PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

SIXTH SERIES—VOLUME 364

HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FIFTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2000–01

COMPRISING PERIOD
5 March—16 March 2001

£70

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5 March 2001

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FOURTH SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FIFTIETH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 364**

SIXTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2000–01

House of Commons

Monday 5 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

HAMMOND INQUIRY

Ordered,

That there shall be laid before this House a Return of the Report of the Review by Sir Anthony Hammond KCB of the circumstances surrounding an application for naturalisation by Mr S.P. Hinduja in 1998.—[*Mr. Pearson.*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL SECURITY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Disability Living Allowance

1. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What estimate he has made of the proportion of appeals against medical assessment leading to refusal of benefit that are upheld by the independent appeal tribunal. [150480]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): For all appeals held between 1 October 1999 and 30 September 2000 that concerned decisions on benefits involving a medical assessment, appeal tribunals upheld 54.9 per cent. of the original decisions.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful for that information, but rather disappointed by it. In 1999, the hon. Gentleman told me that in 1997 he inherited a figure of 59 per cent and that, although it had decreased to 48 per cent., it was still too high. It appears that it has risen again. If nearly half of all appeals are being upheld, many people are being wrongly assessed, and that figure does not even include people who do not have the ability or opportunity to take their case to an appeal. Does he agree that it is about time that we had a system that gave disabled people a proper medical assessment and got decisions right in the first instance rather than on appeal?

Mr. Bayley: I share the hon. Gentleman's view that we want to get every decision right first time, and I should like fewer decisions to be changed on appeal. However, he must agree that since disability living allowance was introduced, about half the cases that are taken to appeal result in a different decision. In many cases, that does not mean that a different rate of benefit is awarded—simply that the benefit is paid for a different period, which is usually longer.

I also agree that we want to ensure that high-quality medical evidence is given. The hon. Gentleman knows that the Government have taken a number of steps to improve the quality and consistency of decision making, through better management of the doctors whom we use and better training of them. In February last year, we introduced a procedure to allow an appeal tribunal that is dissatisfied with the quality of the medical evidence given by the Department of Social Security doctor to raise its concerns with our chief medical adviser. We welcomed that important innovation and, since then, tribunals have raised five cases in which there have been concerns about such medical evidence.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Is not the key word "quality"? Every MP deals with heart-rending cases

of appeals that are turned down or doctors' assessments that are not considered satisfactory. Equally, however, we have a responsibility to constituents who are concerned about any working of the system that might result in an abuse. We need quality and strictness so that we are fair to both sides of the benefit appeals system.

Mr. Bayley: The Government have introduced a number of reforms to the decision-making and appeals system which are intended to make decisions more consistent. Together with the Royal College of Physicians, we have introduced a diploma in disability assessment medicine to set a benchmark of high standards that we want our doctors to meet. We have also introduced better and more consistent training for them. That used to be organised ad hoc by a senior doctor in each medical boarding centre. We now have a national programme of training, which adheres to a national syllabus, that is delivered by trained trainers. We hope that that will make the improvements that all hon. Members want.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): We appreciate the Minister's answer. Is he disappointed or surprised that only five cases have been referred on the basis of their medical details? Medical assessments are part of the problem. We are told time and again that the adjudicating officer makes the mistakes, but on appeal we discover that poor medical responses have been at fault.

Mr. Bayley: Clearly, there are cases of poor medical reports. However, those are written far less frequently than many hon. Members might suspect given the amount of attention that such a report attracts. I do not want a high or low number of complaints. I want people, including the chairmen of appeal tribunals, to have somewhere to go if they believe that a poor medical report has been written, in the knowledge that their appeal will be thoroughly investigated. If that means that remedial action has to be taken with the doctor, such as retraining or tighter management, or, in the most extreme cases, if we have to stop using that doctor's services, then that is what will happen.

Fraud

2. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will make a statement on the cost to business of the measures arising from the Social Security Fraud Bill. [150481]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): The vast majority of businesses will be unaffected because generally only the large companies—typically, financial institutions—will be asked to provide information. The hon. Gentleman asks about costs. For one large bank, the annual cost of providing the information under the Bill is estimated to be equal to just over one hour's profit.

Mr. Swayne: These additional costs, which are estimated to be £7.6 million, are on top of the costs of administering the working families tax credit, the stakeholder pension and so on. Is that £7.6 million going to be worth paying given that clause 79 is soft on fraudsters because it provides for sanctions for only 13 weeks and for any number of exemptions?

Mr. Darling: The Bill provides that if someone is convicted of benefit fraud twice, their benefit is stopped, which did not use to happen. The hon. Gentleman also asked about the cost to banks. I repeat that the cost to a bank or other large financial institution in an entire year is estimated to be equal to just one hour's profit, so he will realise that what we are asking is not unreasonable. It is in the interests of banks and insurance companies that we stop fraud because people who defraud the DSS could also be interested in defrauding those financial institutions. That is probably why our proposals have been widely welcomed as a valuable contribution to the fight against social security fraud.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Does my right hon. Friend agree that most businesses, and certainly those in my constituency, will feel that the small amount of extra work involved represents good value because it tackles the major problem of social security fraud? Does he agree also that the introduction of the ONE service will provide a major means of tackling such fraud? It not only saves claimants from having to go from pillar to post but enables the Benefits Agency to build a relationship with claimants and to see them through the system, and in the process staff may be able to spot fraud at an early stage.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right on both counts. First, banks and other financial institutions have welcomed what the Government are doing because they recognise that it is in their interests that fraud should be tackled and discouraged. He is also right to say that experience has shown that the more often people are seen and their benefit claims are checked, the more accurate the payment of income support and other benefits becomes. For the first time, we have seen a significant reduction—6.7 per cent.—in fraud and error in the payment of jobseeker's allowance and income support because we are checking details far more often.

The Government fixed a target to reduce fraud by 10 per cent., which was to be reached in 2002, and I can tell my hon. Friend that we are on track to do that 18 months early. That is because we are tightening the gateways to the benefit system in order to cut fraud and error. The Bill is just one means of doing that. It should have happened years ago.

3. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement on progress in tackling benefit fraud. [150482]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): As I have just said, the results that we published in November show that we have already made a 6.7 per cent. reduction in fraud and error in the payment of income support and jobseeker's allowance. That is the first ever significant reduction. As I told the House, we are on course to meet our first target, of a 10 per cent. reduction in fraud and error, 18 months ahead of schedule.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am grateful for that information. However, under this Government there has been announcement after reannouncement about the need to tackle benefit fraud—I have counted almost 50 so far—and whatever the Secretary of State promises in future, it will not change the fact that two things have happened.

First, the amount of benefit fraud has gone up. His Department estimates that its value is about £7 billion. Secondly, the number of prosecutions is going down. Are not those two facts evidence of the way in which the Government—first, other Departments and now this one—talk toughly but act softly?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman is wrong on just about everything that he said. The number of prosecutions and sanctions has increased during our time in office. The previous Government, of whom he was a member, did not begin to measure fraud in the social security system until 1995, and no significant measures were taken to tackle the problem until 1997—some 18 years after they first took office.

In case the hon. Gentleman was not listening to the answer that I gave a few moments ago, I repeat that for the first time there has been a significant reduction in the amount of fraud and error in the payment of JSA and income support. We will have reached the target that we set for reducing fraud and error by 10 per cent. 18 months ahead of schedule. That is because we are increasing the powers available to the Department and investing in the information technology needed to keep track of people's claims—investment that the hon. Gentleman's party opposes.

Finally, by stabilising the staff whom we employ on the front line, we are able to check more claims and get them right. If the Conservatives cut 5,000 Benefits Agency staff, as they now pledge, there will be more fraud and error, not less. We have a record on which we are happy to fight. We are beginning to turn the corner in the fight against fraud and error, which the Conservatives never did in 18 years in office.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the increase in checks that has been implemented to tackle fraud in income support has resulted in a saving during this Parliament of £1 billion? Does he agree that the critical factor in clamping down on benefit fraud and the best way in which to prevent it is to get the right payment going to the right person in a timely fashion? That not only tightens up on fraud, but delivers the correct benefit to the person who genuinely needs it, and it should be the objective to which the Government's efforts are directed.

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. It is important to prevent fraud from entering the system in the first place. As I said, by investing in the IT that the DSS needs—when we took office, some of that was approaching 30 years old and becoming increasingly ineffective—and by making sure that we have enough staff on the front line to check claims and demand verification of information, we are ensuring that we have ever more accurate information.

My hon. Friend is right to say that during this Parliament we shall save £1 billion simply by halving the error rate in income support that we inherited. The Conservatives must face up to the fact that they had 18 years in which to sort out that problem, but did not do so. We are sorting it out. For the first time ever, figures show that we are beginning to turn the corner and bear down on the amount of fraud and error in the system. More money was lost through fraud and error than it cost to run the Department. That is an indictment of the 18 years that the Conservatives had to put matters right.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Are the Secretary of State's comments not refuted by his former colleague, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who said that his first discovery on taking office was the realisation of his colleagues' political reluctance to bear down on welfare fraud? Has not that observation been borne out by running down the beat-a-cheat line, closing down spotlight campaigns against fraud, missing all the fraud targets so far and cancelling the benefits card, which would have been the most effective means of stopping fraud?

The Secretary of State says that we did not measure fraud until 1995, but will he acknowledge that ours was the first Government in this country or any other in the world to devise a method of doing that? Officials had said that it was impossible until I decided that it had to be done.

Mr. Darling: I have no wish to be churlish, especially as I read last week of some extremely complimentary remarks that the right hon. Gentleman made about the Government's stakeholder pensions. I am grateful to him for having recognised how valuable a contribution they will make.

On the question of fraud, I understand why the right hon. Gentleman seeks to clear his name, but he will know that it was not until 1995 that any serious attempt was made to measure fraud and error in the system. It is true, as I said, that in 1997 some efforts were made to deal with the problem; however, they focused almost entirely on simply detecting fraud that had already entered the system. The National Audit Office recognised the shortcomings of that as the sole strategy, because it almost encouraged people to let in fraud by rewarding them for detecting it. We have stopped fraud entering the system in the first place.

As I have told Opposition Members who have asked the question, the fraud and error rate in income support and JSA is down for the first time ever. We are on track to meet our target to cut fraud by 10 per cent. and we are going on to reduce fraud even further. We shall do that through legislation, by tightening up the gateways to benefit, by investing in new IT—which, as the NAO has recognised, is vital if we are to control DSS expenditure—and by ensuring that there are sufficient staff on the front line to carry out checks. As a former Secretary of State, the right hon. Gentleman will know that if his party were to get away with cutting 5,000 Benefits Agency staff, which is what they pledge to do through a freeze in civil service recruitment, the result would be more fraud and more error. That shows why the Conservatives' sums do not add up.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Before the right hon. Gentleman approved expensive advertisements in today's newspapers on benefit fraud, did he read the report on the trials in the pilot areas? Is there justification for what appears to be a long catalogue of reasons why people should commit benefit fraud? The cost of one page of the advertisement works out at more than £1,000 a word. Nothing is said about what a person is supposed to do if he finds a benefit cheat. There is no reference to the

hotline. Why did the right hon. Gentleman not pay attention to the report that was lodged in the Library last week?

As for the trials, the report stated that the

"result of the campaign was that respondents within the test area perceived benefit fraud as easier to commit."

Thanks to the Secretary of State, the entire country knows that benefit fraud is easy to commit. I know that he is hurt by the Opposition's suggestion that his policies are all spin and no delivery, but we never believed that he would respond not by increasing delivery but by reducing the quality of the spin.

Mr. Darling: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman's reading skills did not enable him to read the whole report. If he had done so, he would have found that the advertisements in the north-west raised people's awareness of fraud and got across to them that fraud is theft from the country and that they should be concerned when it is committed. It is important to change the culture so that people recognise that fraud is bad. It took years before people accepted that drinking and driving should not be tolerated, and so it is with benefit fraud.

If the hon. Gentleman wants proof that our policies are working, I repeat that a reduction in fraud and error in income support has been achieved 18 months ahead of schedule. By ensuring that we improve the error rate in income support calculations, £1 billion has been saved. Those are examples of all the things that the Tories could have done, but did not do. We are delivering on reducing fraud and error. One reason why social security spending is growing at its lowest rate since the second world war is that we are tightening the gateways to the benefit system, which is long overdue.

Pension Credit

4. **Mr. John McFall** (Dumbarton): What plans he has to inform older people of the pension credit proposals. [150483]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): We set out our proposals for how pension credit will work in the consultation paper published on 9 November. That has been made widely available and is free of charge. At the latest date, we had issued more than 4,000 papers. The website has been available since the date of publication.

Mr. McFall: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the shame and scandal of the pension industry is that, far from being rewarded to date, those on occupational pensions and those with savings have been penalised for their thrift and prudence? Does he agree also that the consultation document changes the pension landscape for the first time? Will he reassure the many millions of pensioners that something will now be done for those who had the foresight to save for their retirement? Will he ensure that once he has studied the consultation document proposals they will be made available to everyone so that everyone can claim what is his or her right?

Mr. Rooker: My hon. Friend is perfectly right. It does not pay to save in this country, and it never has since 1948. The pension credit will reverse that. For the first time, it will pay to save, and that message must go out. More than half the pensioner population—more than 5 million people—will gain directly when pension credit is introduced. Our plan is to introduce it in 2003. There have been more than 400 responses to the consultation document. The closing date was only last week, and we have not analysed all the responses, but to the best of my knowledge not one submission has opposed the pension credit. We thought through the policy idea before we published the consultation document, and it has received universal approval.

The flowers on the Opposition Benches sometimes wilt—I know that you do not like us criticising them, Mr. Speaker—and their policies change every week. The pension credit system will be universally successful and will be seen to benefit more than half the pensioner population.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): The Minister talks of the beneficiaries of the policy, but does he not accept that, as a consequence of the implementation of the pension credit, more than half of this country's pensioners will be forced on to means-tested benefits? That is a direct consequence of the Government's commitment to targeting, rather than investing in the universal basic state pension. Our policy is clear. Why do the Government not accept that their policy consigns pensioners to a future in which the basic state pension will wither away?

Mr. Rooker: If that is a signal that the Liberal Democrats oppose the pension credit, which will directly benefit 5.5 million pensioners, it is fine to have that on record. One cannot equate the language of the means test with the proposed pension credit. It is not a weekly means test; it is not an annual means test; it is not even a bi-annual means test. Pensioners will be examined on their circumstances at the age of 65, and again at the age of 75. If anything changes in the meantime, they will not have to report it. If they want to make an extra claim, that will be fine. Once they are over the age of 75, there will be no further examinations. To equate that with what has happened since the early 1930s and 1940s and the language of the means test, when over 50 per cent. of pensioners will benefit, is a travesty of the proposal.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): Is the Minister aware that the Institute of Fiscal Studies said that the abolition of capital rules and the new pension credit could leave some pensioners "worse off"? Will he give the House and pensioners an assurance that no pensioner will lose out as a result of the changes in 2003?

Mr. Rooker: The thrust of the IFS's report supported the pension credit, which will make the biggest single contribution to pensioner incomes under any Government since the start of the welfare state. Of course, we made it plain in the consultation paper that the final shape is not clear; that was the reason for consulting. The plan is not that people will lose out. The fact is that in April the relaxation of the capital rules—which were frozen for years under the previous Government—will be of substantial benefit to 160,000 to 200,000 pensioners. Our

plan is to abolish capital rules under pension credit. It is ludicrous to argue that that would disadvantage pensioners.

Mr. Willetts: It is appalling that the Minister cannot give a simple assurance to pensioners that the changes in 2003 guarantee that no pensioner will be worse off. There is no point in his talking about a change in the capital rules now; we want that simple assurance. If he cannot give it, pensioners will have been warned that his changes in 2003 could mean that some with modest savings will lose out.

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the figure that is below the capital rule at present. We have made it abundantly clear that 5.5 million pensioners will benefit from the change and get direct extra cash. Unlike the previous Government, we will for the first time ever reward pensioners with small occupational pensions and people who continue to receive modest earnings after their retirement. The credit is not exclusive to those who receive pensions. It is not intended that the abolition of capital rules will disadvantage pensioners who, in ordinary terms, have tuppence ha'penny in the bank. I have already said that.

Winter Fuel Allowance

5. **Mr. David Winnick** (Walsall, North): What the cost is of the winter fuel allowance paid in the winter of 2000–01. [150484]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): We have made about 11 million winter fuel payments so far this winter, at an estimated cost of £1.7 billion. At our best estimate, 16,000 of those payments were made in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Mr. Winnick: That is money well spent, bearing in mind the climate at the moment. Has my right hon. Friend found any pensioners in his constituency or elsewhere who have described that sum of money as "a gimmick"—the description used by Conservative Front Benchers on numerous occasions? Why was there no such help before the Labour party came to office in 1997?

Mr. Rooker: It was basically because the other lot did not care—not to put too fine a point on it. That is the truth. The winter fuel payment of £200 per household has proved extremely popular. It is double last year's payment and how it could ever be described as a gimmick, I do not know.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): A number of my constituents have contacted me, having listened to Ministers saying that all pensioner households would receive the winter fuel payment, but having subsequently discovered that because they did not turn 60 or 65 by the middle of September, they would lose out—as did those who were in nursing homes. Will the Minister be more careful in presenting such policies? Does he agree that if the payment were a top-up of weekly benefits, all would benefit from it?

Mr. Rooker: That is another change of policy. I understand why some people argue as the hon. Gentleman does. As for all benefits, there are eligibility criteria, one of which is the date. We had to fix a date, which, I recall, was in September. That was fixed so that we could guarantee that the majority of payments were paid before Christmas. If the date had been set any later, we would not have been able to achieve that. We delivered on that commitment. For pensioners who were eligible on the relevant date—that is the factor—those payments were made before Christmas. The only payments that are still being made are to those who must claim. In general, those are men between the ages of 60 and 65, as the hon. Gentleman well knows.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): Has my right hon. Friend any plans to abolish the winter fuel allowance? I ask because in my constituency, "Focus", the leaflet from the Liberals, stated that they are the only ones who would retain it.

Mr. Rooker: I expect that for every Liberal "Focus" in one constituency pledging one policy aspect, we can find another one in another constituency promising the exact opposite. The only thing that the two major parties have in common is suffering from the fact that the Liberals do not have a consistent policy. The Labour Government invented the winter fuel payment, and we have increased it year on year. We are committed to keeping it, as the Prime Minister said recently.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): The winter fuel payment is safe in our hands. The winter fuel allowance for households in which there is someone over the age of 60 has provided invaluable assistance given the disastrous snow storms that we have had in south-east Scotland. The allowance will make a valuable contribution to households suffering from the effects of the inclement weather. Will the Minister confirm that severe weather payments, which are also available through the social fund to people who are on means-tested benefits, will be triggered? They are a valuable addition to households in south-east Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom that have suffered severe weather. Will the right hon. Gentleman assure us that departmental officials will do all that they can to get those payments made, and that regions such as south-east Scotland will receive severe weather payments in the immediate aftermath of the storms?

Mr. Rooker: Yes. For those on means-tested benefits, cold weather payments of—I think—£8.50 a week, which are quite separate from winter fuel payments, have been triggered since the onset of winter. So far, we have made more than 3 million payments at a cost of £28 million. The vast majority have, by definition, been in the north of the country, particularly Scotland. They are triggered and paid as the conditions are met.

Child Poverty

6. **Mr. Jeff Ennis** (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): What plans he has to increase the income of the parents of children living in poverty. [150485]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): "Opportunity for All" describes a range of measures that we are taking to

reduce the number of children living in poverty. From April this year, the working families tax credit, for instance, will guarantee a family with one child and one adult in full-time work a minimum income of £214 a week. The effect of all the changes that we have made means that, by April, all families with children will be better off, on average, by £15 per week in real terms compared to 1997, with the poorest gaining, on average, twice that amount.

Mr. Ennis: Is my hon. Friend aware that since the Government came to power, more than 100,000 children have been lifted out of poverty in Yorkshire and Humberside alone? That is good news for my constituency, which, as he knows, has the lowest level of gross domestic product per capita in the UK. Does he agree that one group of parents who face particular difficulty are those of disabled children? How do the Government intend to help those parents?

Mr. Bayley: I can confirm that my hon. Friend is right. In Yorkshire, 100,000 children are now living above, rather than below, the poverty level. The number is far greater throughout the country as a whole, where 1.1 million children have now moved above the poverty line. In last week's Child Poverty Action Group report, Jonathan Bradshaw, who wrote the child poverty chapter, stated:

"There is no doubt that when the election takes place there will have been a substantial reduction in poverty, particularly child poverty, by any measure you care to use."

We are this year increasing the disabled child premium in income-related benefits, which are received by the poorest families with disabled children. We are doing so because we recognise the need to target more help on families with disabled children.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): The close association between poverty and disability has already been mentioned; I suspect that it applies especially when breadwinners and families are involved. Given that association, what consideration is the Under-Secretary giving to the fears expressed by the Remploy unions and others that incentives to so-called progression under the workstep scheme may lead to deskilling and poorer incomes for disabled people who are now in supported employment?

Mr. Bayley: The Government continue to support Remploy through my colleagues in the Department for Education and Employment, who have introduced new leadership for the company and are planning a long-term secure future for supported employment. However, that is only part of the picture of what the Government are doing to improve employment opportunities for disabled people. We introduced the disabled persons tax credit and, through the new deal for disabled people, we have been piloting ways of enabling the many hundreds of thousands of disabled people who are on incapacity benefits and want to get back into work to achieve that ambition.

Winter Fuel Allowance

7. **Mr. Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool, South): How many people he expects will benefit from the winter fuel allowance for 2001–02. [150486]

The Minister of State, Department of Social Security (Mr. Jeff Rooker): As I have told the House, we have issued about 11 million payments this winter, about 21,000 of which were made in my hon. Friend's constituency. We will announce our proposals for next winter in due course, in the usual way.

Mr. Marsden: Does my right hon. Friend agree that those figures are a striking testament to the effectiveness of the Government's policy in pursuing the winter fuel payment? Given that extraordinarily high take-up, does he have any estimates of the cost that would be incurred by civil servants if they had to disaggregate and question every single pensioner in the country about whether to retain the separate winter fuel payment or to incorporate it in pensions?

Mr. Rooker: It would amount to a crass waste of public money, even if the Opposition were to ask the civil service to carry out the assessment, as they are entitled to do in the run-up to an election. Making such a change would collapse the income tax and social security systems. It would be merely a figleaf, as there would be no consistent uprating policy for pensions and the winter fuel payment. A tax-free cash payment that is made to everybody and that has proved extremely popular seems the best way to continue.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): In considering the number of claimants of this year's winter fuel payments, will the Minister of State take into account what the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), told me last July? She said that all backdated claims would be paid by the end of September, but I understand that that has now been put back to March. How many claims will still be outstanding in March in respect of last year's payments?

Mr. Rooker: The only people about whom we are talking are men between the ages of 60 and 65 who, generally speaking, happen to have made no contact with my Department. In other words, they will be at work and will not be receiving any benefits, and the Government do not know where they all are. They have to make a claim and they can do so at almost any time. Claims are continually coming in and some remain to be processed.

Some 140,000 claims are currently in the process of being clerically assessed and 70,000 claims are determined and awaiting payment, which is due to be made in the first two weeks of this month. Some 20,000 claims are currently being processed. Some people aged between 60 and 64, including hon. Members, may choose not to claim, but may then change their mind. It is as simple as that.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does the Minister agree that the key merit of the winter fuel allowance is that it is not taxed and that it does not hit benefits? That would not be the case if it were added to the basic state pension; many Conservative Members would like us to do that. Is it not time for the Tory party to admit that the winter fuel allowance works and that it should be here to stay?

Mr. Rooker: My hon. Friend is right. If everything were subsumed in the way Conservative Members advocate, the winter fuel allowance would wither on the

vine, and in future people would not be able to tell what had happened to it. Under a Labour Government, people can tell—because we are paying it.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): The Government should be congratulated on the increase in the winter fuel allowance. However, what assessment has the Minister made, in the run-up to the Budget on Wednesday, of a proposed extension of the winter fuel allowance to disabled people? Do the Government realise that approximately 1 million people under the age of 60 would benefit from an extension of the winter fuel allowance to those on the higher rate of disability living allowance? That is not covered by the mobility and care components of DLA.

Mr. Rooker: No, but the cost of fuel is already covered in the benefits, as the hon. Gentleman knows. He is not living in the real world if he believes that he could confine an extension of the winter fuel allowance to selected, targeted groups of disabled people.

Minimum Income Guarantee

8. **Mr. Alan W. Williams** (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): What his most recent estimate is of the number of pensioners in receipt of the minimum income guarantee and the number of eligible pensioners who have not applied. [150487]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): Nearly 2 million pensioners currently benefit from the minimum income guarantee. I am sure that my hon. Friend appreciates that it is difficult to be sure of exactly how many people might be eligible for it or of how many never apply.

Mr. Williams: In view of the massive increase in the minimum income guarantee in April, from £78 to £92 a week for single people, and from £121 to £140 a week for couples, will there be an advertising campaign, similar to last year's Thora Hird campaign, to try to ensure that those who are eligible but do not apply are told of their rights and receive that superlative increase?

Mr. Darling: Yes. As my hon. Friend knows, we have been advertising the minimum income guarantee over the past few months, and the campaign will continue. Indeed, we are about to write to pensioners who, until now, have been excluded by the low level of the capital rules. They are being increased to £12,000; that means that more pensioners will be eligible for the minimum income guarantee.

When the capital rules disappear from the social security system for the first time in 2003, many more pensioners will benefit from the minimum income guarantee as part of the pension credit. As my right hon. Friend the Minister of State told the House a few moments ago, that will result in 5.5 million pensioners benefiting from a significant step forward in tackling pensioner poverty as well as ensuring that the millions of pensioners who have been thrifty and saved all their lives are rewarded, not punished, for their efforts.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): It is surprising that the Secretary of State does not know the number of pensioners who could benefit from the minimum income guarantee. It is a big flaw in the Government's strategy for tackling pensioner poverty if he cannot tell hon. Members the number of people who are eligible and the number who receive that minimum income.

On the broader question, does not the Secretary of State agree that the majority of pensioners want a guarantee not of a minimum income, but of a decent pension? In the light of what he has told the House, does he have faith that the social security system will provide that? Should not the Government re-examine their support for the state pension system?

Mr. Darling: Let me deal with the hon. Gentleman's two points. First, as he should know, estimates of the number of people who might be eligible for the minimum income guarantee vary widely. The state does not hold information on everybody's bank accounts or on people who do not choose to contact it; that has always been the case.

On pensioner support, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to remind the House and him that, in April, pensions will increase by £5 a week for a single person and £8 a week for a couple; the following year, they will increase by a further £3 a week for a single person and £4.80 for a couple—the Conservative party could never do that because it would not have the requisite money. On top of that, we are increasing help for the poorest pensioners. In this day and age, it is scandalous that so many pensioners live in poverty; that is why we are increasing the minimum income guarantee to £92 a week in April. From 2003, it will increase to £100 a week.

When it comes to the bit, British pensioners will know which party in government can do the right thing: eradicate pensioner poverty and help all pensioners, including thrifty pensioners through the pension credit, and which party in government would have the money to make that decision in the first place. The Tories most certainly would not.

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (Knowsley, South): While encouraging the Government to do all they can to increase the state retirement pension, may I also thank the Secretary of State for what he has done for the poorest pensioners in my constituency? About 14 per cent. of those who benefit from the minimum income guarantee are in the north-west, and they are most heavily concentrated in Merseyside constituencies such as mine. My right hon. Friend has targeted the poorest pensioners in my constituency, who are the most significant group, and the new thresholds will target the next most significant group of pensioners. Will he assure the House that he will continue to target the pensioners whom I represent?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. Unfortunately, far too many pensioners—particularly in parts of the country where wages were historically low, or where there were long periods of high unemployment—were being expected to live on nothing but the basic state pension. That was not enough. The Government's first priority on being elected was to begin to tackle pensioner poverty. That is why we introduced the minimum income guarantee, which was opposed by the Conservatives. It is interesting that their proposals are designed to benefit the top 10 per cent. of the pensioner population and not the others.

On top of introducing the minimum income guarantee, the second stage of our policy is to help the millions of pensioners—some of whom live in my hon. Friend's constituency—who are by no means well off but who have saved a little money, only to find that the social security system that we inherited penalises them for what they have done. The pension credit, on top of the minimum income guarantee, will mean not only that we help millions of pensioners out of poverty, but that we help the hard-working men and women of this country who have scrimped and saved throughout their lives. They will now receive extra help that was never there in the past.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Following the end of the £15 million take-up campaign, will the Secretary of State confirm that only about 100,000 people have benefited from the minimum income guarantee? Although we are pleased that those people have some extra money, will he tell us what he plans to do to contact the 400,000 missing people whom Ministers said were legally entitled to an increased minimum income guarantee?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Lady should not be so patronising towards people who have applied for and obtained money under the minimum income guarantee. The average amount that they receive is about £20 a week, which makes a big difference to pensioners who qualify. Let me repeat—as the hon. Lady is evidently hard of understanding, if not hard of hearing—the point that I have made on many occasions. The reason many people do not qualify at the moment is that, under the present system that we inherited, the capital rules hit anybody who saves a modest amount of money. *[Interruption.]* We want to ensure, through the minimum income guarantee, that from 2003 no pensioner will have to live on less than £100 a week. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has asked a question; she should listen to the answer.

Mr. Darling: The Conservative party is having some difficulty in coping with a Government who have a consistent pension policy that lasts more than nine months, and has not had to be torn up because it is discovered to be all wrong. Our policy is delivering more money to millions of pensioners, as well as overhauling the pension system to ensure that, for the first time ever, we not only eradicate pensioner poverty but help millions of pensioners who have put a little money by and who should be rewarded for their thrift, not punished for it as they were under the Conservatives.

Child Support (Service Personnel)

9. **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley): What action he has taken in collaboration with the Secretary of State for Defence about revision of the services pay regulations that prevent Child Support Agency deductions of earnings orders being implemented on service personnel. [150489]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): In 99 per cent. of child support cases involving service men, the full amount of maintenance is deducted from their pay. In less than 1 per cent. of cases, the full amount is not met because it exceeds the maximum deduction rates that are set by the Ministry of Defence. We have discussed with the Ministry of Defence the problems encountered with this small minority of cases.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but I find it a little disappointing. I have campaigned on this issue for a number of years, and although it affects only a small percentage of families, it seems strange that we are saying that someone who joins the Army can, in some way, escape their CSA payments. May I urge my hon. Friend to look into the matter, and particularly into the circumstances in which service personnel who leave the service get an end-of-service payment? The CSA should be urged to liaise with the Ministry of Defence to see whether, at that point, before the service man disappears, the payments that he should have made could be met in full.

Angela Eagle: I know that my hon. Friend has a particularly difficult individual case to deal with and that she has been working hard for her constituent with respect to it, but 99 per cent., which is the compliance rate in the services, compares very well with the compliance rate in civilian cases, which stands at 72 per cent.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): In confirming what the Minister has said, may I urge her not to follow the recommendation of the hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint)? Will the Minister confirm not only that the services compliance rate is higher than in civilian life, but that, unlike civilians, service men and their families face a huge range of disadvantages? They are taxed as though they are resident in the United Kingdom, a range of UK benefits are not available to them and, when they leave the services, they are grossly disadvantaged in the housing market.

Angela Eagle: I have some sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman says, and the compliance rates do compare favourably. The maximum deduction rates—25 per cent. and 50 per cent.—were put in the in-service rules for a particular reason following experience in the second world war. My hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) has had a debate with the Ministry of Defence about the matter and she needs to continue to make representations there.

Means testing

10. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What recent representations he has received on means testing of benefits; and if he will make a statement. [150490]

13. **Mr. Peter Viggers** (Gosport): If he will make a statement on Government policy on means testing of pensioners' benefits. [150494]

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): Numerous representations have been made over the years. As the hon. Lady will know, the benefit system has always combined universal, means-tested and extra-cost payments. Each plays a part in meeting people's needs.

Miss McIntosh: Is the Secretary of State proud of the fact that, under his stewardship, savings have gone down

while means testing has gone up? According to his own Department's figures, at least 500,000 pensioners who should be receiving the minimum income guarantee have not applied. Will he pay heed to the representations that he has undoubtedly received from Age Concern, to the effect that means testing does not help the poorest pensioners, but simply puts them off applying?

Mr. Darling: Day by day—indeed, minute by minute—I become increasingly confused about what the policy of the Conservative party is. It was in power for 18 years, and means testing as a proportion of the benefit system increased from 17 per cent. in 1979 to 35 per cent. in 1997. For the sake of completeness, I might add that the figure is now 30 per cent. She must recognise that any Government who want to help the poorest pensioners cannot do so through universal, across-the-board increases. That is why we introduced the minimum income guarantee.

Of course the hon. Lady is right that we need to ensure that as many eligible people as possible receive the minimum income guarantee. As my right hon. Friend the Minister of State and I have told her, we have to assess how much pension people are due when they retire; so when the pension credit is introduced, from 2003, we shall work out whether they qualify for the minimum income guarantee and the pension credit. In that way, we shall be able to target and eliminate pensioner poverty and reward saving. Unless the hon. Lady is proposing that there should be no means testing in the social security system, which is not a policy usually taken up by most elements in the Conservative party and which would be cripplingly expensive, she must accept that the Government are tackling pensioner poverty in the right way.

Mr. Viggers: The Secretary of State has not answered the question. Before the election, the Labour party campaigned on the basis of ending the means test for elderly people, but in government it has increased its use. The figure is 50 per cent. and rising: has something gone wrong or have the Government changed their mind?

Mr. Darling: It is always touching to hear the Conservatives' new-found concern with pensioner poverty, which they allowed to grow when they were in office. When we were elected, we made it clear that our first priority was to deal with and then eradicate pensioner poverty. That is possible only if the money is targeted on the people who need that help most, which is why we introduced the minimum income guarantee. From April, it will rise to £92 a week. The Conservative party has no policy for tackling pensioner poverty, and the only proposals that it has made for pensioners would disproportionately benefit the better off.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government have done more to help the poorest sections of the community? If we are to do so at an affordable cost, there regrettably has to be means testing. Will he assure the House that at some stage there will be only one means-testing form for income support, for the guaranteed minimum income for pensioners and for housing and council tax benefit, so that we can reduce the number of forms that have to be filled in?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend is right. If any Government are serious about tackling pensioner poverty or child poverty, they must give more to the people who need it most. In addition to tackling pensioner poverty, we must help the people who are by no means well off—those who have saved and have a little money in the bank—and that is what the pension credit will do. We are taking that approach for other benefits. Through the working families tax credit, we can help people on low wages to increase the amount of money that they take home, so that they see the benefit of being in work and the difference that the credit can make to their take-home pay.

Right across the board, the Government's strategy has been, first, to deal with poverty; secondly, to ensure that the right incentives are in the system so that it pays to work and to save; and thirdly, to benefit the incomes of the population as a whole. That is what we have started to do, and if we are returned at the next election, that is what we shall continue to do. That is in stark contrast with what the Tories are about, which is to restore the inequalities that they presided over during the 18 years they were in power.

Housing Benefit

11. **Mr. David Ruffley** (Bury St. Edmunds): What plans he has to reform the administration of housing benefit. [150491]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): Following years of neglect by the previous Government, improving administration is the biggest challenge facing the housing benefit system. We published our strategy to achieve such an improvement in December, and one of our first steps has been the formation of the expert help team. Working in partnership with local authorities, the team will help to turn things around.

Mr. Ruffley: The Minister will have a list of the 10 local authorities with the worst record of tackling housing benefit fraud. Could she tell us which ones are Labour controlled?

Angela Eagle: As most local authorities are Labour controlled, that is a pretty pointless question.

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): Does my hon. Friend recognise that housing benefit creates particular difficulties in areas with high housing costs? The threshold at which a return to work is worth while requires some people to work 20 hours just to cover the loss of housing and council tax benefit. Will she bear in mind the fact that a reform of the housing benefit system to address that issue would be most welcome in Hertfordshire?

Angela Eagle: There is a lot of truth in what my hon. Friend says. We need to work on the work-incentive aspects of housing benefit, but we will not fundamentally reform the system until after the reform of rents, which was dealt with in the Green Paper, and that will be in the medium to long term.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that the Government have made no fewer than 85 changes to the administration of housing benefit, does the hon. Lady rule out an 86th?

Angela Eagle: No; and I can tell the hon. Gentleman that we shall shortly introduce a change to ease the single room rent restrictions, which have caused so much hardship to the single homeless. I expect that he will be against such a measure, but it will be a great help to the socially excluded.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): My hon. Friend will be aware that the announcement that east Ayrshire is to be included in the housing benefit expert team project was warmly welcomed by its Labour-controlled council and by its 10,500 housing benefit recipients. I am glad that it is a Labour-controlled council in a Labour-controlled country. Under that initiative, what steps can be taken to improve clarity and simplify the form, and to reduce the mountain of paperwork and bureaucracy that is generated by housing benefit applications?

Angela Eagle: I add my thanks to East Ayrshire council for agreeing to allow the expert help team to assist it with the administration of housing benefit, which is a difficult benefit to administer.

Working with the benefit fraud inspectorate, the Department has for the first time produced a template of a housing benefit form that is readable and user friendly. It is now being made available to all local authorities, and I hope that many will take advantage of it.

National Minimum Wage

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the national minimum wage.

As the House will know, in June last year I asked the independent Low Pay Commission to produce a further report on the national minimum wage by July of this year. In particular, the commission was asked to consider whether there was a case for increasing the rate of the minimum wage. In considering any increase, it was required to take into account movements in earnings, the effect on employment, the impact on individual sectors, including small business, and the likely and future impact on the economy.

The commission announced at the end of January that this year it would produce its report in two parts. It had a clear message from employers that the length of notice given of any changes would be critical.

Today we are publishing volume one of the commission's third report. It looks solely at the main rate, and makes recommendations to have effect on 1 October this year and next. Copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

I thank the commission chairman, Professor George Bain, and its other members for the time, commitment and detailed consideration that they have given in preparing today's report. The strength of its recommendations comes from the detailed analysis, and also from the fact that it is a unanimous report, agreed by, for example, the deputy general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union as well as the deputy director general of the Confederation of British Industry.

The report concludes that the minimum wage has been a success, with nearly 1.5 million benefiting without any adverse impact on employment or the competitive position of British business. More than 70 per cent. of those benefiting are women. The commission concludes that, in narrowing the gender pay gap, the minimum wage has had the most beneficial effect on women's pay since the introduction of the Equal Pay Act 1970 more than 30 years ago. It has also helped to close the gap in regional pay differences. Since its introduction, the largest increases in average earnings have been in traditionally low-paying parts of the United Kingdom. While the national average increase in earnings for the first year of the minimum wage was 3 per cent., average earnings in the north-east rose by 5 per cent. In Wales, the average increase in earnings was over 4 per cent., and in Yorkshire and the Humber it was 3.5 per cent.

The minimum wage is about ensuring that people throughout the United Kingdom share in the country's economic prosperity. Twenty years ago, pensioners made up the largest section of those in poverty. Today it is those living in workless working-age households who are in poverty. Simply compensating people for their poverty through benefits is not good enough; the task must be to deal with the causes of poverty. The best form of welfare is work, and having a job. That is why it is crucial to make work pay, and the national minimum wage makes a vital contribution to the achievement of that objective.

Of course, there are those who opposed the very concept of a national minimum wage. They said that its introduction was the height of irresponsibility. Some said that it was a cretinous idea. Others said that it would deal a blow to low earners and would cost more than 1 million jobs.

The critics have been proved wrong, wrong and wrong. Employment has increased by nearly 450,000 since the introduction of the national minimum wage in April 1999 and by more than 1 million since we were elected with a clear pledge to introduce it. The number of jobs in the hotel and catering sector, which includes a high proportion of low-paid jobs, increased by 14,000 between March 1999 and September 2000.

In recommending a new rate, the commission had to satisfy itself about the likely impact of any increase. A rate that was not manageable would hurt the prospects of the very people whom it was meant to benefit. The commission is confident that there is scope for a significant increase in the rate of the minimum wage. The aim has been to make recommendations that are bold enough to make a real difference, but prudent enough not to have an adverse impact on employment or the economy. The commission's report is unanimous. It recommends that the adult rate, currently £3.70 an hour, should increase to £4.10 an hour on 1 October this year.

The Government accept that recommendation. It will mean that someone on the minimum wage and working a 40-hour week will see their earnings increase by £16 a week. It will mean a £10 a week increase for someone working 25 hours a week. Coupled with the working families tax credit, the Government are ensuring that work pays. The commission also recommends that the adult rate should increase in October next year to £4.20 an hour. In principle, the Government also accept that recommendation, subject to the economic conditions prevailing at the time.

The commission's report looks in detail at the impact of an increase to £4.10. It finds that the estimated wage bill impact will be modest—lower than the wage bill increase that resulted from the introduction of the minimum wage—and that the minimum wage had no discernible impact on the main measures of inflation. Analysis shows that the rise in the wage bill that would follow from the proposed increase to £4.10 adds 0.07 per cent. to inflation in the first year and 0.05 per cent. in the second.

The new rate for the minimum wage will apply across the board: to part-time and full-time workers, to agency staff and to those who work from home. I understand that there are some who would exclude businesses that employ fewer than 100 people from all legal requirements, apart from health and safety. That would mean nearly 8 million people being denied decent rights in the workplace. We reject such an approach. That is why the minimum wage will apply to all those in work, whatever the size of organisation that employs them.

The introduction of the national minimum wage has been one of the Government's great achievements. It has already had a real and much-needed impact on the lives of many hard-working people and their families, helping to raise the pay and standard of living of almost 1.5 million people.

The minimum wage combines economic efficiency and social justice. Increasing it to £4.10 an hour will take people further out of poverty pay. It is a significant

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increase that is affordable and will make a real difference to those who receive it. It brings reality to the phrase "dignity of work." I commend the increase to the House.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving me some notice of his statement today.

Last October, the national minimum wage was uprated by 10p an hour. Before that, the Secretary of State made no oral statement to the House. Today, however, he has announced in the House that there will be a 40p uprating in the minimum wage. Is the difference in the announcement and the way in which it was made anything whatever to do with the fact that there will shortly be a general election?

When we take office after that general election, businesses will be planning that uprating and adjusting their payrolls accordingly. We shall therefore not oppose this uprating—*[Interruption.]* I want to make that clear at the outset. However, I do have various conditions and questions for the Secretary of State—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is entitled to a hearing. The Minister received a hearing; the right hon. Gentleman is entitled to one.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am most grateful, Mr. Speaker.

Why has the Secretary of State been so anxious to make this announcement on the minimum wage while at the same time adding to the regulatory burdens on the very businesses that will be delivering the jobs in future? I remind him that, according to the British Chambers of Commerce, over the lifetime of this Parliament, that regulatory burden amounts to an extra £10 billion on British business. Would he like to confirm that, contrary to his earlier claims, that £10 billion figure does not include the financial costs of the minimum wage?

Is the Secretary of State aware that small business organisations are extremely alarmed at the damage caused by those regulations—which are added now to a substantial uprating later this year—particularly in vulnerable sectors such as village shops, sub-post offices and care homes?

I should like the Secretary of State to deal specifically with the point about the costs on private care homes. Is he aware that, this year, most care homes are receiving a funding increase from the Department of Social Security and from local authorities of between 1 and 2 per cent., whereas those same homes will now have an increase in their total costs of more than 7 per cent? For an average 20-bed care home, that will increase those costs by £2,600 annually. That is a Government responsibility. This is a Government problem that is being made worse by the Secretary of State's announcement. What offsetting arrangements is he making to get over and solve that crisis in care?

Will the Secretary of State also confirm that it is not within the Low Pay Commission's remit, but up to the Government, to assess the economic effects of increasing the national minimum wage in that manner? What could the damage be if this turns out to be at the top of the economic cycle? Will he confirm that unemployment decreased more slowly in the first three years of this Government than in the last three years of the previous Government? Will he therefore give his own assessment of the effect that the uprating will have on future employment growth, on which national prosperity and the prosperity of the low paid depend?

Will the Secretary of State comment on the report today by the organisation Incomes Data Services—which is authoritative in this sphere—which shows that pay settlements are running substantially ahead not only of inflation, but of last year's equivalent wage settlements? Those data were not available to the Low Pay Commission when it drew up its recommendation.

The Secretary of State gave a very low figure for the inflationary consequences of his announced uprating. Will he tell us whether that takes account of the preservation of differentials when the national minimum wage is increased by 11 per cent. and also of the earnings figure that has now been disclosed by IDS?

Finally, will the Secretary of State confirm that, in "Economic Trends", the Office for National Statistics records that under this Government, the tax burden on the poorest 20 per cent. of households has increased from 37 per cent. of gross income to 40 per cent.? So the sharpest rise in taxation under this Labour Government has been imposed on the poorest fifth of households. Will he confirm those Government figures? If the House takes seriously its duty to help the lowest paid, as it should, it will pay at least as much attention to that problem, and to the problem of future employment growth, as it does to this uprating of the national minimum wage.

Mr. Byers: Well, there we have it. I admit that I had some sympathy for the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) at the beginning of his response, because he had to accept that the Conservative party agree with the decision that the Government took, having opposed, day in and day out, the introduction of a national minimum wage.

The people of this country know the Conservative party's approach to the national minimum wage—it disagrees with it in principle, and it would allow it to wither on the vine. That is why the right hon. Gentleman said that the minimum wage would deal a body blow to low earners. That is his view of the national minimum wage, and he knows that it has not changed. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) called it a "cretinous" policy. Well, he should know—but the reality is that 1.5 million people have benefited from its introduction. The right hon. Gentleman said little on the details of the proposals that we have announced this afternoon.

On the impact on small businesses and, in particular, on the private care sector, the Low Pay Commission has considered in detail the impact of the increase, sector by sector, and has decided that it would be prudent to adopt a significant increase to £4.10. That increase will make a real difference to those who receive it, but it will not have an adverse impact on either the economy or employment levels. That is the position. If the right hon. Gentleman looks at the areas where we have had the biggest increase in employment growth, he will see that they happen to be those that have traditionally been in the low-paid sector. That is the reality, as he will know.

Yet again, we have heard the cry about burdens on business. It is about time that the right hon. Gentleman made a distinction between red tape and bureaucratic

burdens and decent, minimum standards. Today's announcement is about decent, minimum standards. The right hon. Gentleman will not challenge directly the basic standards that the Government are providing because he knows that they have broad and popular support. Instead, a code is used—the right to time off in emergencies involving children, the right to four weeks' paid holiday and the right to a national minimum wage is all red tape and bureaucracy. Well, it is not; it is what people should expect at the beginning of the 21st century. Under this Government, they will get those decent minimum standards; under the right hon. Gentleman, they would be taken away.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): It is like having two Budgets in a week.

Is my right hon. Friend aware that no Labour Government with a majority in Parliament have ever introduced a minimum wage? The Attlee Government did not achieve it; neither did the Wilson nor the Callaghan Governments. That is why it is important that my right hon. Friend has made a statement today, even though the Tories do not want to hear the truth. Is he aware that this minimum wage is vital to people in areas where the bosses have got the whip hand and where the pits were shut and people were paint spraying at £2.10 an hour? I went through those Lobbies glad to vote for the minimum wage, muttering "£5" as I went through, and I look forward to the day when, in the next Government, my right hon. Friend will take the figure up to £5 an hour. Then he will get another plaudit from me.

Mr. Byers: We shall probably have to wait for the Low Pay Commission to report. However, I can tell my hon. Friend that we have decided to make the commission permanent—it had been reappointed on an annual basis. However, under this Government, the minimum wage is here to stay, which is why the Low Pay Commission is to be made a permanent body.

My hon. Friend is right to point out that the minimum wage is significant for individuals. I know from my own constituency of many hundreds of people who have benefited from the minimum wage. I remember vividly a security guard coming to my advice surgery. He pulled out his wage slips and he showed me that he was paid £1.80 an hour for working evenings and weekends. He said, "Now, because of what you have done, I am being paid £3.60 and hour", which was the rate at the time. He added, "This has simply made a difference to my life that I could not have believed before you introduced it." That is why the Labour party and this Government are committed to retaining the minimum wage and ensuring that it will not wither away.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): May I welcome the announcement, particularly on behalf of my colleagues who represent constituencies in the south-west, the north-east and Wales, where wages are below the national average?

Although I was given 20 minutes to read the Government's 170-page report, I have several questions for the Secretary of State about it. First, table 4.2 suggests that one of the main beneficiaries of today's announcement will be the Chancellor of the Exchequer because there will be a substantial saving in benefit payments amounting to about £100 million plus increased tax and national insurance contributions. As the reduced working families tax credit payment amounts, in effect, to a tax on business, what plans does the Chancellor have to feed back the money from the Treasury to business?

Secondly, what analysis has the Secretary of State conducted of the impact of the changes specifically on the competitiveness of manufacturing industry? Table A.3.1 in appendix 3 suggests that, at the present level of exchange rates, we now have the highest minimum wage of any country in Europe apart from Luxembourg. What assessment has he made of the impact of that on the unit costs of manufacturing and what proposals has he to enable British manufacturers, who have to compete for trade, to sustain the increase in costs?

Finally, although most groups in society will benefit from and appreciate the increase, some specialist groups have concerns. I am sure that the Secretary of State has read the Mencap report on people with learning difficulties. What thought has been given to the impact of the minimum wage on Mencap and associated groups and how does he propose to deal with their particular problems?

Mr. Byers: The Low Pay Commission is considering the hon. Gentleman's final point about therapeutic workers and that will form part of its recommendations in volume two of the report, which we expect to receive in a few months.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about the tax and benefits position, we should probably all wait until my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer makes his Budget statement on Wednesday. That may have an impact on these matters.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about the competitive position. The Low Pay Commission was particularly tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that any increase would be significant to individuals, but would not effect the competitive position of British business. That balanced approach is important, and I am confident, from the Government's analysis, that the commission's recommendation of an increase to £4.10 will not affect the competitive position of British manufacturing.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is axiomatic in his statement that, if the Low Pay Commission gets it wrong, that could have an adverse effect on employment and the economy? Is not the simple fact that, if the minimum wage is set below market levels, it is otiose and, if it is set above market levels, it will simply result in job losses in the economy? Does the Secretary of State agree that either the minimum is not needed at all or that, if it is applied in this way, it will result in job losses?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman is repeating what he said in the House on 4 May 1997.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): It was not on 4 May—that was a Sunday.

Mr. Byers: It was 14 May—the hon. Gentleman is right. We all remember that weekend very well.

When the Labour party took office, we announced the introduction of the national minimum wage in the Queen's Speech. The hon. Member for Banbury

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(Mr. Baldry) shows that Conservative party policy has not changed; the Conservatives still fundamentally disagree with a national minimum wage.

It is important to have a significant increase that helps individuals without producing the adverse consequences that the hon. Gentleman mentions. A minimum wage of £3.70 has made a difference to people who receive it, and an increase to £4.10 in October will be significant. That bold move can be afforded. It is manageable because of the economy and its strengths. I think that we have achieved the correct balance. We are not threatening the economy or jobs; rather, we are increasing the national minimum wage to a decent level.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Is my right hon. Friend aware that when I asked his counterpart in the previous Government what a constituent of mine was to do because his hourly pay as a security guard had been reduced to £2-plus and his average working week had been increased to 70 hours, he said that my constituent had the choice of resigning, even though the constituency had some of the worst unemployment in the country and the worst youth unemployment in England? Is my right hon. Friend also aware that, by capping the working week, providing minimum pay and cutting unemployment vastly—youth unemployment has fallen by two thirds in my constituency—the Government have transformed many of my constituents from virtual menial slaves to respected working people who contribute to society?

Mr. Byers: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. His illustration of the way in which his genuine question was dealt with by the Minister responsible at the time demonstrates a typical Tory reaction to a pressing issue. He is correct in outlining the benefits that his constituents and many millions of other hard-working people up and down the country have received. We were elected to govern for all our people, and that is exactly what we are doing, whether by introducing the national minimum wage, providing working-time paid holidays or ensuring that people can balance work and family life. Those important measures are also sympathetic to the needs of business. The increase in the national minimum wage reflects that approach.

Angela Smith (Basildon): Many of us are overjoyed by my right hon. Friend's statement because we have campaigned for the minimum wage to be uprated. Does he share my disappointment to hear the whingeing of Conservative Members? Given that Members of Parliament are on a salary of almost £50,000 a year, is it not miserly to begrudge an increase to those people whose salary will, even after today's announcement, be only about £8,500 a year? Although his statement is good news, will he also consider, before the rate is introduced in October, the youth rate of the national minimum wage so that there is not a greater discrepancy between them?

Mr. Byers: I share my hon. Friend's disappointment, but I am not surprised by the reaction of Conservative Members because we know their view about the national minimum wage. On the youth rate, I assure her that we have asked the Low Pay Commission to consider that in volume two of the report, which will be produced a little later this year.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Will the Secretary of State assure us that there will be appropriate changes to the level of tax credits to ensure that the increases in October will lead to a real increase in living standards, rather than simply being an accountancy exercise? Does he agree that in some seaside towns there is an anomaly because employees in cafes and restaurants receive substantial tips from the customer on top of the minimum wage, while employees in the shops next door simply receive the minimum wage? Can that be resolved? Although I appreciate that it will be difficult to do so, I hope that the Secretary of State accepts that it is a problem.

Mr. Byers: Tips do not count against the national minimum wage, and there may be a particular problem to which the hon. Gentleman is referring. I understand his concern about the possible impact of the minimum wage on seaside towns. The Low Pay Commission considered the hospitality, catering and hotel industries because, as we are all aware, they are traditionally low-paid sectors. We wanted to ensure that an increase to £4.10 an hour would not have an adverse effect on them, and the commission's analysis shows that it will not.

On the interface between the tax and benefits system, I repeat that it is worth waiting for the Chancellor's statement on Wednesday.

Mr. Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): The national minimum wage will be one of the greatest monuments to this Government. I welcome the speed and boldness with which my right hon. Friend reported to the House this afternoon. He said that the impact of the minimum wage on inflation is less than 0.05 per cent. Families in the pit villages that I represent and in the coalfields of Yorkshire more generally will feel that £16 is a massive increase in their weekly household income and will greatly welcome it.

The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) said that he would not oppose the measure. That form of words is more than a verbal circumlocution; it indicates a fundamental dividing line in the House. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Tories have always resisted the national minimum wage and other measures to improve the living standards of working people?

Mr. Byers: It is a traditional role of the Conservative party to do precisely that, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those who work 40 hours a week will see their earnings rise by £16 pounds a week and those who work 25 hours will receive an increase of £10. That will make a real difference to hard-working people and their families. It is interesting that the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat–Amory) did not say that the Conservatives' policy of exempting employers of up to 100 people from basic employment legislation, except for health and safety provisions, would not apply in this case. A raft of employees would therefore be exempt from the national minimum wage. We shall certainly make sure that people throughout the country are acutely aware of that.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I thought that we were here to discuss the Government's policy. Will the

Secretary of State therefore answer the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) about whether those who run care homes will feel a particular impact following his announcement? Given that the number of care homes that are closing is causing alarming problems, especially for the health service and related areas, what will the Government do to help care homes?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We must ensure that every sector involved is able to manage the increase, and the Low Pay Commission is confident that that is the case. The private care sector plays an important role in our society and it is valued. We would not introduce any measures that would threaten its future, and we are confident that the measures that I have announced today will not do so. The implication of what the hon. Gentleman said is that people working in the private care sector should not be paid the national minimum wage, and we disagree.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware that one of the main reasons that the Government have remained popular is that Ministers are concerned about ordinary people, not least those who desperately require Parliament's protection—namely, low-paid workers? Is he surprised to learn that far from wanting an election, the Tories are absolutely terrified of having one?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have taken people out of poverty pay through the national minimum wage, which was introduced in the face of total opposition from the Conservatives. Their words might have changed, but we know that their beliefs remain the same: they do not accept even the concept of a national minimum wage.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): May I welcome today's announcement and congratulate the Government on sticking to their principles in this respect? I have a couple of questions, the first of which relates to the long-term future of the national minimum wage. Does the Secretary of State accept that subsidies to the low-paid will continue, for example, in the form of the working families tax credit, which can be seen in that light? In the long term, will he consider raising the national minimum wage to a level at which those subsidies do not kick in, and recycling the Treasury money, perhaps in the form of support for small businesses?

Secondly, will the right hon. Gentleman examine where real poverty in the workplace now occurs? Increasingly, it is the small self-employed tradesperson—the farmer, or the person who runs a small rural post office—who is affected. Such people cannot avail themselves of the national minimum wage but increasingly receive less than the national minimum wage. Will the Government consider whether that problem can be addressed through the tax system, so that poverty does not increase in one part of the economy while it is decreasing in another?

Mr. Byers: We must ensure that we have measures in place to make work pay, whether for the self-employed, farmers or workplace employees. The issue can be addressed in a variety of ways: one is through the tax regime; another is through the introduction of the national minimum wage. As for the working families tax credit, it is important that we have in place measures that complement the safety net of the national minimum wage; the working families tax credit achieves precisely that. We have to achieve a balance and set the national minimum wage at a level that takes people out of poverty pay but does not affect employment opportunities. Getting that balance right is the crucial test.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will reflect on the fact that Wales is a part of the United Kingdom that has benefited most from the introduction of the national minimum wage in terms of both the number of people it covers and the increase in average earnings it produces. That increase in average earnings has been of real benefit to the country of Wales and, under the Labour Government, it is secure for the future.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Does my right hon. Friend know how many people in Wales will benefit from this excellent measure and what will be the full-time annual wage of someone receiving the national minimum wage in Wales? Today's announcement heralds an important social and economic advance, which Wales will be pleased to receive from the Government. Why are the Conservatives looking so miserable, sad and out of place? Will my right hon. Friend send for the House of Commons nurse to aid them?

Mr. Byers: One reason might be that there are no Conservative Members of Parliament to represent the 80,000 people in Wales who benefit from the national minimum wage and will benefit from the increase announced today.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Secretary of State will know that I am never miserable and that I have always supported the principle of a national minimum wage—indeed, I operated a company in the United States that was subject to the national minimum wage. However, he will recall that in 1997 his own party predicted a national minimum wage of between £5 and £5.50 an hour, which is why the Conservative party said that the result would be high unemployment. Far from the Conservatives being "wrong, wrong, wrong", as he put it, the national minimum wage is just another Labour promise made in 1997 that was broken, broken, broken.

Mr. Byers: I think that the hon. Gentleman opposed the introduction of the national minimum wage. He will be aware that when we appointed the Low Pay Commission, we said that it was for it to decide the level at which the minimum wage should be introduced. The hon. Gentleman said that

"the minimum wage and other Bills going through Parliament will harm rather than enhance women's employment prospects."—[*Official Report*, 8 March 1999; Vol. 327, c. 67.]

He has forgotten that there are more than 600,000 more women in work now than there were under the Conservative Government. There are more women in work, and they are better paid because 70 per cent. of them benefit from the national minimum wage.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): My right hon. Friend rightly received wide-scale plaudits last Friday when he visited the north-west, announcing improvements in the science base. Today, he will receive more plaudits from other parts of the community.

[Mr. Andrew Miller]

When he next visits the north-west, may I invite him to see lone parents in my constituency who have benefited in their attempts to get into work and obtain real paid work that takes them off benefit as a result of the minimum wage policy? The policy has made a fundamental difference to those people and others. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that that message goes back to the Low Pay Commission? Will he tell it to keep up the good work, and will the Government continue to support the commission?

Mr. Byers: One reason that the Low Pay Commission is such a strong body is that it visits regions and talks to those who have benefited from the national minimum wage, as well as employers who are responsible for paying that wage. The members of the commission have a balanced and rounded approach to the recommendations that they make.

I have no doubt that my announcement will be good news for the tens of thousands in the north-west who will benefit from it. It is about ensuring that work pays and that there is real dignity for those in the workplace. The national minimum wage is an important element in securing those objectives.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): What advice would the Secretary of State give to small business men and women who perhaps employ only one or two people and work many more hours than their employees? Given the right hon. Gentleman's announcement, their net take-home pay will be considerably less than that of the employee in receipt of the minimum wage. Will the Government make up their wages through the social security system? That cannot be done now because they are self-employed. If someone cannot see any light at the end of the tunnel in terms of his business—he may be a farmer, for example—should he sell up before the increase in the minimum wage comes into effect in October?

Mr. Byers: When the Low Pay Commission considered its recommendation, it looked at the impact that it would have on all sectors of the economy. I am confident that the recommendation that we have been prepared to agree will escape the difficulties to which the hon. Gentleman has referred. It is a balanced approach. It is prudent and bold in that there is a significant increase, but it is being introduced in a way that will not adversely affect the economy or employment generally.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): My right hon. Friend's announcement will be extremely welcome in my constituency, where more than 2,000 people—most of them women—have already benefited from the national minimum wage.

There are always Scrooge employers who try to use every dodgy practice going to avoid paying a penny. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that his Department will mount an effective publicity campaign so that people know what they are entitled to? A clear message must be sent to miserly bosses that they need to pay what is due to people.

Mr. Byers: We need to ensure that there is effective enforcement, and we have committed a good deal of time and resources to that end. Enforcement will be one of the issues covered by the Low Pay Commission in the second volume of its report, which will be available in a few months' time. We have put measures in place to ensure that people are aware of their entitlement. We have already run an advertising campaign; no doubt we will want to do so again, to publicise the fact that there is to be an increase to £4.10 in October. In the interim, individuals or employers who need guidance or have questions should contact our helpline number, which is 0845 6000 678.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Secretary of State referred to benefits for women, especially in respect of the hotel and catering industry. Has he had time to read the latest Bank of England quarterly report, which indicates that the trend in the increase in employment is less towards full-time jobs and much more biased towards part-time jobs? Does he recognise that the increase in the national minimum wage will therefore involve less full-time employment and an increase in part-time employment? That is fine if that is what women want when their children are at school, but not if the women are the main breadwinners and bringing up young children.

Mr. Byers: As I said, the rates will be the same, whether employees are full-time or part-time. As a result of today's announcement, the national minimum wage will go up to £4.10 an hour from this October. It is important that people have a genuine choice; many of them choose to work part-time. I welcome the fact that, as a result of employment growth under this Government, people now have that option and can decide how to balance their lives. If people want to work reduced hours or go part-time, it is important that they should be entitled to do that, particularly if they have responsibilities for child care or looking after an ageing parent. In a genuinely flexible work force, employees can choose to work fewer hours, if that is what they want.

Mr. Terry Rooney (Bradford, North): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement. Will he confirm that there are no grounds at all for differential rates, whether by sector or geographic region? In particular, will he resist calls from Liberal Democrat Members for a lower rate in the south-west and Yorkshire and Humberside?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is right to point out what the Liberal Democrats' policy was; I am not sure what it is nowadays. [HON. MEMBERS: "Neither are they."] That is probably right. When the national minimum wage was introduced, the Liberal Democrats wanted regional differences in the application of the rate, which would obviously have an adverse impact not just on Yorkshire and Humberside, but on the north-east, the north-west and Wales in particular. Under this Government, the national minimum wage is exactly that: it is a national minimum, which does not vary according to sector or geographical location. Wherever someone works in the United Kingdom, in whatever sector, in whatever size of organisation, he or she will be able to get the benefit of the increase that we have announced today.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I accept that a powerful case has been made for the national minimum wage and that my fears about it have not been realised—

[Interruption.] I do not find that embarrassing; my mother always said that it was quite a good idea, and I probably should have listened to her earlier.

Will the right hon. Gentleman assure the House that farmers who earn substantially less than the national minimum wage will shortly be on the receiving end of Government largesse? Further to the pertinent inquiry of my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House what specific discussions he is having, or intends to have, with the Federation of Small Businesses and the Forum of Private Business about the impact of the uprating on micro businesses?

Mr. Byers: The important point is that the Low Pay Commission has consulted and engaged with all organisations and has considered the impact of the national minimum wage. We, too, have looked at its impact, and are confident that some difficulties about which the hon. Gentleman is concerned will not arise. The report was published early in the cycle to ensure that small businesses have plenty of notice of the intention to introduce an increase in October this year. We are now giving them that notice. I have no doubt—and this point was reflected in the report—that, with that period of notice, the change will be manageable for micro businesses and other small businesses.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement, particularly as it comes at the beginning of international women's week? Is he aware that, before the statutory minimum wage, countless women went out to work, often part-time, for what was derogatively called "pin money"? One effect of the statutory minimum wage has been to raise the status of part-time work—for example, in cleaning and private care homes, where formerly work was nothing more than exploitation.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is right. Before we introduced the national minimum wage, there is no doubt that there was exploitation of workers, especially of women in the workplace. Through the introduction of the national minimum wage, we have made sure that work pays for those women, and that part-time workers have the same rights as full-time workers. They are no longer treated legally as second-class citizens. We will ensure that part-time work has status and dignity. Of course, the majority of people working part-time are women, so I am pleased that, as my hon. Friend pointed out, we made the announcement at the beginning of international women's week.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): I know that the whole House will want to congratulate the mother of the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on her good sense. It is sad that she did not have more influence on him, so that we could have avoided a single sitting of 23 and a half hours in Standing Committee while he and his colleagues tried to talk down the national minimum wage.

I welcome my right hon. Friend's confirmation, in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon (Angela Smith), that the youth rate will be considered before October. Did my right hon. Friend hear Mr. Chris Humphries of the British Chambers of Commerce this morning, when he said that his members, mostly small and medium-sized firms, did not oppose the national minimum wage? Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the membership of that organisation—firms with fewer than 100 employees—were exempted, that would mean the abolition of the minimum wage for a large number of vulnerable employees?

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend is right to point out that if employers with fewer than 100 employees were granted an exemption from the national minimum wage, hundreds of thousands of people would lose the benefits of it. That is why we stated clearly that it should apply to all employers. I did listen to Chris Humphries this morning. I know that the British Chambers of Commerce endorses the principle of a national minimum wage, and I hope that now that he has had an opportunity to see the details of our proposals, he will welcome our approach to the matter.

On the specifics of the youth rate, my hon. Friend can be assured that the second volume of the Low Pay Commission report for this year will address it within the next two or three months. When the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) has read the Low Pay Commission report, he will see that it considered in detail the impact of differentials in relation to the recommendations that it made. In the light of that, the Low Pay Commission recommended a significant increase, which the Government have endorsed.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): May I take the Secretary of State back to the issue of the youth rate? When he considers the next report, which will deal with the youth rate, will he also consider extending the national minimum wage to young people aged 16 to 18? As I am sure he is aware, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that many 16-year-olds are grossly exploited because they are not covered by the national minimum wage, and some employers take great advantage of that. Will he consider, too, the problem of the increasing benefit trap in areas of high housing costs? When people get a job, the loss of benefit combined with very high rent costs unfortunately means that they are worse off. Finally, will he put another 90p on the national minimum wage?

Mr. Byers: The Low Pay Commission has been charged with the responsibility of examining the youth rate, but we have not restricted that to the existing youth rate; we have specifically asked the commission to examine the position of 16 and 17-year-olds, so they will be covered by the second volume of the report, which is due in a couple of months.

As for the impact of the national minimum wage on the benefits system, the Government keep it under review generally, because it is important that the existing barriers to work—my hon. Friend identified one of them—are removed, so that people are rewarded when they go out to work and recognise that there is a better future for them in work than on benefit. It is important that the barriers are removed wherever possible.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): My right hon. Friend's announcement will be warmly welcomed by the people of Devon and Cornwall, where pay is traditionally very low. Thousands of families in the region have benefited from the national minimum wage, so is it not telling that not a

[Mr. Ben Bradshaw]

single Conservative or Liberal Member from those counties is present to welcome the announcement? Furthermore, is it not time that we were given a fulsome apology by those who opposed the minimum wage? They claimed that it would boost unemployment, but there is record employment in Devon and Cornwall and throughout the country, and it is still rising.

Mr. Byers: I welcome the fact that we have been proved right on the introduction of the national minimum wage. As my hon. Friend said, it benefits the tens of thousands of people in Devon and Cornwall who have been taken out of poverty pay because of its introduction. Those people will benefit also from the significant increase that will be made in October, as I have announced. I share his disappointment that no Conservative or Liberal Democrat Members who represent constituencies in the south-west were present to hear the announcement.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): In low-paid constituencies such as mine, the announcement of the £4.10 figure will be much welcomed, as will the assurance that the Low Pay Commission will continue its work, which demonstrates the Government's commitment to continuing the national minimum wage at the right level and to ensuring that it will be relevant in future years.

There is one further thing that we should do in relation to the minimum wage: we should recognise that many employees are worth a lot more than the minimum. We must urge employers who can afford to pay more not to rest on the floor of the minimum wage. When they can pay more and their workers deserve more, we should ensure that a fair wage is paid.

Mr. Byers: The minimum wage is a safety net below which no employer can legally go. Obviously, it is to be hoped that individuals who merit a higher wage will receive proper rewards, but I am pleased that thousands of hard-working people in Burnley will benefit from today's announcement. The minimum wage is about rewarding communities and individuals, and that is exactly what it does. As a result of the increase, 1.5 million people will be better off in October than they would otherwise have been.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, despite the Opposition's forced weasel words of support, there can be no doubt that if a Conservative Government were elected, the national minimum wage would be allowed to wither on the vine? Does he also agree that the success with which the measure has been introduced and extended should give us greater confidence to proceed with further family friendly employment policies?

Mr. Byers: I agree with that final point. We must ensure a balance so that work and family life can be lived to the full. My hon. Friend was also right to point out the Opposition's view. It was the shadow Chancellor who announced what appeared to be a policy U-turn by saying that the Opposition would support the national minimum wage. He did so having had very little consultation with his Front-Bench colleagues.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): How do you know?

Mr. Byers: Because they have told me. Later, on the "Today" programme, the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said: "You know, we're not great enthusiasts about the minimum wage." That is absolutely right.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Byers: At least the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) agrees with that. He is among the foremost of those who do not believe in the national minimum wage, but the reality is that most Conservative Front-Bench Members who speak on trade and industry matters do not believe in it either.

Mr. Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that north-east England will benefit most from the minimum wage? It is another great achievement for the Government, but, above all, it is a socialist achievement.

Mr. Byers: It is an achievement that manages to combine economic efficiency and social justice. I know that my hon. Friend will be pleased for the thousands of people in Blyth Valley who will benefit from the increase announced today. Indeed, hon. Members who represent constituencies in the north-east will take particular pleasure in the announcement. We know that for far too long, good, hard-working people in the region that we represent have simply not been rewarded for their endeavours. As a result of the national minimum wage, that is now happening, and they will benefit from the significant increase that is to be made in October of this year.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does my right hon. Friend realise that fewer than a dozen Conservative Back Benchers are present to hear his statement? They have escaped an afternoon of humiliation here by going to their constituents to apologise for being wrong for the past 22 years. Members of the shadow Cabinet are reversing all the policies that do not match the Government's, while others, such as the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), are busy working out which party to support in the general election.

Does my right hon. Friend agree—I am sure that he will—that the announcement is a great triumph for the Labour Government? It means that 3,000 of my constituents, who faced the daily insult of dirt pay for many years, will earn wages that will lift them out of the dependency culture and give them a reasonable reward for their labours.

Mr. Byers: There is no doubt that the national minimum wage has taken people out of poverty pay and that it rewards them for their endeavours. The significant increase that we have been able to announce today will make a real difference, not only to my hon. Friend's constituency but to the 1.5 million people and their families who rely on the national minimum wage. Today's announcement constitutes a genuine benefit for them; they know that it was introduced by a Labour Government and

that it is safe under this Government. They also know that the Conservatives do not believe in it and would take it away at the first opportunity.

Mr. David Watts (St. Helens, North): Many small employers in my constituency will welcome today's announcement because, for many years, they were seriously undercut by employers who offered £1 and £2 an hour.

Now that we have acted on pay, will my right hon. Friend consider the many people who are on temporary employment contracts? They continue to suffer because they have no security of tenure.

Mr. Byers: On my hon. Friend's final point, we are considering the fixed term directive and the steps that we need to take on that.

My hon. Friend made the important point that many small businesses encouraged the Government to introduce the national minimum wage because they were worried about the way in which other small businesses exploited their position and paid very low wages.

The Government have set up an enforcement line and many calls have come from employers, not employees, who have told the Inland Revenue and my Department about other employers who pay wages that are below the national minimum level. That demonstrates that business accepts the national minimum wage as an important provision. Indeed, it is widely accepted and welcomed, not only by those who receive the benefit of it but by decent, fair-minded people who know that a national minimum wage is about decency. At the beginning of the 21st century, the least that we can expect of a Government is the introduction of such a provision. We have done that, and we are proud of it.

Points of Order

4.33 pm

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will recall the anxiety that was expressed by hon. Members of all parties last week about the outbreak of foot and mouth disease, and especially hon. Members' wish to obtain as much information as possible from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and other Departments. It is natural at such a time that our constituents may want to apply to us for information that they are experiencing difficulty in obtaining, or for clarification of that information. To be fair, the Minister of Agriculture responded to those anxieties by saying that he would establish information machinery for hon. Members.

I received two difficult constituency representations and rang the Minister's private office. I refer to you and your judgment on that matter, Mr. Speaker, because, to my surprise, the private office referred me to the hon. Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly), the Parliamentary Private Secretary, and her private office. I believe that that is unprecedented. I make no complaint about the courtesy with which my inquiry was handled, and I am sure that the person who spoke to me wanted to be as helpful as possible, but, given the seriousness of the matter, it is somewhat cock-eyed and inappropriate to handle it in that way.

Would it not be better for those who listen to these issues to take the matter back to the Ministry and set up proper machinery at an official level, so that hon. Members on both sides of the House can refer their cause to the Ministry and get the matter officially clarified?

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. I did not know that my hon. Friend was going to raise the issue, but I would like to concur with what he said. A way must be found for Members of Parliament to put cases directly to Ministers. I rang the Minister's private office not long ago, and was also directed to the hon. Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly).

A farmer in my constituency has calving heifers on land about two miles away from his farm. He is unable to get to those animals and to be with them while they are calving. The Minister must come to the House and make a statement, so that hon. Members have the opportunity to raise such concerns as these.

Mr. Speaker: The points of order raised by both hon. Members are matters for the Minister. I listened carefully to what the Minister had to say, and I got the feeling that he wanted to give as much information to the House as possible. I am sure that the concerns expressed by both hon. Members will be noted by the Minister and taken on board.

Welsh Affairs

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

4.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I shall not let this opportunity pass without paying tribute to a great Welshman who, sadly, was buried a week ago. Cledwyn Hughes was a great Welshman because of his passion for Wales: in that, few were his equal and none his master. His passion for devolution was deep, but he was also proud to be British and I know that, were he here, he would argue strongly for the continued partnership between London and Cardiff in the post-devolution world.

Cledwyn Hughes was also a great Welshman because he was a true internationalist. He stood opposed to fascism in the 1930s because he knew that events on the continent of Europe were not about far-away lands of which we knew little, but had a direct bearing on all of us on these islands, too. He was a man who had the vision to see the importance of Europe for Britain's future. At the Welsh Labour party conference last week, Neil Kinnock lamented Cledwyn's passing and expressed his regret that he had never been made Foreign Secretary. I, too, feel that history would have been very different—and that that difference would have been to the benefit of all of Britain—had that appointment been made.

The past few days have been trying times for many people in Wales. I know that the House will want to express its sympathy and understanding for the many involved in farming in Wales who face desperate worry and uncertainty as a result of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. Those involved expect the Government, Parliament and the Assembly to act, and act collectively we have. We have acted speedily to do what we can to restrict the spread of this infection. We have acted to give local authorities the powers that they need to restrict public access to footpaths and bridleways. Again, I urge the public to stay off those paths, and warn anyone who breaks the law that they will face the prospect of heavy fines.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for making the point about staying off footpaths. I am a keen walker, and was walking in Talyllyn in the constituency of the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) only two weeks ago. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is important to emphasise that people should not only stay off the footpaths that are clearly marked, but refrain from crossing fields and other areas that may not be clearly marked as out of bounds?

Mr. Murphy: I take the hon. Gentleman's point, and I am glad that he was walking in Wales some weeks ago.

We have started to allow the movement of healthy animals for slaughter and subsequent sale. The House will know that we must proceed with caution, so movements have been relatively limited thus far, and that we have acted to secure agrimonetary compensation for farmers. We have done so through a strong partnership between Westminster, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast. All the Ministers involved—my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Carwyn Jones, Ross Finnie and Brid Rogers—deserve credit for their willingness to act swiftly and decisively.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The Secretary of State rightly refers to compensation and the European funding that is being accessed to help farmers. He will be very much aware that others directly associated with the agriculture industry such as slaughterhouses, hauliers and others will equally be hit and may be put out of business. Indeed, the tourist areas of Wales are being hit especially hard and bookings over Easter might be undermined by these developments. Is there any help at all that the Government foresee being available to those who are indirectly affected by this tragedy?

Mr. Murphy: The right hon. Gentleman will know that in previous outbreaks of the disease farmers who lost their stock were directly compensated. There was a danger that their stock would infect other stock. Consequential compensation has not yet been considered, but I shall make sure that his points are put to my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): At the weekend, I spoke to my brother-in-law, who is a farmer, and to other farmers about compensation. A number of people have been indirectly affected. Many of my constituents are small hoteliers. They have been drastically affected by the cancellation of the rugby match, which was entirely to do—*[Interruption.]* These are not small matters, as the cancellation meant losses of £5 million to the Welsh Rugby Union and considerably more to small hoteliers around Cardiff. If indirect compensation is considered, I hope that the Government will take account of matters such as the cancellation of major events, which have large knock-on effects for many small businesses.

Mr. Murphy: I take my hon. Friend's point, but the compensation has so far been limited to those who are directly losing their stock, which would pose a danger to other stock. His points about Cardiff are well taken and I am sure that my colleagues in other Departments will take note of them. I do not underestimate the problems that have arisen because of the disease, which in some senses go far beyond the farms themselves, but compensation was not paid in respect of such matters in the past.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): This morning, I heard that slaughterhouses are seeking to exploit the situation by reducing the price that they offer farmers. If that is happening, does the Secretary of State wholly deplore it, because farmers are in a desperate situation and they need to get their meat to slaughterhouses? Will the Government do everything they can to facilitate farmers getting their stock to slaughter where it is safe to do so, and, in the longer term, will he undertake to consider with his colleagues in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food reopening more small slaughterhouses so that animals do not have to be carted vast distances to slaughter?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman and Members from Welsh constituencies will be aware that a number of abattoirs have opened to receive such stock in north

Wales, mid-Wales and south and west Wales. I take his point, which is valid and, if I may say so, very interventionist for a Conservative, but obviously we are all conscious of the problems that the disease has brought to our local communities—not simply those that are wholly rural, but mixed communities, to which I shall refer later.

I find it extraordinary that so many Conservative Members seem to think that there is something outrageous about the idea of strength going hand in hand with diversity. That is absolutely and completely what devolution is about: Welsh domestic approaches to Welsh domestic matters in a strong partnership with the United Kingdom Government.

There is a corollary to that. Serious politicians spend their energies tackling problems that they have an ability to influence, and that is the approach taken by the Labour party in the National Assembly. The Welsh nationalists, Plaid Cymru, seem to have other ideas. They see the Assembly as little more than a platform for their own ideas. They have nothing of substance to offer by way of an alternative to the programme being implemented by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan) and his Administration, but that is for them to deal with in the Assembly.

The Conservatives, too, have their plans. No doubt they will make plenty of attacks on the Assembly Administration in this debate. They seem unable to face up to the fact that devolution is here and that it works. They will get over it sooner or later—probably later. Much later, I expect.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way with his usual courtesy. Does he accept that it is not only Conservatives who criticise the operations of the Welsh Assembly? His colleague, the First Secretary, stated in the *Western Mail* on 10 October 2000:

"The National Assembly is very unstable and far too prone to concentrating on procedural points of order, votes of no confidence and petty wrangling, instead of getting on with the job in hand—that of making decisions."

Does the Secretary of State agree with that?

Mr. Murphy: As the hon. Gentleman knows, many Conservatives were involved in such activity. My right hon. Friend was referring to the need for stability in the National Assembly. The partnership in the Assembly between my party and the Liberal Democrats exists to ensure stability.

This Wales day debate will be of considerable interest to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as a Welsh person. It marks another milestone in the history of the new, post-devolution Wales. It offers us, as Members of the House of Commons, a chance to look back at a full year of devolution. It gives all of us an opportunity to review the work of the UK Government, and to consider what might happen in the year ahead.

I am, of course, fully confident that the people of Wales, when they come to decide, will endorse the Government's record. Some figures published in the past few weeks might help the House to understand why I am so confident about that outcome.

First, the new earnings survey published in December showed that the earnings of full-time employees in Wales rose by 4 per cent. between April 1999 and April 2000. That was the second highest figure for any part of the UK, and it compares with an increase of just 1 per cent. in London and 2.6 per cent. in the south-east. The reason for that increase is clear: the national minimum wage. To emphasise the point, the same survey showed that the earnings of adult women in Wales rose not by 4 per cent., but by 5 per cent. The minimum wage has helped more than 80,000 Welsh people, which represents almost one in 10 of Welsh employees. It is a pay rise from the Government for all those people in Wales. Only today, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced a further increase in the minimum wage: another pay rise for many thousands of people in Wales. As I said to the Welsh Grand Committee recently, that Labour pay rise was for years resisted by the Conservative party.

I should also like to draw the House's attention to the policy of the Liberal Democrats. They thought that it was wrong that Welsh employees, especially Welsh women, had such pay increases thanks to the minimum wage. Their policy was—or is, unless it has changed—a regionally varied minimum wage, which would mean lower wages for Wales.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): That is not the case. I have never supported a regional minimum wage. I believe that the minimum wage is being misused by powerful companies in, for example, the health care industry. They go down to the lowest common denominator and take on new employees at the lowest possible level, which did not happen before, when they were in the national health service, for instance.

Mr. Murphy: I am grateful for that intervention, but I am not much clearer about the policy of the Liberal Democrats on the national minimum wage. At least the Conservative shadow spokesman for trade and industry said that, although his party had misgivings, it welcomed today's announcement. But there we are. We shall wait and see.

After the earnings figures published in December came the employment figures. I know that many people in Wales still face the threat of redundancy, and at least 300 of my constituents are threatened with the loss of their jobs with Corus.

On Friday, along with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, West, I met representatives of all the steel plants affected by the company's proposals. We listened not just to the expressions of justified anger and upset—how else would we expect workers at some of the most efficient steel plants in the world to react when faced with closure announcements?—but to people who were determined to do all that they could to keep as many jobs as possible at those plants.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): Steel workers at Shotton are very grateful to my right hon. Friend and his Parliamentary Private Secretary for what they have tried to do to help them in the corridors of power, notwithstanding the 400 redundancies that we face at that plant.

[Mr. Barry Jones]

Are the Government considering any measures to take into account the comparatively high wages that young redundant steel workers have been earning? Will it be possible to make up the difference when those workers have new jobs?

Mr. Murphy: My right hon. Friend has worked hard on behalf of his constituents at Shotton. As he knows, the Government are considering a variety of packages. He will also know that, as we speak, the trade unions are working out alternatives to the Corus proposals. It would be wrong for me to go into detail until those alternatives had been put to the management.

The trade unions' pitch to Corus is firmly based on the commercial realities of the steel industry. We in the Government and the Assembly are pledged to do all that we can, within the tight constraints of the coal and steel community treaties and codes, to assist them. It is a tragedy that Corus has so far refused to engage constructively with either the unions or the Government, but I hope the whole House will join me in urging the chief executive, the chairman, Sir Brian Moffat, and his colleagues to listen to the unions' commercially based proposals.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): My right hon. Friend may be aware that the chief executive and chairman gave evidence to the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs on Thursday. When my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Mr. Caton) suggested to the chairman, Sir Brian Moffat, that the Bryngwyn plant was profitable, the chairman stated that he had no knowledge of its profitability. Does that not demonstrate the incompetence of senior management who are prepared to shut a plant regardless of whether it is profitable?

Mr. Murphy: That is clearly of considerable concern; but what concerns all of us who represent steel constituencies in Wales such as Ebbw Vale, Shotton, Gorseinon and Llanwern is the fact that steel plants that are among the most efficient and productive in Europe, if not the most efficient, are to close or at least partially close. That strikes me as a national tragedy from a Welsh and indeed a British point of view.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I am sure most Members support all that my right hon. Friend has said. Does he agree that if Sir Brian Moffat proceeds with his proposals, does not listen to the unions and decimates the steel industry, the knighthood that he received for services to the industry should be withdrawn?

Mr. Murphy: I am not in a position to comment on Sir Brian's honour. I am much more interested in what he is proposing to do to 3,000 people in Wales, their families and their communities. I hope he will listen very carefully to the alternatives that the unions and others will put to him in the next week or two.

Steel, however, is not the only industry in Wales. In recent weeks we have seen Ford's £240 million investment in the Bridgend engine works, which will create or secure 500 jobs in a leading-edge technology. Investment of £17 million is going to Mostyn docks in north Wales to secure 85 new jobs. There are 100 new jobs at IQE in Cardiff, announced in December, and 83 at Surface Technology Systems in Newport. Moreover, 1,700 jobs are to be created by BAE, and 1,000 are to be safeguarded at General Domestic Appliances. There are to be 400 jobs at Lloyds TSB, 400 at On:Line Finance and 230 at Paramount Food. There will be 264 new high-tech jobs at Wireless Systems International in my constituency, and 110 at Pure Wafer Ltd.

Manufacturing output and manufacturing investment are rising. There have been difficult times, but the climate, including the relative exchange rate between the pound and the euro, is improving. Manufacturing output is up 3.5 per cent. Exports are up 9 per cent. in the past year alone. Inward investment since 1997 is worth £2.2 billion.

Overall, the increase in jobs in Wales has outstripped any losses by 17,000 in the past year. That rate of growth is greater than that in the UK as a whole. It is greater even than that in London or the south-east of England, but jobs are not the last piece of good news for the Welsh economy. Last week, the Office for National Statistics published new data on regional GDP. I know that those data are often subject to change and reassessment, but it is only fair that I quote it, given that the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) has been so happy to use it in the past few weeks. He said:

> "The latest regional estimates, published on 27 June by the Office for National Statistics . . . show a decline in GDP per head in Wales relative to that of the whole UK".—[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 29 November 2000; Vol. 357, c. 216WH.]

Perhaps he might wish to use any speech that he might make this afternoon to update the House. The latest figures, published on 27 February, show that Wales's relative share of GDP has risen from 80.2 per cent. of the UK average in 1998—itself a figure that was revised upwards—to 80.5 per cent. in 1999.

What matters to our constituents? Do more jobs matter to them? We are getting that. Does better pay matter to them? We are getting that. Does more prosperity matter to them? We are getting that. Do low interest rates matter to them? Interest rates are falling. Does low inflation matter to them, too? Inflation excluding mortgage rates is at its lowest since records began; including mortgage costs, it is enjoying its longest run at low levels for many decades.

I know that many in our rural communities feel that they are suffering from particular economic stress—something more than just the immediate effects of the foot and mouth outbreak. Labour Members are more than aware of that feeling. Mine is a mixed constituency: I represent farmers as well as steel workers in the House. Overall, the Labour party represents more rural and semi-rural constituencies in the House than all the other parties in Wales combined; indeed, it represents more such constituencies than all the other parties in the UK combined.

We—the UK Government and the National Assembly—are acting to assist rural communities, and not just through the £3.5 billion that is paid in subsidy to farming throughout the UK every year. The Assembly is acting in partnership with the Strategic Rail Authority to improve rural rail-bus links and to restore passenger services to the Vale of Glamorgan.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Before the Secretary of State moves off the economy, will he confirm that,

when the Government came to power, Wales's GDP was 82.8 per cent. of the UK average and that what the Government have presided over—there has been a slight readjustment lately—is a decline in GDP of more than 2 per cent.?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman is not prepared to accept that Wales is getting better—in its economy, prosperity, jobs and in the relative way in which people live in Wales. That is typical of the Welsh nationalist party. All the time, it grumbles and whinges about what the economy is like when everyone knows, in his constituency, in my constituency—in the constituencies of all of us who represent Welsh seats—that things are getting an awful lot better.

Dr. Julian Lewis *rose—*

Mr. Murphy: I give way to someone who does not represent a Welsh constituency, but we will listen to what he says.

Dr. Lewis: Unlike me, the Secretary of State was not, I believe, born in Wales. Will he, in his great concern for the farming community in Wales, dissociate himself from the remarks of the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), who stated on "Farming Today" on 22 March:

"Of course there are farmers in serious difficulties, but I believe they have greatly exaggerated their case. And much of their case is based on distortions or plain untruths."

If that were not good enough, he was also quoted in *Farmers Weekly* on 4 February as saying:

"And the main reason why there's a large number of suicides among farmers is because they have shotguns handy."

Does the Secretary of State dissociate himself from those remarks?

Mr. Murphy: First, I should like to say that I most certainly was born in Wales. I was born in the parish of Llanbradach, near Usk, which at the time, I suppose, was in Monmouthshire—although in our hearts that was a Welsh county. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) has just returned to the Chamber and can reply to the hon. Gentleman's comments after we inform him of them.

The Assembly's rural development plan has been accepted by the European Commission, so in future subsidy payments to agriculture will be modulated, with additional United Kingdom Exchequer funds to strengthen not only farming but rural communities more generally. It is of course fallacious to suggest that measures such as the children's tax credit or the minimum wage work only to the benefit of urban areas. As I have already said, most Members in Wales represent mixed constituencies. I know that those measures are as important in rural parts of Torfaen as they are elsewhere.

In last year's Welsh affairs debate, I was able to tell the House that the Government had agreed to establish in statute a Children's Commissioner for Wales.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Before my right hon. Friend leaves the subject of the serious crisis hitting so many parts of Wales, may I tell him something? No one would begrudge the full compensation that the farming community will receive for the nightmare that it is going through, but if we are in the business of compensating all the citizens of Wales who are suffering severe losses because of no fault of their own, should we not also be thinking of compensation for steel workers who may be losing their livelihoods, many of whom will probably never work again? I am told that, in redundancy payments and other compensation, they will be receiving about one fifth of what Dutch steel workers would receive. In this era of compensation, with all the incidental losses being suffered by people outside the farming industry, should we not be thinking of full compensation for steel workers?

Mr. Murphy: My hon. Friend is right to compare what would happen to a steel worker's family with what would happen to a farmer's family when we hit times as bad as we are experiencing now. Some of his comments have probably dealt with the points made by the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis).

As I said, the Government agreed to establish a children's commissioner. That announcement reflected the importance of this House and this Parliament in passing primary legislation for the people of Wales. Since our last Wales day debate, my office has overseen the parliamentary passage of new Welsh law not only on the children's commissioner, but on care standards more generally, on education, on training and on local government.

When we first dealt with the issue of the children's commissioner, we were limited to using the legislative vehicle then available—which has become the Care Standards Act 2000. That necessarily led to the creation of a commissioner with a limited role. However, I am pleased to say that, as we all know, our further measure was welcomed on both sides of the House and quickly passed into law. I am very grateful for the co-operation that was shown by all parties on the children's commissioner.

Today I am in an even happier position. On 1 March—less than one year after our announcement in last year's debate—the new commissioner took up his post. A Bill to widen the scope of his work to the full canvas of the Assembly's work is now being considered in another place, having completed its passage through this place in a matter of weeks, with, as I said, the co-operation of all parties. This year, Parliament has debated not only the Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill, but Welsh aspects of the modernisation of the national health service.

As hon. Members may recall, last year the present Conservative spokesman on Welsh Affairs, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) told the House:

"Labour has also failed to ensure that Wales receives its funding from the European Union."

Moreover, despite the Prime Minister's promises, the hon. Gentleman added:

"Labour is refusing to give a commitment to secure the extra funding that Wales needs."—[*Official Report*, 2 March 2000; Vol. 345, c. 649.]

The hon. Gentleman was, of course, referring to the funding of the objective 1 programme. As the House knows, objective 1 is an opportunity for west Wales and the valleys to catch up some of the economic ground that they lost in the 18 years of the Conservative Government. It must

[Mr. Murphy]

therefore have been something of an embarrassment to the hon. Gentleman when, in last July's spending review, we did indeed fully fund the objective 1 programme.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): I am sorry that the Secretary of State did not quite understand the point being made not only by me but by other hon. Members—those in other parties, as well as those in the Conservative party. We were talking not only about the European Union funding, but about the additional funding that was supposed to come from the United Kingdom Government. There was no additional funding from the Government; the only additional funding comes from the existing block grant to the Welsh Assembly.

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman is mistaken; he knows that almost £500 million over the next three years will be additional to the Barnett block. If that is not additional, I do not know what is. He does not understand the funding arrangement. As he will be aware, both when the Conservative Government were in power and when I was a Northern Ireland Minister dealing with such matters, all the money involved in objective 1 structural funding—in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland or England—had to be found from the block itself.

The hon. Gentleman obviously does not understand, first, that the block has become much bigger in the past year—it is the biggest settlement ever paid to Wales by a United Kingdom Government—or, secondly, that between £400 million and £500 million will be paid over and above the Barnett formula in the next three years, so that we can draw down those funds. That represents an enormous development in the way in which public finances work. Any hon. Member—from whichever party—who suggests that that does not represent a major surplus for Wales does not understand the nature of that funding.

Mr. Wigley *rose—*

Mr. Murphy: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman does not want to make the same point as the hon. Member for North Dorset, because he knows that it is wrong.

Mr. Wigley: I understand the nature of the funding, and I welcome part of what the Secretary of State has just said. He has acknowledged that until now, not one brass farthing of European money over and above the Barnett block has come to Wales or any other part of the United Kingdom that is supposed to receive money from Europe. Will he acknowledge that, whereas we are supposed to receive £180 million a year for objective 1 from Europe, we do not, in fact, get that much in addition to the Barnett formula? We receive a sum above the Barnett level, but not the full £180 million—let alone the necessary match funding. That is why expenditure on education in Wales is being increased by a lower proportion than expenditure on education in England; the money has to be diverted to provide the match funding.

Mr. Murphy: Obviously I have to disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. Here are the figures: the additional funding in 2001–02—the new financial year, which begins in a few weeks—will be £113 million; the year after, it will be £148 million; and the year after that, it will be £160 million. That amounts to £421 million in total over those three years. The point is that in the past, all the money had to be found from the block itself, but those sums are additional to the block. That is a major change in the way in which we deal with public finances. Does the right hon. Gentleman think that if the United Kingdom Government were not prepared to pay that money, the same amount would come from money raised in Wales alone? I very much doubt whether it would.

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): I suppose that we have heard the nearest that we shall ever get to an apology from the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley) for supporting a lie in the Welsh Assembly just over a year ago. It is just as well that that did not happen in the House. Will my right hon. Friend invite the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues in Plaid Cymru to stop the continual whingeing that we have heard for so long, support the initiatives that objective 1 status can produce and start to help to improve the economy of Wales, instead of damaging it by continually discouraging people from proposing schemes?

Mr. Murphy: My right hon. Friend is right. There was a lot of fuss and bother about whether we would get that money, but we did get it, and in a special way. However, all our energies in Wales were spent on arguing with each other about whether the money would come, rather than on preparing the schemes for the objective 1 areas, which are so important. We must not fall into that trap again. The money is there, the will is there, and it is now up to everyone in Wales—from north to south and from east to west—to encourage the partnerships and to ensure that we spend the money wisely.

As I said, it must have been something of an embarrassment to the hon. Member for North Dorset that the funding was found. He denies that he was embarrassed by his failure to understand the issues, but the money is there. His embarrassment could only have been compounded when Conservative central office denounced that decision, and the rest of the spending review, as a "public spending binge" and as a return to "tax and spend".

The briefing for Members of Parliament—it was for Conservative Members, I hasten to add, but I am pleased to say that a copy has also found its way to me—goes on to say that there is a £16 billion spending gap between what the Conservatives say is affordable and what Labour plans to spend. However, Wales will suffer badly if the Conservatives ever get their chance to close this "gap", because the 2000 spending review increased Welsh spending through the block faster than Government spending as a whole. The Welsh block will rise by about £2 billion over the next three years. That means more money for schools and more money for health. Welsh services dealt with outside the block, such as the police, have also done well, so there is also more money for policing in Wales.

How do the Tories propose to fill that gap? I know: they will cut, cut and cut. They will cut our schools budget, they will cut our health budget and they will cut our police budgets. In Wales, they will slash the very objective 1 budget that the hon. Member for North Dorset commended only a year ago. What else could we expect from a party that has swung so decisively against Europe?

Yesterday's speech by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) was condemned by the *Financial Times* today as

"as disingenuous as it is distasteful".

The reality, as the newspaper makes clear, is that the Tory anti-European bandwagon is now hurtling towards the precipice marked "Withdrawal". As the newspaper's leader column adds:

"Short of British withdrawal from the EU, the Tories are making promises that cannot be delivered."

Withdrawal from Europe would represent an economic and political disaster for the whole United Kingdom, and for Wales in particular; we would suffer most. Conservative prejudice and intolerance would leave thousands out of work, close off our export markets and destroy our agriculture.

Of course, the Tories' intolerance finds its echo in the words of Councillor Seimon Glyn. *[Interruption.]* I thought that Plaid Cymru Members would be upset by this; they do not like to hear about him. His view is that 80 per cent. of his fellow countrymen and countrywomen, such as me, speak a foreign language, and that incomers from Chester need to be "monitored and controlled". I notice that the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones), the leader of the Welsh National party, is not here today to talk about these issues. The only difference is that while the Tories want to withdraw from Europe, the nationalists want to withdraw from Britain. Of course, many nationalists must want the Tories to be returned to power, because both parties have a common interest in undermining the devolution settlement.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I am rising to the right hon. Gentleman's bait on the question of what Seimon Glyn did or did not say. However, did the right hon. Gentleman read what the right hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies) said in *The Western Mail* on Saturday, in which he acknowledged that there was a problem with support for the Welsh language? The silence from the Labour Government on that matter is deafening.

Mr. Murphy: My right hon. Friend was speaking from Zagreb. I happened to be speaking in Swansea, where the Labour party conference was meeting, and the view from Swansea is very different from the view from Zagreb.

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): Is my right hon. Friend aware that in the 1980s, Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg used the well-known phrase, "Heb waith, dim iaith"? This Government have done more to create work in Welsh language areas and to preserve the language than any Plaid Cymru carping could do.

Mr. Murphy: I agree with my hon. Friend; I know that she takes an interest in these issues.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Secretary of State has misrepresented the Conservative party's policies in a way that is unworthy of him. Would he now care to comment on the Labour party's stewardship of the health service in Wales? Since the election, in-patient waiting lists have gone up by nearly 15 per cent., out-patient waiting lists have almost doubled and the number of those waiting for more than six months to see a consultant has gone up by 700 per cent. Will he comment on those figures?

Mr. Murphy: I was wondering when the Conservative party was going to attack the National Assembly. I must tell the hon. Gentleman that the national health service in Wales will, I think, receive an extra £1.3 billion over the next three years. That is the biggest increase ever, and the service treats more people in Wales than ever before.

As for the speech by the leader of the hon. Gentleman's party over the weekend, Welsh people are disturbed by such comments. The devolution settlement, which we all believe is the way ahead, could be seriously undermined by such an attitude to the European Union. Objective 1 European structural funding is vital to ensure that our gross domestic product and economy improve. What would happen if we withdrew from the EU?

Mr. Clifton-Brown: The Secretary of State knows that we are not going to do that.

Mr. Murphy: Conservatives suggest the next best thing. They never have a warm word for what comes out of Europe. Their spokesmen, from party leader down, have nothing good to say about the EU, even though the lives of millions of people in Wales will be improved by EU structural funding.

Xenophobia about all things foreign, whether that is expressed towards a foreigner from the EU or a foreigner from England, undermines the devolution settlement and the basic tolerance of the Welsh people. Were the Conservatives to win the election—which they will not—I suspect that this would be the last Adjournment debate on Welsh affairs. It is their policy that all Members of Parliament should cease to be equal. According to the leader of the Conservative party, it is their priority to strip Welsh and Scottish Members of Parliament of their rights to vote on many matters that come before the House. For the first time, we would have different classes of Members of Parliament. The Conservatives are supposed to be the party of the Union, but on English laws they plan to have nothing but English votes.

We hear English nationalism from the Conservative party and Welsh nationalism from Plaid Cymru, but none of that coincides with what the Welsh people want. They want to be part of the United Kingdom, and they want their representatives to play a full role in the House of Commons. They do not want to be in a Wales that is split off and cut away from the rest of the UK.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Does the Secretary of State think it right that the decision on hunting with dogs in Scotland is being taken by the Scottish Parliament, but that Scottish MPs could come here and decide that issue on behalf of England and Wales?

Mr. Murphy: It is right. As soon as we try to make Members of Parliament who represent different parts of the UK have different rights and different ways of operating, we undermine the basis of the House of Commons. The vast majority of hon. Members represent English constituencies. If they all voted together, they would easily outvote Members of Parliament who represent constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The House has never divided the way in which it works between different parts of the UK. If that were to happen, it would be a recipe for the break-up of the UK and the House of Commons. Even such an illustrious person as yourself, Madam Deputy Speaker, would find it difficult to rule whether this Adjournment debate was a Welsh or a UK matter.

[Mr. Murphy]

Would turkeys vote for Christmas? Would the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) or the hon. Member for North Dorset vote to put themselves out of a job by backing such proposals? If the answer is yes, perhaps they should explain their participation in a debate on Welsh affairs, not to mention their participation in our proceedings on the Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill, when Members of Parliament who represented Scottish, Northern Irish and English constituencies—including even hon. Members from constituencies in Lancashire and Dorset—could come to the House of Commons, participate in the debate and vote on an exclusively Welsh Bill. As soon as we start dividing up matters for debate, that will be the beginning of the end of the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]* The people of Wales created the Assembly by voting for it. Conservative Members should understand that a combination of their policy and that of the party that wants complete independence from the United Kingdom would undermine the devolution settlement and the unity of the nation.

Mr. Fabricant: The Secretary of State said that the people voted for the Assembly. Did not 75 per cent. of the Welsh people either abstain or vote against the Assembly?

Mr. Murphy: I make two points to the hon. Gentleman. First, two Conservative Prime Ministers between 1979 and 1997 represented minority Governments. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman himself was elected with a majority of just over 200, and I suspect that more people voted against him than voted for him.

If the Conservatives' answer to my earlier question is no, we are clearly about to witness another of the policy U-turns that has disfigured their stumbling election campaign over the past few weeks. I await further discussion of that matter. Meanwhile, Labour Members intend to preserve the foundation of democratic rule—the notion that all Members of the House, be they ever so mighty or ever so low, be they Welsh, English or from Northern Ireland, have an equal vote.

The past year has been something of a roller-coaster ride for us all. Those who predicted the death of Welsh parliamentary politics because of the creation of the National Assembly must be feeling rather foolish today. As we have seen, our debates on Welsh matters are as lively as ever, whether they take place on the Floor of the House, in Standing Committee or in the Welsh Grand Committee, yet that has all happened at a time when Wales has had its own political voice in the form of the National Assembly. It is not wishful thinking on my part to state that devolution has strengthened the United Kingdom; it is everyday experience. If devolution is to grow and flourish, we must all work constructively with the new institution. Labour Members are fully committed to doing just that.

Our vision is of a strong and confident Wales within a strong and confident United Kingdom. We want a Wales where we enjoy high-quality, efficient public services that are accountable to the people of Wales, and where jobs, education and opportunity are available to all. We want a Wales where we are not afraid of our European partners or our European role, but willing and able to play our part at the very heart of European decision making, both through the United Kingdom and with our own voice where appropriate. Above all, our vision is of a tolerant and inclusive Wales that values all its peoples as its greatest assets. In the past year we have moved closer to all those goals, and in the year ahead I know that we can move closer still.

5.23 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): It is a delight for me to take part in this annual St. David's day debate. Mostly, we get no delivery from the Government, but we have late delivery of this debate, albeit by only a few days this year.

I share the Secretary of State's sentiments about the late Cledwyn Hughes. He was a Commons man and a Lords man, actively involved in both Houses. He was a parliamentarian for half a century, and there are few people about whom we can say that. He was passionate about Wales, Britain and politics, and politics is the less for his passing. I was in Ynys Môn on the day that he died, and the people there showed genuine sadness at the news of his passing. I understand that Holyhead was at a standstill during his funeral, which is a tremendous tribute and mark of respect for a man who loved politics. I believe that politics loved him.

On those matters where the Government are prepared to listen, there is tremendous support from Opposition Members. Indeed, during the current appalling outbreak of foot and mouth, we have fully supported the Government's measures to contain that dreadful disease, which is blighting an industry that was already reeling. We have also demonstrated our support for the Children's Commissioner for Wales Bill, which was recently passed by the House of Commons and is now proceeding through the House of Lords. We wish that Bill well; we want it to be on the statute book as soon as possible.

However, in many other areas, we are unable to support the Government because they simply do not listen. They are all spin and no delivery. That was reflected in far too many comments made by the Secretary of State for Wales today. I am amazed that he did not claim credit for Welsh rugby—that he did not spin the news that, when Wales played England this year, Wales came second, which was tremendous news for Welsh rugby. He is all spin and no delivery, which is why many people are becoming increasingly fed up with the Government.

Last Thursday saw two by-elections. One was in the constituency of the hon. Member for Monmouth (Mr. Edwards), now present; the seat was retained by the Conservatives. The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) is looking rather shifty. There was a by-election in his constituency in which the seat was retained by the Conservatives with a swing of 12.5 per cent.

Mr. John Smith: I take offence at that remark uttered in the Chamber. The hon. Gentleman is being highly disingenuous. He knows well that the by-election in my constituency arose in extremely unusual circumstances, not the least of which was the tragic death of an old friend of mine—politics apart—Councillor Ray Davies.

Mr. Evans: I always welcome the hon. Gentleman's interventions. He is right in what he says about Ray's passing. None the less, the seat was won by the

Conservatives with a total vote of 67 per cent. We shall miss the hon. Gentleman's characteristic interventions in debates after the general election, when Susan Inkin will take over from him.

I have been greatly entertained in the past few days by speculation about who is to run the Labour party's campaign in Wales. On 26 February, the *Western Mail* carried the headline "Hain carries flag but is he strong enough?" He might be the weakest link; the next day, the headline read "Murphy—not Hain—to spearhead election drive". In only 24 hours, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain) was "slapped down" and put in his place.

On 26 February, the *Western Mail* said that Labour would turn to the hon. Member for Neath

"to spearhead its general election battle in Wales amid fears that the Tories will take key marginal seats."

It said

"Labour fears it could lose to the Conservatives"

in the Vale of Clwyd—the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) is missing—and in Conwy. The hon. Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams) is also absent: both are probably in their constituencies campaigning. It is good to see other hon. Members whose constituencies were mentioned in the article in the Chamber today. They include the hon. Members for Monmouth and for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence), whose seats the hon. Member for Neath thinks will be lost by Labour. The hon. Gentleman also warns that the constituencies of Cardiff, North and Vale of Glamorgan might be lost to the Conservatives.

The hon. Gentleman did not give a comprehensive list, having missed out the constituencies of Clwyd, West and of Cardiff, Central, both of which we believe we will win. Nor was mention made of other seats that we believe we will get, including the Liberal Democrat seats of Brecon and Radnorshire and of Montgomeryshire, as well as Ynys Môn. No doubt, the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones) is in his constituency today, leaving only three of the four Plaid Cymru Members present during a Welsh affairs debate that we have only once a year.

The Labour campaign might show itself willing to rob Peter to pay Paul, which brings me to the right hon. Member for Cardiff, West (Mr. Morgan). He is the First Secretary and self-styled First Minister, which in Welsh is Prime Minister. As for the House, he is the First Secretary. He said:

"Let Labour carry on building the house of socialism in Wales and Westminster . . . We can deliver so much more for the people of Wales if we are given another chance at the General Election."

Labour will not be given another chance at the general election.

Mr. Flynn *rose—*

Mr. Evans: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman, who no doubt will want to apologise to the farming industry for some of the appalling and dreadful comments that he has made over the past few years.

Mr. Flynn: I direct the hon. Gentleman's attention to his parliamentary profile. It chronicles that when he stood in a by-election in Wales, the Conservative vote slumped from 9,000 to 5,000. It records his memorable remarks in 1992, when with confidence he forecast that at the next election the map of Wales would be bluer. Will he remind us what happened in 1992 and in 1997 to Conservative Members?

Mr. Evans: I am not surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not want to address himself to his recent comments about farming, which is in such a plight.

I remember well the by-election that I fought in Pontypridd in 1989: the Conservatives went on to win the 1992 general election. We look forward to the next general election, whenever the Prime Minister decides to call it.

There is no doubt that the

"Labour Party in Wales is in 'crisis', and in . . . need of regeneration."

I am sure that it agrees about that, and that there is

"a stark warning in Wales in"

the Labour heartlands. I am sure that the Labour party would agree that that is so. It has

"been too complacent for too long"

and it must open up its "style of politics". I am sure that it would agree with that as well. Labour needs

"to regenerate the party otherwise"

it

"will pay the price in the future."

I assume that that refers to the general election that we are about to have. Labour Members have not intervened to attack that view because, of course, those—

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I notice that the hon. Gentleman missed my constituency from his list. It has not been in Conservative hands for more than 100 years.

On support for the Labour party, I remind the hon. Gentleman of an opinion poll that received little publicity last week. It was conducted by National Opinion Poll for HTV, and it gave Labour 52 per cent., Conservatives 19 per cent. and Plaid Cymru 14 per cent. It anticipated a general election result for the Labour party in 2001 almost identical to that in 1997.

Mr. Evans: I ask the hon. Gentleman to get real. The day before the referendum in Wales, we were told by the outcome of an opinion poll that it would be won by 2:1. Instead, it was won by 0.6 per cent. If the hon. Gentleman's belief in opinion polls gets him to sleep at night, and perhaps during the day as well, I am only too happy that he believes in them. We do not. We believe in the polls that have only recently taken place. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the Vale of Glamorgan, where there was a swing of 12.5 per cent. to the Conservatives.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given the potent intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) and the subsequent challenge by my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), does my hon. Friend agree that it is shocking that the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) has still failed either to apologise for or to explain his calumny upon Welsh farmers in accusing them of exaggeration, distortions and plain untruths, and in suggesting that the

[Mr. John Bercow]

suicide rate among them is attributable merely to the ready availability of shotguns? Should not his speech be the occasion for a frank apology?

Mr. Evans: I hope, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) is able to speak in the debate. That will give him an opportunity to apologise for the views that he expressed on the "Today" programme, which I thought were appalling. An entire industry deserves an apology from him.

As I was saying, it is interesting that no Government Member condemned the remarks about the Labour party being in disarray.

Mr. Flynn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: In a moment, once I have finished this.

I quoted the words of the hon. Member for Neath himself, so it is not surprising that his responsibility for leading the campaign in Wales has rapidly been taken away from him. I shall now give way to the hon. Member for Newport, West who, I am sure, will wish to apologise.

Mr. Flynn: May I inform the hon. Gentleman that, as far as I know, I have never spoken on the "Today" programme about farming? However, I have talked about the farming crisis on many occasions. It is as well to remember that I would not withdraw a single word that I have said. The House should know that, on television yesterday, someone said that there were 10 farming suicides every week. Every suicide is a terrible tragedy for the family involved. However, that number is wrong, as there were 70 farming suicides last year—which is 70 too many. In the past four years of crisis, there have been fewer suicides than there were in each year of prosperity between 1989 and 1993.

It is disgraceful that Opposition Members and certain other people wish to turn personal tragedies into events that invite photo-opportunities. There is a crisis in the farming industry, but a sequence of misinformation has been given. I am happy to defend everything that I have said.

Mr. Evans: To remind the hon. Gentleman, his remarks were made on 22 March 2000 on "Farming Today" on Radio 4 and his comments on suicides appeared in *Farmers' Weekly* on 4 February 2000. I am sure that he will want to reflect on his words and perhaps apologise to the farming industry.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: I shall make a little more progress and, I promise, give way to the hon. Gentleman a bit later.

It is interesting that the Secretary of State made no reference to another matter. Should the nightmare happen and—if everyone can bear with me for a moment—incredible as it sounds, the Labour party wins the next general election, what would happen to the position of Secretary of State for Wales? This morning, I enjoyed a little tussle on Radio Wales with the Under-Secretary of State for Wales when we discussed what would happen after the election. We already know that an incoming Conservative Government will create the position of Secretary of State for Wales, and that that will not be merged with responsibilities for Scotland, England or Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State will have extra responsibility in recognition of the post-devolution position.

However, I was unable to get any guarantee whatever from the Under–Secretary of State for Wales that an incoming Labour Government would ensure that the position of Secretary of State for Wales would be retained. From the silence of the Secretary of State, I take it that the Government have already written it off, he is already looking to retire if the Labour party win the election and Wales will lose its voice in the Cabinet. All that I can say is that Wales will be the poorer after the election if Labour wins, given that the Secretary of State is not prepared to say that there will be a position of Secretary of State for Wales. It sounds as if he already has inside information that that position will be merged and that Wales will lose its separate and special voice.

Mr. Paul Murphy: I thought that the hon. Gentleman was tempting me. He knows that neither my hon. Friend the Under–Secretary of State for Wales nor I determine Cabinet positions; that is a matter for the Prime Minister. The hon. Gentleman is also aware that there are no plans to change the position of Secretary of State for Wales and that it is based firmly on the devolution settlement, which was voted on by the people of Wales. I am delighted, although rather bemused, by his conversion and U-turn to the new position, as his party has not held that view for some time. To me, the part-time position of Secretary of State that is proposed by the Conservative party is rather peculiar.

Mr. Evans: It is amazing that the Secretary of State says that the position is in the gift of the Prime Minister. I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) about that position and we have now made our view clear. It is well known that the Labour party is looking seriously at merging England, Wales and Scotland together in a Ministry of the Union. Even worse is the rumour that the Minister responsible for that will be the Deputy Prime Minister—let us have one fright at a time. I am amazed that the Secretary of State for Wales has not even discussed the matter with the Prime Minister, or if he has discussed it, that the Prime Minister has not reassured him. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House—

Mr. Livsey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: No.

Has the Secretary of State discussed with the Prime Minister the matter of a voice for Wales around the Cabinet table, with the post of Secretary of State for Wales not being merged into a general post for Scotland, Wales and England?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman is aware that there is a voice around the Cabinet table representing Wales—mine. That has been the case since the establishment of the role after devolution. Let me make it clear to the hon. Gentleman that, in the referendum and by the devolution settlement, the people of Wales indicated that there should

be a voice in Westminster and in the Cabinet through the position that I hold. Do the Conservatives intend to have someone to shadow me as the Secretary of State?

Mr. Evans: It looks likely that there will be no Secretary of State for Wales if there is a Labour Government after the general election. If the right hon. Gentleman cannot speak up for his own job around the Cabinet table, I wonder whether he can speak up at the Cabinet table for the jobs of other people in Wales.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: As the hon. Gentleman is the Conservative party spokesman for Wales, can he remind us whether he is a member of the shadow Cabinet?

Mr. Evans: I enjoyed sitting around the shadow Cabinet table last Wednesday. I look forward to sitting around the shadow Cabinet table in the future, and after the general election I look forward to sitting around the Cabinet table as Secretary of State for Wales or whichever position the leader of my party as Prime Minister asks me to take. At the next election—

Mr. Livsey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: In a moment. I have given way to so many of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues who sit around the Cabinet table in the Lib-Lab pact that I am trying to eke out my speech.

So many people feel let down by the Government, although that is hard to believe from the speech that we heard from the Secretary of State. Students feel badly let down by the introduction of tuition fees and the disappearance of their grants. Pensioners feel let down, after the 75p increase that they were given last year. Motorists are now paying higher taxation on their fuel than in any other country in Europe, and petrol prices are among the highest in the world.

Stealth taxes have been imposed—on average, £670 a year for a family living in Wales. Council tax has increased well above the rate of inflation. The Government clearly do not understand the countryside or farming.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Evans: I shall give way in a moment, once I have made a little more progress.

There are so many people who feel badly let down, but in no industry more than in farming. In 1996–97, the average income in the farming industry was £23,200. In 1998-99, it was £5,800 and it has now fallen below £5,000. The Welsh Institute of Rural Studies has predicted that the average net income will be £4,100. We have just heard a statement on the minimum wage. An average farm income of £4,100 represents £1 an hour for a farmer working 60 hours a week, and we know that most farmers do much more than that.

One in five farms is trading at a loss. There is a crisis in farming. Getting new entrants into farming is incredibly difficult. The average age of farmers is 58. In Wales, agriculture is vital, yet four fifths of the farming land is in less-favoured areas. As rules and regulations increase and costs, including hygiene costs, go up, there is enormous extra pressure on farmers.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for eventually giving way.

On competence in farming and the question of who deserves an apology, the House should contrast the way in which the current Government have acted on the dreadful disease that is now affecting British agriculture with the way in which the previous Government acted on BSE. This Government have responded promptly, effectively and efficiently, whereas the previous Government did not act promptly and shamefully exported BSE around the world. When people in farming make that contrast, they will have no doubt about who understands farming.

Mr. Evans: I suspect that not one single farmer will support what the hon. Gentleman has just said. Who is playing politics with farming now? We have given full support to the Government on the measures that they have introduced to tackle foot and mouth disease. We did not get such support from the Labour party when it was in opposition. Instead, it cruelly used the issue of BSE.

Farmers are asking not for special treatment, but for equal treatment. That is what they will get with the implementation of "A Fair Deal for Farmers", which is part of the common-sense revolution package that will be delivered by an incoming Conservative Government. We shall carefully consider the standard of meat that is imported into this country and the need to ensure that products are clearly labelled. When the label says that a package contains Welsh meat, that is exactly what it should contain. We must ensure that fair and proper rules and regulations are in place and give full support to farming. Last year, 3,800 people left farming in Wales, while 20,000 people left it nationally. That came on top of the 20,000 people who left it the year before.

There was to be a rally for the countryside on 18 March this year. Its postponement was a big decision for the organisers. That decision could not have been easy, as the number of people who were coming to march in London on that day was well above the number who participated in the march that took place a few years ago. Although the rally will not now occur, the reasons for it remain. The Prime Minister must listen to the people who live and work in the countryside. It was amazing that any time was given to the Hunting Bill in the House last week, while the foot and mouth crisis was under way. It would have been far better to suspend such a debate at a time when the agriculture industry is in such deep crisis and to consider foot and mouth disease instead. Instead, an Opposition day had to be used for a full debate on the subject.

Will the Secretary of State ensure that the Minister of Agriculture comes regularly to the Dispatch Box to keep us informed about foot and mouth and the measures that he is taking to provide as much assistance as possible? Assistance should be given not only to farmers; as has been mentioned, it should be given to the line of other people who are involved in farming. Those affected will not necessarily be farmers, but may none the less have paid a heavy price.

[Mr. Evans]

The Farmers Union of Wales has contacted me to express its concerns. It says:

"There is an urgent need to address the welfare implications of having in-lamb ewes and in-calf heifers away from the farm, given the current movement restrictions."

It welcomes the limited movements of livestock to abattoirs under licence, but it is

"concerned that abattoirs/dealers are passing the increased costs associated with the scheme back on to producers."

Will the Secretary of State consider that matter? I am further informed by the union that it would

"welcome clarification on why prior to the FMD outbreak, supermarkets claimed that it was cheaper to source meat imported from abroad due to the strength of the pound and since the outbreak, have been warning consumers that prices will have to go up".

Will he please consider the matter carefully and have discussions with the Minister of Agriculture, so that we can get as much information as possible?

I turn now to law and order. We had a Welsh Grand Committee debate on this subject only the other day, but it is right to stress again the law and order problems in Wales. In 1994, the number of incidents involving violence against the person was 13,478, but in 1999, there were 37,922 such incidents. That is an amazing increase. In 1997, the figure for robbery was 811; today it is 909. Total violent crime has increased from 20,000 in 1997 to 40,580 today. Those statistics are worrying; they affect everyone who lives in Wales. The Government should do something about that.

Mr. Michael: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that violence against the person has increased by 6 per cent. in Wales, compared with a combined England and Wales average of 11 per cent.? Is he aware of steps taken by, for example, the Cardiff violence reduction initiative, which demonstrates that we can succeed in reducing violence? The Home Secretary is rightly encouraging such developments throughout England and Wales.

Mr. Evans: I welcome any initiative to tackle crime in Wales. A leaked report from the Home Office states that the Department is carefully considering reducing custodial sentences of a year or less to three months. That, together, with early release of prisoners, sends the wrong signal to criminals. We must carefully examine the early release of prisoners, because several have gone on to commit further crimes.

Mr. Bercow: I do not want my hon. Friend to understate his case. Does he agree that it is especially outrageous that more than 200 people who were convicted of assaulting a police officer and were sentenced to five months' imprisonment have, under the terms of the ludicrous early-release scheme, been let out of jail after serving only six weeks? Is not that testimony to and eloquent proof of the fact that the Labour party does not believe in supporting our police?

Mr. Evans: I am not usually accused of understatement; perhaps I am guilty of it only in comparison with my hon. Friend. However, he is absolutely right. I was a victim of crime before Christmas, and I have spoken to many other victims. I am sure that, like me, they feel completely let down. I feel sorry for the police, who work so hard to find the criminals. When they take them off the street, the criminals are released and soon able to reoffend. That is another slap in the face for the victims of crime. The Government should be strong on law and order, not simply on rhetoric. They claim to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, but early releases and shorter sentences contradict that claim.

The national health service has been mentioned. Again, people feel badly let down. The Government are good on slogans; we shall be tough on the causes of slogans. We all remember, "24 hours to save the national health service", but the latest statistics are damning. On 31 March 1997, the total number of Welsh residents waiting for in-patient or day-case treatments was 67,609. By 31 January this year, that figure had increased to 75,415. In 1997, 6,274 patients waited more than 12 months for treatment; today, the figure is 11,002. In 1997, the figure for patients waiting more than 18 months was 1,402; today, it is 4,818. Those increases are startling.

In March 1997, the total number of Welsh residents waiting for a first out-patient appointment was 101,000; today, that figure is 179,440. When the Government came to power, 28,401 patients waited more than three months for treatment; today, the figure has increased to 93,773. In 1997, 5,956 patients waited more than six months for treatment; today that figure is 48,506.

The Government promised people so much on the health service, but little has been delivered. In Wales, more people are waiting longer for treatment. That is hardly surprising. An article in the *Western Mail* entitled "Heart patients 'dying needlessly'" stated:

"Consultant cardiologist Dr. Tony Davies said patients needing urgent heart treatment were being turned away because their beds were taken by emergency medical admissions . . .

Dr. Davies and his . . . colleague consultant cardiologist Dr. Mike Stephens said heart patients' appointments were cancelled every day as the winter beds crisis worsened . . .

'People are dying because of a lack of beds,' said Dr. Davies".

People who work in the national health service, not us, are making those comments. Dr. Davies is employed by the Gwent health care NHS trust.

"People are dying on the waiting list."

Those are the words of someone who works in the national health service in Wales.

I visited the Heath hospital in Cardiff less than two weeks ago. Someone told me that £5 million was needed for a children's hospital, yet the Labour party's Administration in the Welsh Assembly is wasting between £30 million and £40 million on a new building. The Government would prefer to spend the money on pampering politicians instead of treating patients, especially vulnerable child patients. Their priorities are skewed.

Mrs. Lawrence: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's comments on hospital beds. Not long ago, "Newsnight" carried out a survey, which showed that, during the Tory years of 1982 to 1995, the number of acute beds in British hospitals decreased from 144,000 to 109,000 as a result of the former Government's policies. Is not this an opportune time for the hon. Gentleman to apologise for that?

Mr. Evans: I fear that the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, who represents Neath,

is correct about the hon. Lady's future. Stephen Crabb will make an excellent Member of Parliament for Preseli Pembrokeshire. He will speak up for the patients of Wales and ensure that they receive proper treatment. I thought that the hon. Lady might refer to the comments of someone who works in the national health service. We hear much spin about the amount of money that is going into the NHS, but someone at the top of his profession says that people are dying through lack of attention by the Government.

Mr. Paul Murphy: If the Conservative party formed a Government, and Mr. Crabb became Member of Parliament for Preseli Pembrokeshire, what would happen to the pledges of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), the shadow Chancellor? He said that he intended to make cuts of £16 billion in public spending. Does not the hon. Gentleman understand that that would mean a severe cut in the block grant to Wales? Whatever he says about buildings, cuts of £16 billion are bound to affect the national health service. Does not he accept that they would have an adverse effect, and does not he understand that the Government have put more money into the health service than any Government since its inception?

Mr. Evans: The amount of money that was invested in the national health service increased throughout the Conservative years. That would continue under a Conservative Government. The Secretary of State mentions the figure of £16 billion, which is completely false. No journalist accepts that it bears any resemblance to reality. We will match the money that is being spent on the national health service, education and law and order. We will cut out the wasteful expenditure of £8 billion that the Government are prepared to perpetuate, and we will increase vital public service expenditure and ensure that the money is effectively spent.

Although the Secretary of State has a diminished role post-devolution, he has twice as many special advisers in his Department as David Hunt had when he was Secretary of State and had much more to do. Money could be saved by cutting out useless administration, and better spent on front-line services. We will do that. The Secretary of State had an opportunity to say that the right hon. Member for Cardiff, West and the Assembly were wrong to spend so much money on a new building for politicians and that he would have preferred it to be spent on patients. However, he did not say that. He is justifying the mis-spending of millions of pounds on a new Assembly building in Wales that could have been so much better spent on patients.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) *rose—*

Mr. Evans: I give way to the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd, who has come in late. It is very good to see him.

Mr. Ruane: I apologise for coming in late. I was chairing a meeting in my constituency for three hours this morning that was organised two months ago.

The hon. Gentleman denies the existence of the £16 billion cut that the Conservative party has proposed. The genesis of the matter is to be found in a press release from Conservative central office issued on 18 July 2000, which gave an itemised breakdown of each region of the United Kingdom and of how much would be given in tax cuts. That is where the figure comes from.

Mr. Evans: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman was late, because he missed my informing the House that the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe predicts that the hon. Gentleman will lose his seat at the next general election. The figures that the hon. Gentleman is coming up with mean absolutely nothing. The scare tactics that Labour is using—

Mr. Ruane: I received 53 per cent. of the vote at the previous general election.

Mr. Evans: Well, if that gets the hon. Gentleman to sleep at night, that is fine. However, he will have more time to sleep after the general election, if the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe is correct. The hon. Gentleman is using scare tactics. We will increase the amount of money being spent on essential services. No one now believes the £16 billion figure that the Labour party has dreamed up, because it is completely false.

Mr. Llwyd: May I take the hon. Gentleman back to what he said about the cost of the new Assembly building? Is he not being slightly hypocritical in saying that that money is not being well spent, when he is ensconced in a palatial office in a building that cost £250 million?

Mr. Evans: I shall come on to Plaid Cymru shortly. The hon. Gentleman will acknowledge, if he is being fair, that I condemned the amount of money being spent on Portcullis House. I would have preferred to see the savings that could have been made there going into front-line services. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry that Labour Members find consistency so unusual, but I can understand why they do.

I shall move on from the national health service to business. Two reports have been published recently. One is from the Federation of Small Businesses, entitled "Barriers to Growth and Survival"—*[Interruption.]* I shall mention that briefly before I move on to a more up-to-date report from the Confederation of British Industry called "Facing the Future". The Under-Secretary has just reminded me that I mentioned the former report when we last debated these issues. It is necessary for me to remind the House again of what the report said because the Government are not listening.

The report from the Federation of Small Businesses was based on Wales, and on page 25 it deals with dissatisfaction with legislation issues. Of those who responded, 81 per cent. said that they were dissatisfied with the volume of legislation; 83 per cent. were dissatisfied with the complexity of legislation; 79 per cent. were dissatisfied with the rate of change of legislation; 79 per cent. were dissatisfied with the interpretation of legislation; 59 per cent. were dissatisfied with the ability to employ staff; and 65 per cent. were dissatisfied with the cost of compliance.

The Federation of Small Businesses and small business men themselves are saying that the Government are not providing the solution to the problem—they are the problem. I wish that the Government would listen more

[Mr. Evans]

carefully to what business men are saying. They are the people who are creating the jobs. Only this week, the CBI stated that businesses are being "smothered by legislation". One of the authors of the CBI's report is Michael Plaut, managing director of the south Wales company, Northmace. He states that

"flexibility is being put at risk by increasing red tape and legislation. We are close to a situation where the straw is going to break the camel's back . . . We have some superb SMEs in Wales which would love to employ more people, but are deterred from doing so by stringent regulations."

The Government are now introducing the climate change levy, which will cost manufacturing jobs—some jobs are already being shed in anticipation. The Secretary of State read out the names of a number of companies in which jobs were being created, and I welcome every one of those jobs, including the 500 that were announced by Ikea in south Wales this week. However, I ask him also to consider the jobs that are being lost in Wales, such as those at Dairycrest—some new jobs were announced there, but there was a net loss of about 300—and at Corus, where about 6,000 jobs will be lost. A further 165 jobs are to be lost at Dewhirst in Lampeter.

Mr. Ruane: It will be 3,000 jobs at Corus.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman says that it will be 3,000 jobs. Well, that is all right, then.

Mr. Ruane *rose—*

Mr. Evans: I ask the hon. Gentleman to sit down and listen to me for a moment. If he does not accept that the enormous impact of the loss of jobs in steel production in Llanwern, Ebbw Vale and Shotton will have knock-on effects, he is seriously mistaken.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the worst features of so many Government policies in Wales is that they consistently shuffle responsibility from the Government to beleaguered businesses, forcing the latter to become unpaid tax collectors and benefit distributors? Does he agree that that is a matter of particular concern, given that 99.6 per cent. of companies in this country employ fewer than 100 people, that they account for 57 per cent. of the private sector work force and that they generate two fifths of our national output?

Mr. Evans: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The CBI's report calls businesses with fewer than 250 employees "small", although I do not. There are 3.75 million SMEs in the UK, and they account for 99.8 per cent. of the total UK business stock. They are vital. During the Conservative years, we looked to small businesses to create jobs, and they did so. We shall pay a heavy penalty if we do not recognise that fact and support them instead of trying to strangle them with the rules, regulations and taxation that have been the hallmark of this Government since 1997.

Mr. Ruane: Does not the hon. Gentleman think that he should have better control of his brief, as he is the chief spokesperson on Wales for the Conservative party? A few moments ago, he mentioned that the job losses in Wales as a result of the Corus closures would be 6,000, but that is not the case; the figure will be 2,800.

Mr. Evans: All that I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that he ought to talk to people, although I am sure that he has. I visited a pub in Shotton a couple of weeks ago, and people there fear that all the small businesses in the area will be affected. Does not the hon. Gentleman think that the consequence of almost 3,000 direct job losses at Corus will be a further 3,000 job losses in other sectors in Wales that serve the steel industry?

Mr. Ruane: That is not what the hon. Gentleman said.

Mr. Evans: The hon. Gentleman ought to know that those people will be listening carefully to what he is saying as well.

The CBI believes that business confidence among Welsh manufacturers has fallen to the greatest extent since last January, according to its quarterly trends survey. The survey suggests that the fall comes as business confidence in manufacturing across the UK as a whole fell by much less. It also shows that the costs for Welsh manufacturers are likely to increase.

There have been 5,168 job losses in Welsh manufacturing since the beginning of this year. That is an enormous number of jobs. While the Secretary of State for Wales still has a position at the Cabinet table—at least, for now—will he speak to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the matter? When the 10p-on-income-tax-Chancellor—that is the equivalent of what he has put on taxes in the past four years—decides to give some of it back on Wednesday to try to bribe people to support his Government at the next general election, he should look carefully at the taxes that he has already raised and those that he is about to raise. In particular, he should consider the taxes on small to medium-sized enterprises and on manufacturing industry in Wales. He should also reconsider the climate change levy, which a future Conservative Government will abolish. We also support small to medium-sized enterprises and manufacturing industry.

I agree with one remark that the Secretary of State made concerning Plaid Cymru. Seimon Glyn has been mentioned time and again. When Plaid Cymru Members intervened earlier, I thought that they might have taken the opportunity to apologise for Seimon Glyn, the chairman of housing of Gwynedd county council and a leading member of Plaid Cymru in that area. But, no, Plaid Cymru Members did not apologise, and I suspect that they will not apologise for him again. They did so last time, but Seimon Glyn himself withdrew that apology. Indeed, only a couple of weeks ago, he attended a rally in Caernarfon and told 350 protesters that he had received hundreds of messages of support from people all over Wales and beyond and that the future looked bleak for Welsh-speaking villages on the Llyn peninsular in north Wales and in other areas.

Let us be in no doubt about this whatever: Seimon Glyn is a leading member of Plaid Cymru in Wales and he has not been ostracised by members of his own party. They have not booted him out and he still holds the position of Gwynedd county council's chairman of housing, so I can assume only that the very highest commands of Plaid

Cymru support his membership. No doubt he will campaign hard during the election for votes for Plaid Cymru, but it will pay a heavy price throughout Wales—*[Interruption.]* Oh! The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) thinks that I am wrong. He obviously thinks that Seimon Glyn has struck a chord with the people of Wales and, indeed, with many people who have come to Wales, contributed and provided so much support over many years.

Mr. Llwyd: May I correct the hon. Gentleman? Our telephone canvassing shows increased support over the past month. Given that Welsh language and culture are under threat and under considerable pressure in some areas in Wales, what policies does he advocate to deal with that?

Mr. Evans: I remind the hon. Gentleman that it was a previous Conservative Government and Wyn Roberts who did so much to support the Welsh language. Indeed, it has been widely acknowledged on both sides of the House that the previous Conservative Government gave unprecedented support through the creation of Sianel 4 Cymru and backing for the Welsh language. I can tell the hon. Gentleman now that we shall continue to support the Welsh language, but we shall not do so at the expense of people who come to Wales to add their contribution by setting up businesses, employing people and visiting Wales. It is a great shame that he has not at least condemned the remarks of Seimon Glyn. Indeed, he has made no reference to those comments, which suggests that he endorses them.

It may have been noted that I have not mentioned the Liberal Democrats. I thought about it, then decided not to. I shall move on.

Dr. Julian Lewis: My hon. Friend does not want to mention the Liberal Democrats, but will he allow me at least to ask what he thinks of an electoral system for an Assembly that is as lacking in a democratic mandate as that in Cardiff, which allows the party that was fourth in the elections to share ministerial-type appointments with the party that was first? Is that fair or democratic? Can we expect more of that from a Government who have such ways of undermining proper representation?

Mr. Evans: My hon. Friend tempts me to mention the Liberal Democrats, but I am loth to do so, except to say that they will pay a heavy price at the general election because people feel badly let down. They are not part of the Opposition, but they are part of the coalition and they will pay in Brecon and Radnorshire and in Montgomeryshire.

Mr. Paul Murphy: The hon. Gentleman did not reply to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) on proper democratic representation of constituents. I do not think that he will come to that point, so will he tell the House his party's policies and his own views regarding the next Parliament? I am sure that there will not be a Conservative Government, but were there to be one, would he agree with reducing the rights, duties, responsibilities and powers of Welsh Members? Would he make us second-class MPs?

Mr. Evans: The Secretary of State has just returned from his own conference in Swansea and it was reported:

"Speakers voice strong opposition to PR system".

With so many of his own supporters attacking the Labour party at every turn, I can understand why he does not want to address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East. On what a Conservative Government would do, he signally fails to recognise that all of us, apart from Scottish Members, have been made second-class Members. Scottish Members are able to vote on issues relating to England and Wales, but we are not allowed to vote on those same issues as they relate to Scotland.

The Secretary of State must accept that Scottish Members can vote on legislation to ban hunting with hounds as it affects England and my constituency and as it affects his constituency, but we cannot vote on it as it affects their constituencies. Even more absurd is the fact that even they cannot vote on such legislation as it affects their constituencies. We shall make absolutely certain that Scottish Members will not be able to vote on issues that have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The Secretary of State knows that the power to make primary legislation for Wales rests here, so we shall make certain that only English and Welsh Members can vote on matters devolved to the Scottish Parliament. I am content with our policy and believe that it will gain a lot of support from the people of Wales as we explain it during the general election campaign.

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman says that his party's policy will get a lot of support from the people of Wales. Under it, however, there would be different types of MP, including Welsh Members, and Scottish Members would be unable to vote on certain matters. I assume that his party believes that the same should happen to Welsh Members. Should not there be a single type of Member of Parliament to represent each constituency? If not, inadequate representation would be provided by those who sit for the 40 Welsh parliamentary constituencies; or is he saying that he wants to reduce that figure as well? The Conservative party, through him, is saying to the people of Wales, "You will have second-class MPs in the House of Commons."

Mr. Evans: I am saying that, under the Labour Government, there are a number of second-class MPs, including the Welsh and the English. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, it is a great shame that the Government did not properly think through the devolution proposals. They say that they are replacing one anomaly with another and that we should be grateful for it. However, it is wrong that Scottish Members should come down to vote on issues that have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament. They ought to have no say whatever as such matters should be left to English and Welsh Members. That is what I believe and that is what I shall support at the general election.

Mr. Fabricant: Following the point made by the Secretary of State, does my hon. Friend agree that many Welsh Assembly men think that they are second-class Members under the current arrangements? Do not they

[Mr. Fabricant]

have far less power than Members of the Scottish Parliament? That shows the lack of symmetry in the devolution mechanism under the Labour Government.

Mr. Evans: The Government were already prepared to accept a different system because they knew that the people of Wales simply would not vote for a Parliament. Indeed, they almost did not vote for the National Assembly for Wales—the winning margin in the referendum was 0.6 per cent. We totally oppose and shall not support or vote for any measures to give the Welsh Assembly powers to raise tax and make primary legislation, which the Liberal Democrats at least believe should be foisted on Wales without a referendum.

Mr. Murphy: The House and the people of Wales would be interested to hear precisely what Conservative party policy is on devolution. As the hon. Gentleman has made his attitude to Welsh Members of the House of Commons clear and as he has just said that he does not like the idea of different types of devolution, what sort of devolution does his party favour for Wales?

Mr. Evans: We shall review the workings of the Welsh Assembly to ensure that it operates in the best interests of all the people of Wales—north, south, east and west.

Mr. Murphy: What does that mean?

Mr. Evans: The Secretary of State asks what that means, but many people in a number of areas of Wales feel badly let down by the National Assembly, so we shall work hard to make it operate in the interests of all the people of Wales, without the power to raise tax or make primary legislation.

The Secretary of State has asked me about representation and devolution. I am prepared to debate those issues with him on television during the next general election campaign. Is he prepared to accept the invitation of the television companies to participate in such debates during the election? I have said yes, and I suspect that members of the other political parties are also prepared to do so. Does the Secretary of State for Wales have more guts than his leader, who has run away from debating these issues with the leader of the Conservative party? Will he accept the invitation to hold televised debates at the general election?

Mr. Murphy: I shall tell the hon. Gentleman what I told the Welsh Grand Committee. It is not for the Conservative party to tell the Labour party how to run our election campaign, but I am sure that the opportunity will arise for us to have the great delight of debating all these issues with each other, so it would be useful to know his views on devolution.

Mr. Evans: I think that that was a distinct no. We may be only days away from the announcement of a general election. Labour want to run the campaign with spin and technology from Millbank. The Prime Minister is running away from the Leader of the Opposition. It is sad that the Secretary of State has not accepted my invitation.

The Government have badly let down many people, whether they be students, pensioners, farmers, workers in manufacturing industry, small and medium-sized enterprises, those waiting for an operation, those in growing class sizes in secondary schools or those suffering teacher shortages. The Government say, "Please trust us with your currency. We will have a referendum to decide the future of the pound." No one will trust our currency to a referendum run by the Government, because no one trusts them any more. People are disillusioned and have seen so much given away in the past. At the next election, with the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks, we will have an opportunity to give our country back to the people of Britain and Wales.

6.22 pm

Mr. Alun Michael (Cardiff, South and Penarth): Like many right hon. and hon. Friends, I was shocked to hear last night of the death of Ian Spratling. During my time as Secretary of State for Wales and First Secretary, I found him to be a unique individual—tough, vigorous and a positive voice for business in west Wales. He would work with elected representatives in central and local government to do the best for business. He was London born, which I did not realise because his passion for west Wales and for making the best of objective 1 opportunities were manifest.

I join my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in paying tribute to Lord Cledwyn. My uncle, Bob Roberts, who was brought up at Ty'n y Felin just outside Llanfachraeth, was a class mate of Cledwyn Hughes. They both ended up in the House of Commons—Cledwyn inside as Secretary of State, and uncle Bob outside as a policeman on St. Stephen's Entrance. It was a matter of great pride for the family that they both made it here. When I was elected in 1987, almost the first call I received was an invitation as a "bachgen o Ynys Môn" to see him in his office in the Lords. It was a great delight when, a short time later, he joined me and my wife and my mother and uncle Bob. We had the pleasure of his company and his memory of those times. He had a passion for the university of Wales; not because it is an institution, but because it offers hope and opportunity to young people, which is why it was established in the first place. He had a passion for Wales, and was a passionate supporter of devolution, but he hated the narrowness of nationalism, as did Jim Griffiths, another great Welsh and British politician and democrat.

I want to remind the House of the arguments for devolution that Lord Cledwyn and Jim Griffiths used in their time. We are now involved in a struggle between the negativism of nationalism and the positive values of partnership, which is what devolution is all about. The Leader of the Opposition spoke today of how Wales would be represented in the future: a part-time job for a non-Welsh MP. That is nonsense. The reality is that, if the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) ever became Prime Minister, he would lead a narrow, English nationalist Government.

We have seen already the value of devolution in England. Questions from Conservative Members seem to suggest that they are unaware of devolution in Spain, which is not symmetrical. There is no symmetry in devolution in England, because London has its own mayor and authority with powers, although the English regions have their own regional development agencies and chambers of commerce to give them a voice. The voluntary sector is also coming together in those regions.

I ask English colleagues to look at the nationalists in Wales and to be warned. Devolution has already happened in England, and it is strengthening democracy in England.

There is no need to say more about the words of Councillor Seimon Glyn, except that he outraged most Welsh speakers, and those who have come to Wales from England, Scotland and elsewhere and want their children to learn Welsh. It is Labour party members who care for the Welsh language, as we heard in an excellent debate on Welsh language and culture at our conference on Saturday morning in Swansea. It is the Labour party that is bringing jobs to Wales and reconstructing the Welsh economy, which is the real opportunity for the Welsh language, as it is for every other aspect of Welsh culture.

We see the same narrow, conservative nationalism behind the so-called row that the *Western Mail* has been trying to whip up over the census and the tick box. It is irresponsible of the *Western Mail* or anyone else to encourage people not to respond to the census. When people had the opportunity in Ceredigion and Gwynedd to say whether they wanted changes in the census form, they did not ask for a tick box.

What does it mean to have a tick box? Scotland has a tick box. In the words of the right hon. Member for Caernarfon (Mr. Wigley), who is no longer present, Plaid Cymru believes:

"Where Scotland goes, Wales must surely follow."

I do not agree with that. I want our political debates in Wales to resolve Welsh issues, rather than imitate what happens in Scotland. I do not want Plaid Cymru's follower Wales: I want a Wales that leads.

In Scotland, if people follow the instructions correctly, only white Scots will tick the Scot box. That is ludicrous, and it is not right in this century. I do not want that in Wales. I will tick the box to show that I am British, and I will write in to say that I am Welsh. I am sure that the census system can cope with that. I am proud to be Welsh and I am proud to be British. The nationalists cannot say that. I will encourage many people in my constituency to say that they are Welsh, British and Afro-Caribbean or Asian. This intemperate, last-minute debate has confused the issues of nationality and ethnicity.

Mrs. Lawrence: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the word "British" comes from the Brythonic language, of which Welsh is a member? That shows how integrated Wales is, because it has given the name "British" to the British Isles.

Mr. Michael: My hon. Friend is correct. As I said, this intemperate, last-minute debate has confused the issues of nationality and ethnicity. It is possible to deal with those points, but not by adding an extra tick box. If people want the census to ask about their national background and ethnicity in a couple of questions, rather than just one, that can be done in the next census. If so, I would want people in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to give their birth origins and their national and ethnic identity. I suspect that all of us could unite around that. *[Interruption.]* I am glad to see the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) nodding. However, that cannot be dealt with in time for the current census, and it is ludicrous to suggest that it should be.

We could use the information from the census for many serious jobs, so we need the best possible responses to it. Socio-economic measurements and crime and disorder audits, which will be undertaken in the coming years, are taken against the baseline of the national census, so everyone should be encouraged to fill in the form. We could then have a debate about the questions for the next census.

Our levels of crime and disorder are still too high, on which work is to be done that only a Government will do. I thought that the comments of the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) about crime were wrong, and it was disgraceful that he tried to whip up fear of crime and fly in the face of the facts. One fact is that, since 1997, overall crime has fallen in all four police areas in Wales. There has been a fall of 24 per cent. in my area in south Wales, the second largest in England and Wales: only Northumbria has experienced a larger fall. That cannot be said to be a cause for satisfaction—there is still a long way to go—but at least it is going in the right direction. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley, who represents a distant constituency, would have gained a little more respect had he demonstrated that he knew a little more about what is happening to crime in Wales.

Violence against the person is currently one of the big worries, but it is a small consolation that it has risen by 6 per cent. rather than by the England-and-Wales average of 11 per cent. As I said during my time as First Secretary, this is not just a matter for the police and local authorities; those employed in the health service should also try to recognise the nature of violent crime—as workers in Cardiff's accident and emergency units have—and then work with the police to reduce it. That would demonstrate that we can act as we have been proved to be able to act in regard to other problems, such as burglaries and car crime.

I am pleased to note that it now takes half the time it took previously to bring young offenders before the courts. In the third quarter of last year, south Wales achieved its target of 71 days, as opposed to the 142 days that obtained when we took office, and we want that achievement to be sustained for a long time. Police numbers in Wales have risen by some 145 since the general election.

We need a wake-up message, however, because far more needs to be done. In April 2002, the second crime and disorder strategy needs to be in place for every local authority area in England and Wales. Local police superintendents and local authority chief executives, who have personal responsibility for the strategy, should be getting the work done now. Other organisations—including, again, the health service—need to recognise that crime and disorder audits will identify problems involving young people such as drug problems and the need for rehabilitation work. They should be getting the facts together for the audit now, and anticipating the work that they and local authorities will have to do in developing the youth service.

I pay tribute to the working party that produced the report "Extending Entitlement". I think we all want local authorities and the voluntary sector to help to produce the new Welsh youth service that the Assembly has a chance to produce—a project that I am sure the Assembly's Secretary, Jane Davidson, will pursue with great vigour, to our benefit.

The hon. Member for Ribble Valley's comments about the health service struck me as disingenuous. He should have known that we inherited a health service that was—

[Mr. Michael]

as we predicted at the time of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990—divided and competitive. It was duplicating services at local level, and was not delivering. A great deal of work had to be done, because the Secretary of State of the day had ripped out the Welsh Office's capacity to plan and supervise the use of the money going into the youth service.

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): Should not the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) have pointed out that last week's figures for January waiting lists in the health service showed a dramatic drop? Is it not typical of the Conservative party not to recognise any improvements?

Mr. Michael: The hon. Member for Ribble Valley seems to rely on out-of-date newspaper clippings—presumably sent by his former newspaper shop in Swansea in order to increase its profits—for information about Wales. It is a pity that he is so clearly out of touch.

Mr. Walter *rose—*

Mr. Michael: I give way to another voice from England.

Mr. Walter: But at least a Welsh voice from England.

The right hon. Gentleman has said that when Labour came to power it had to sort things out. I remember the Prime Minister saying that he would reduce waiting lists by 100,000. Since Labour came to power, the list of people waiting for their first out-patient appointment has increased by 79,000—just in Wales.

Mr. Michael: When I took over as Secretary of State for Wales, we were just discovering how disastrous was the legacy of the hon. Gentleman's party. I established a taskforce to examine the position, and also involved the Audit Commission. We discovered massive debt in every part of the health service in Wales, especially in Dyfed Powys, where the entire service was crippled by the disaster left by our predecessors. The hon. Gentleman should be ashamed of the mismanagement of successive Secretaries of State, which may owe itself to the fact that—like the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley—they did not represent Welsh constituencies and were out of touch with what was happening in Wales.

As for the economy, we have seen stability and a rise in employment, but problems and challenges remain. Those problems and challenges need to be met by business and Government working together. Corus, for instance, has not been willing to work with either the Westminster Government or the Assembly. As well as tackling such issues through partnership, we should encourage a "can do" approach among business. I was delighted to note such an approach among business people who joined us at Labour's business breakfast at Swansea on Friday. Business must join the public sector and others to use the opportunity presented by objective 1 status, and—as I suggested earlier—end the whingeing that has held us back during the early period of that opportunity.

Let me now mention something related to my constituency. Next year, a boat called Spirit of Cardiff will set a new world record for going around the world, thus illustrating the spirit of a constituency that still has higher male unemployment than any other Welsh constituency. Although we have seen improvements in the economic position of south Cardiff, we need to do more in that regard. In setting that world record, Spirit of Cardiff will put Cardiff and indeed Wales on the map. Before it does so, it will publicise its "can do" spirit and its future achievement in May with a practice run to New York. I am delighted by the response from business people in New York who have Welsh origins, and who want to be a part of the initiative.

I pay tribute to the voluntary sector in Wales, and to the manifesto that has been launched in the past few days. I am delighted that one plea could be left out—the plea for Government to pay for the criminal records checks that will be introduced in the next few months—because the Government have announced that they will pay for them. They will not constitute a burden or a tax on volunteering, as was planned by the last Conservative Home Secretary. This Government recognise the importance of encouraging voluntary work.

The manifesto also encourages partnership. It suggests that we should operate on the basis of outcomes: we should consider not just what goes in but what comes out, and the question of who does best. That is a constructive approach, and I hope that my right hon. Friend and his colleagues will respond to it positively.

I am glad that it has been decided not to abolish community health councils in Wales. I fought opposition to them during the passage of the 1990 Act, and I was pleased to be able to restructure them in Wales and create a pattern to give them a long-term future there. On Report, amendments were accepted in respect of the English arrangements, bringing the position much closer to what we had all hoped for. Ministers responded positively then. I hope that on this occasion the Minister will be able to assure us that the enhanced powers given to the new body—I think the name is less important than its capacity to do its job for patients and the community—will be available to the Assembly to pass on to Welsh community health councils.

The whole point of devolution is that it gives us the opportunity as Welsh Members of Parliament to celebrate not only differences, but the partnership with the Assembly, with local government, with business and with the voluntary sector in Wales. Devolution is about differences and about partnership. It is a step on the road not to separation or to victory for nationalism, but to victory for common sense.

I pay tribute in particular to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales for the quiet, constructive and powerful way in which he has represented Wales in the Assembly. He has worked with the Assembly constructively during his period of office. It is in that sense that we should celebrate St. David's day and our opportunity to debate Welsh issues in the House today.

6.41 pm

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): I also pay tribute to the late Lord Cledwyn. He was a doughty fighter for devolution and, indeed, for Europe. During the 1975 referendum campaign, in Aberystwyth, I spoke on a platform with him when it was not popular in the Labour party to be so pro-European, but he was fearless in his beliefs and truly independent in many aspects. I admired

that trait in him a great deal, as did many of my countrymen. It is a sad loss to politics as a whole that he has passed away.

This is possibly my last speech in the House, because I am retiring at the general election. I do not hear many expressions of regret about that. None the less, it is a great honour to be a Welshman who has served my constituents and my country in the House.

I had an upbringing in rural Wales. I was a widowed teacher's son and went to school at the age of three. She was a peripatetic teacher and taught in schools in three different places, so my early education was in Talybont, Talgarth and Hay-on-Wye in my constituency.

I learned to think for myself as a result of those early experiences and of living through the second world war. I was very interested and involved in farming and country pursuits. It is ironic to see farming at the height of a foot and mouth outbreak now. Naturally, I ended up in a career in agriculture, working for a multinational company. Later I was a farm manager, and a lecturer in agricultural economics.

I am glad that I had that career. Most Welshmen have to travel to find work. I travelled to the north of England, to Scotland—and, indeed, as far as Aberystwyth. I could not have done what I have done without the enthusiastic and dedicated support of my wife and family. All I know is that my career before I came to the House—in the world of big business, farming and education—prepared me well for the time that I have spent here. Even two years in the Army helped a lot. In particular, I thank all those who have helped me on the way—relations, friends, teachers, lecturers and party members—for their great kindness.

The Welsh day debate is the occasion to celebrate being Welsh, to have poetry in one's heart and, for a lot of us, the spirit of music within us—whether it comes out or not. We have politics running through our life experience, often from our confrontation with social realities: lack of work, a hard environment, poor health and poverty. Welsh society tends to be more equal than society in England, but we rightly rail against the inequalities.

I am pleased that proportional representation has arrived. The Ribble Valley ranter spoke for an hour and criticised PR; that is quite a wonder, considering that eight of the Conservative Members in the National Assembly are there only because of PR. At least the Liberal Democrats had three Members elected by first past the post; the Conservatives had only one.

My liberalism stems from within my family. It stems from non-conformism, independence and awareness of the importance of co-operation, wealth creation and social justice. It is not socialism, but it is egalitarian. It empowers communities as well as individuals. Modern liberal democracy does not fear state intervention, and stands clearly to the left of new Labour.

My conversion to liberalism was secured in my teens by Clement Davies and a young Glyn Tegai Hughes, who preached home rule for Wales, economic and democratic government for Europe and successful world government through the creation of the United Nations. Most of those aims have been achieved in my lifetime. That is a long way from yesterday's description by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) of a foreign country. Fifty years ago, we were talking of much more progressive things.

Home rule for Wales was compatible with a European Union. State intervention and taxation were more than acceptable if they produced a world that brought about the greater good of society and the individuals in it. Hence Liberals such as Beveridge worked hard for the establishment of the national health service, to which we all enthusiastically subscribed.

Beveridge found the money to finance that; Nye Bevan brought in the Act. Liberals and Liberal Democrats in Wales have always worked at the leading edge of progressive politics. In recent times, we have not always had the credit for our radical, constructive approach, but I expect that, ultimately, our support for the National Assembly and our decisive move to enter partnership politics to provide stable government in the Assembly will stand Liberal Democrats in good stead. We remain independent, but choose co-operation.

Wales needs stability. Liberal Democrats give it that dimension. We believe that education and training empower individuals, that a good health service epitomises a caring Wales, and that no worthwhile society in Wales can be created without quality jobs, mainly created through home-grown entrepreneurs—backed in future, I hope, by our own banks.

The Westminster Parliament must soon give Wales primary legislative powers like those in Scotland, so that it can become a master in its own house. We must reform the Barnett formula and base it on the needs of Wales. Tax-varying powers must accompany those reforms. Such measures will release the energy of a new and confident Welsh people in a Welsh Parliament.

My constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire is the largest, most beautiful and most rural in Wales. It has been a huge privilege to represent it. The loyalty of my constituents and their willingness to elect me as their representative here is something for which I will be eternally grateful.

My supporters have worked tirelessly for the Liberal Democrat cause. The victory that we achieved together in the great 1985 by-election was one of the highlights of my life. We demolished the second highest Conservative majority in Wales. As a result, the Conservative party chairman was sacked. I was elected at the age of 50 as the 50th Liberal Member of Parliament since the second world war.

My political career has been a roller-coaster, and I do not mind admitting it. In seven elections, I have had two lost deposits, a third place, a second place, three wins and eight recounts. That is not bad for a son of Talgarth. All that was thoroughly enjoyable. If people do not enjoy politics, they should not be in it.

I have had a very good relationship with my constituents. During our time together we have saved factories, opened new ones, seen others close and seen some work go to eastern Europe. On the plus side, thanks in some measure to the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), we have fought a tremendous battle and won the argument to save our six community hospitals. We saved our NHS trust, too. That has ensured that a real grass-roots NHS for patients can be delivered efficiently and effectively in one of the remotest parts of Britain.

The Liberal Democrats will play an increasingly important role in directing the fortunes of Britain in the 21st century. I certainly expect us to be involved, in one way or another, in the government of our country.

[Mr. Richard Livsey]

Liberal Democrats have an enduring philosophy that can meet the challenge of the vast changes that will occur in British society in this century. I believe that in Wales the Assembly will have not only far greater powers but a new self-confidence emerging from the people of Wales, who will have a very significant impact on their own well-being and make a constructive contribution to a federal Britain with a positive role within the European Union.

The crisis in farming is one matter that has undoubtedly grieved me in recent years. I was brought up on a 90-acre farm, albeit only as the tenant in part of the farmhouse. Welsh family farms are the backbone of our rural society. Both Conservative and Labour Governments have presided over the demise of the family farm to the point that, certainly in my constituency, youngsters no longer want to farm. That situation has been created by the supermarkets' overbearing power in the marketplace. They have borne down on farm commodity prices until they have been able to pay prices that are lower than production costs. That should be illegal in the United Kingdom, as it is in the United States. The sooner the House legislates, the better it will be.

Another aspect is undoubtedly the Government's timidity in refusing to join the euro. Welsh farming families have lost many millions of pounds because of the failure to join the eurozone on 1 January 1999. We must join as soon as possible. Joining the euro is one of the few actions available to us to ensure fair prices for our farm products and, therefore, a return to profitability.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I am sorry that I have to intervene in the hon. Gentleman's resignation speech. However, although it is true that both Labour and Tory Governments have presided over the decline of family farms, that is no more than a statement of the facts. There has not been a Liberal Government in almost a century. The hon. Gentleman has described the problem—which exists in all the other western European countries—but what do Liberal Democrat Members have in mind to solve it? What positive comments does he have to make?

Mr. Livsey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for asking that question. Welsh family farms cannot make a profit because of rock-bottom farm commodity prices. In prices, they have lost out by a margin of 40 per cent. because we are not in the eurozone. The situation is the same in the steel industry and in other industries. Were we in the eurozone, our Welsh family farms would be making a profit. That is why farms in Europe that are only half the size of farms in Wales can make a profit, but those farms in Wales cannot make a profit.

Mr. Jones: Family farms in France and Germany are also in decline. If it is simply a matter of the euro, why have family farms in central France almost disappeared?

Mr. Livsey: Modulation is an extremely important concept, as those resources should be concentrated on family units. We all know the statistics. The large farms receive 80 per cent. of the subsidies, whereas the small farms, which account for far more than half the farming population, receive only 20 per cent. That is the problem. Wales is a country of family livestock farms, which are currently being hit very badly by foot and mouth disease. Foot and mouth disease is a tragedy that must be overcome. In 1967, I left Wales for eight or nine years and worked in Northumberland, where there was a horrendous outbreak of foot and mouth disease. It took six months to conquer that outbreak, and some farming families could not leave their farms for three months. When the dust from this outbreak has settled, we must support family farms and help them to diversify their products for the benefit of Wales's rural communities. Suckler cow premiums, beef special premiums and sheep annual premiums must be paid early to sustain cash flows.

In Wales's urban areas, the closure of our coal mines and the destruction of jobs in the steel industry have destroyed many valley communities. I regard that as an extremely serious matter. In the 19th century, my own family worked in Cyfarthfa ironworks, but everyone was put out of work. My grandfather went down the colliery when he was 14. I understand the problems of the valleys. It is very important for the future of Wales that we understand each other's problems and tackle them in a unified manner.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): I do not think that the hon. Gentleman has the right to talk about valley communities being destroyed. The valley communities that I represent are vibrant and have tremendous community spirit, and the people who live in them are certainly not destroyed. He comes from a rural area, and he should not talk down our valley communities. The Government have poured resources into those communities. Unemployment is coming down, and our communities are on the way up. I wish that people like him would not talk down Wales and valley communities.

Mr. Livsey: The hon. Gentleman has totally misrepresented what I said. My mother came from Troed-y-rhiw, and he should know better. What is needed in the valleys is better quality work, higher wages and a much better local economy. The spirit there is fantastic. The people of the valleys have been oppressed for a long time and they have had to fight. I know that from within my own family. We need to unite and work for a better economy for Wales, to resurrect it as something that is really worth while. A further crash programme of job creation is vital to bringing wealth to those deprived communities. They undoubtedly already have plenty of wealth in terms of community strength.

I have had two stints as leader of the Welsh Liberal Democrats. The most recent one, from 1997 to 2001, has certainly been the most enjoyable and eventful. Winning the Welsh Assembly referendum was certainly the highlight and the realisation of many of the aims of my career. The elation of that victory and of what it meant for my beloved Wales will remain with me for ever. I hope that it will also inspire a new generation of young Welsh politicians.

Our new Assembly is an imperfect thing, but it will grow with our nation. Ultimately, we still have the innate talent in Wales—including the talent for robust political argument—to make more of ourselves. We must raise our eyes from the negativity that sometimes abounds in our debates. In Wales, we need vision and unity of purpose to create a better and more successful nation and society. That is the challenge of the 21st century. I am pleased to

have been able to play a very small part in laying a few secure foundations for the future that my country desperately needs.

6.58 pm

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): The annual debate on Welsh affairs has always provided an opportunity for what are often euphemistically described as wide-ranging speeches. Today's debate has already lived up to the great traditions of the past. I hope that my wide-ranging speech will be fairly short.

We have had various debates on Welsh affairs recently. We have had debates on the economy in the Welsh Grand Committee, debates on social deprivation on the Floor of the House, and other debates on law and order and on building better, stronger and safer communities. I think that most of us, if we consider the Welsh economy objectively, can understand the Welsh economy's strong points, its weaknesses, the improvements that have been made and the improvements that are needed.

The Welsh economy's strong points have already been mentioned in today's debate. Unemployment, for example, has decreased considerably. Indeed, it has decreased by more than most us would have thought possible when the Government were elected at the last general election. Inflation is low, as is the cost of borrowing money. Since my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made his announcements in the autumn, there has been a substantial increase in the sums being devoted to public services. It will take some time before the money filters through to health and education services, but that is happening and it will happen increasingly during the next few years. The minimum wage has been a great success, as we saw today in the welcome proposal to increase it by 10 per cent. Thus there have been strong points, but there is no use in denying that the Welsh economy has weak points; we all know what they are.

Incomes or gross domestic product per head are still low, although some parts of Wales now have fairly high incomes and GDP per head. Perhaps one of our future problems will be the gap between areas such as Cardiff, Newport, the south-east and parts of the north-east and other parts of Wales, but generally incomes and GDP per head are still too low and we need to try to do something to raise them. Obviously, that is not easy; it will take time.

As the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) said, farming is under tremendous pressure. It has suffered one blow after another. I entirely agree with him that the small family farm is often the backbone of rural communities, especially the Welsh-speaking communities, and we should preserve them if we can. However, his prescription was not as constructive or good as his analysis. France was mentioned in an intervention during his speech. Hardly a family farm is left in the Creuse in central France and most of them are occupied by weekend visitors from Paris. That is a real problem around the world, given the pressures on commodity prices.

Mr. Ruane: I have recently been looking at the statistics for French farms, which show a decrease from 1.5 million to 800,000. The number of farms has almost halved in France.

Mr. Davies: My hon. Friend is right. Perhaps I should be careful, given the intervention that my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) made in the speech of the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, but I should like to mention the tremendous pressure that has been placed on our traditional industries, on our manufacturing industry and on the communities that were bound up with them. No other small country in the industrialised western world has had to bear the disruption and degeneration in its economic structure that Wales has borne from the late 1960s onwards.

Mr. Rogers: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Davies: My hon. Friend obviously wants to get his retaliation in first.

Mr. Rogers: The point that I was trying to make—I thought that I had done so—was that, although our industries were destroyed, our communities have not been. The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) should read his speech tomorrow; he talked about valley communities being destroyed. The industry was destroyed, but the valley communities have not been.

Mr. Davies: I agree with my hon. Friend and hope that I can develop that theme. I suppose that, given the high dependence, first, on iron and coal and then on coal and steel, it was perhaps inevitable that the high preponderance of basic industries would not survive, as tariff barriers came down in the aftermath of the second world war and as trade opened up in the late 1960s. Sadly, not only did our communities have to try to adjust to that perhaps natural decline, but we had a tremendous pressure on prices and costs because of the global economy—to use a shorthand term—from the mid-1980s onwards. We never had a chance fully to recover from one economic blow after another, as we have seen, yet again, with the steel industry.

When politicians are faced with those economic hurricanes, we rightly tend to believe that one way to deal with the problem is to ask the Government for more money, whether in grants, public expenditure or objective 1 funding. Some people want the Barnett formula to be changed; others want there to be tax holidays or havens, or whatever, but we all ask, quite rightly, for Government money. Government money can solve many problems, and it is forthcoming, but we should recognise that economic changes and upheavals, such as those we have seen in Wales, have an effect on the cultural, social and, indeed, moral fabric of the communities that have suffered from them.

If we are to attract good economic investment, which we need to do to raise the GDP per head, we must realise that money is not sufficient in itself. We must try to rekindle confidence by fostering a culture of excellence and achievement—perhaps, rekindling some basic moral values—for which those communities were rightly proud and in which they showed great success when they had the economic growth that was lost.

I shall digress a little from this perhaps rather rambling speech and tell the House that, some time ago, a successful national eisteddfod was held in Llanelli. Aficionados of such events will know that a publication, which is quite cheap and written in Welsh, containing all the entries—the poetry, prose, literature, drama and, indeed, the film scripts, which are now part of the

[Mr. Davies]

competitions—and the adjudications on them is issued at the end of the eisteddfod. I have just finished reading the publication of the Llanelli eisteddfod. Frankly, it heartened me to read it, because there is still a culture of excellence, merit and achievement.

The publication is a great tribute to the adjudicators, who carefully consider all the entries and discuss their syntax, grammar and the imagination and language used—presumably, for little reward, because they enjoy doing so. It is also a tribute to those who have entered the competition, because they subject themselves to criticism. Perhaps this is no longer a society in which we want to subject ourselves to criticism, but they do so, and they are often sharply criticised. Of course, that is not an exercise in which "everyone's a winner, baby."

Certificates are not just handed out to everyone. In that perhaps minority area of cultural excellence, prizes are not awarded very often. People are criticised, but they are not given certificates. Perhaps we can learn something from the culture of excellence, attainment and rigour that can be seen in those adjudications and the national eisteddfod's publications. I am sure that that applies in other areas, not just to those Welsh circles.

Let us consider culture and excellence in Wales. Some social commentators maintain that a good way to assess the quality of a country's cultural attainments is to compare the quality of its broadsheet newspapers. Perhaps it is not a very good test, but some sociologists tell us that if a country can produce and sustain one or two well-written, well-analysed broadsheet newspapers, it says something about its sophistication and cultural achievements.

I have always wanted to be an adjudicator, and I shall now give my national eisteddfod-like adjudication. My French is not too good—being a Eurosceptic, perhaps I should not dare admit to knowing any French—so I shall confine myself to the countries of Britain and Ireland. The winner must be Ireland. Of course, such a test might be rather silly—I am not sure who is in the Gallery—but the winner is the *Irish Times*. By a short head, it is just in front of two or three of the London broadsheets that I assign to England even though they circulate throughout Britain.

I have given my first and second prizes and I would give my third prize to the Scots, who share it between *The Scotsman* and *The Herald*. In this eisteddfod, there is no fourth prize, so I am afraid that Wales does not get one. However, if there were a fourth prize, I would not tell the House to whom I would give it.

Mr. Rogers: The *Rhondda Leader*.

Mr. Davies: Why not? The *Rhondda Leader* gets fourth prize.

The *Irish Times* predates the Irish economic recovery that exercises all our minds and on which Plaid Cymru is trying to base most of its policies. I read recently in the *Irish Times* that Ireland is now crawling with economists who are trying to find out the reasons for Ireland's economic resurgence and success. They have not found them yet, but there are many reasons and I doubt whether most of them can be applied to Wales with the different structure of its economy in which the industrial revolution, among other things, played its part.

One reason why Ireland has done quite well may be the cultural sophistication, especially in terms of the English language, that it has shown in an age of communication. One of my Irish friends told me that he thought that the main reason for that goes back to the 1960s and to the education reforms of the Irish Prime Minister at that time, Sean Lemass. I am not an expert on British education and I am certainly not an expert on Irish education, so I do not understand the reasons for Ireland's success. However, I am old fashioned enough to believe that education—especially at secondary level—might be the answer to rebuilding the economic base of those of our communities that have suffered.

Secondary education in Wales is like secondary education in much of Britain: it is good in parts, bad in parts and the rest is middling. I have considered the league tables that *The Times* and other newspapers have published—no doubt, they are not always accurate—but I am delighted to see one or two Welsh schools in the first 50 on the lists. Let us be brutal: we do not see many Welsh schools in the first 50, but it is good to see them when they are there. My impression is that certain areas of education in Wales do not match the best in England, Scotland or Ireland, and the education in those countries does not always equal the best in some continental countries such as those in Scandinavia, including Finland. A small country such as Wales could learn a lot from what happens in education there.

Recently, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister published a Green Paper. Like all Green Papers, parts of it were criticised and others were welcomed, but I believe that it contained many good ideas. A good case was made for some form of specialisation and for some specialised schools and units, even though much work needs to be done to flesh out the policy and to work out the practicalities.

However, I was disappointed when I read on Ceefax that the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning in the Assembly in Cardiff has apparently rejected out of hand the proposals in the Green Paper. Perhaps second thoughts have prevailed and things are different now, so perhaps I am being unfair to her. If I am, I apologise. None the less, I got the impression from the report that the Green Paper's proposals had been rejected almost out of hand.

Just as it was silly before devolution for Wales to follow slavishly what went on in England, it is also absurd after devolution to reject out of hand any proposals that might apply to England. We must try as far as we can—none of us is wholly objective—to assess as rationally as possible ideas when they are proposed. We might reject some because they are not applicable, but we should accept those ideas that we think we can apply.

For certain subjects, we must consider the notion of creating centres of excellence or special units so that we can lift the qualify of education in those subjects. Sciences and mathematics are a case in point. A recent report from the Select Committee on Science and Technology said that science and mathematics education in Britain was woeful and did not offer industry the type of graduates that it wanted.

It has been suggested that we cannot have special schools and units in Wales because we have a large rural hinterland and rural children could not travel to the special units. However, it is perfectly possible to provide sleeping

arrangements and to use the latest e-mail and internet technology to teach science over long distances with no problem whatever.

Mr. Simon Thomas: I do not disagree with many of the right hon. Gentleman's remarks, but does he agree that, in rural areas, we should take the opportunity to create a stronger and much more practical link between sixth forms and the colleges of education that already provide distance learning and high-quality courses, especially in west Wales? Colleges and schools must work much more closely together in the way that he advocates.

Mr. Davies: Indeed, that can be done. Agenda, a television production company in my constituency, not only produces television programmes but has internet technology that is as good as anything that can be found in Seattle. The company can do such work. Let us not put up barriers. It is possible to create centres of excellence—using either technology or clusters of institutions—where people can be educated.

Dr. Julian Lewis: I agree with the general thrust of the right hon. Gentleman's remarks about excellence in Welsh schools. However, does he not agree that it is rather sad that, over a 20-year period, we have come full circle? After the destruction of so many good state schools and grammar schools in Wales, we now recognise the need to reinvent specialist schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and I both went to the same state grammar school in Swansea that my father went to in the 1920s. That school went downhill after its grammar school status was removed and now it is closing. Is that not rather sad?

Mr. Davies: I am a product of West Wales grammar school, but I do not take a romantic view of our school days. There were some good grammar schools and some very bad ones. The 11-plus was not a very successful mechanism; it left many children behind. Rather than looking romantically to the past, we must realise that in a modern world, in which there are global pressures on prices and costs, we must be up there with the highest global standards in education. If we are not, we shall not attract investment. We need some kind of specialisation—certainly in science and mathematics—to enable us to do that. I would argue for that, and I do not think that we should reject ideas out of hand simply because they appear in a Green Paper that technically applies only to England.

The story is not entirely gloomy. There is considerable growth in many areas. For instance, Cardiff is a successful city. I hope that people there realise that much of its wealth comes from the massive public expenditure on its economy. As a result, there are public servants, who get paid reasonably well, and professional firms of solicitors, accountants and management consultants who feed off it. I do not know how much actual wealth creation has occurred, and that is what is important if we are to lift the economy.

Mr. Michael: My right hon. Friend makes some fair points. Cardiff's productivity decreased considerably when the steel works closed and it experienced the problems that many other constituencies are experiencing now. However, there is another side to the argument. A capital city often gives people their first impression of a country. We have a mutual interest in the success of Cardiff and Llanelli.

Mr. Davies: I was not arguing a different case. However, the gap is even wider in Ireland, where there is a fear that, within the next 20 years, half the population of southern Ireland will live in Dublin or its suburbs. There is a problem. Obviously, we cannot denude Cardiff to help somewhere else, but we must recognise that it has received massive public expenditure.

We need public money, but the economic hurricane that has hit Wales in the past 20 or 30 years has caused tremendous social and cultural problems. We must try to return to the virtues of cultural excellence and the attainment of intellectual rigour, without which we will not rebuild those communities.

7.21 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): I warmly associate myself with the tributes to the late Lord Cledwyn, who was one of the greatest Welshmen of his generation. As we have heard, he was an extremely able and honest politician. In my early years, I also knew him as an able lawyer. He will be a great loss to Wales and to Parliament. I also associate myself with what the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) said about Mr. Ian Spratling. Members of the Welsh Affairs Committee met him recently and found him to be a doughty fighter for the underprivileged. He will be greatly missed.

As for the skirmishes between the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and the Secretary of State about the mythical television punch-up that might appear from the ether, if it takes the hon. Member for Ribble Valley an hour to say what he did, a series of debates will be needed.

On miners' compensation claims, I welcome wholeheartedly the Government's recent announcement. The change in direction will mean that there will be no deduction when compensation is paid to widows. Indeed, I called for that measure in a debate on 6 February, to which the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe responded. However, three or four issues are outstanding. I hope that my comments will be constructive.

We need more medical staff. I know that there may be a paucity of them in some areas, but it is my honest opinion that they should be drafted in and, if necessary, taken off elective work so that the claims can be processed quickly. The Department of Trade and Industry's predictions have never been met, but matters are improving.

Mr. Rogers: I appreciate the constructive way in which the hon. Gentleman is approaching the problem, but the issue has been considered. I have sat on the monitoring group since its inception and we identified that as a weakness early on. Unfortunately, the medical profession and the requirements of the hon. Gentleman's profession with regard to the legal aspects of the medical assessment mean that we cannot accelerate the process. He talks about drafting people in, but from where?

Mr. Llwyd: They could come from other parts of the United Kingdom and work solely on the claims for the next few months.

Mr. Rogers: Those areas have the same recruitment problem.

Mr. Llwyd: We must beg to differ. I know that people are touchy about such uncomfortable issues, but I am trying to be constructive.

Before last week's announcement, which will involve about £40 million, the Department of Trade and Industry challenged the rights of widows to receive those payments in full. I welcome the Government's decision to reconsider that, but they should also examine the clawback. Many Labour Members agree with me. The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), who is not present—I am sure that he is on parliamentary work—has worked hard on that issue. We should all follow his example. It is ridiculous that in one case recovered money was initially calculated at £21,707, but was reduced to £6.38 on the third appeal. That decision cost thousands of pounds in processing costs and caused great worry for the person involved. The situation is abominable and I hope that the Government will realise that.

However, there is another side to the coin. I believe that it is wrong to claw back compensation, which is sometimes substantial, because the miner who is in receipt of it will never be back in full-time work. Indeed, many miners will not live long enough to consider such work.

Mr. Rogers: The hon. Gentleman paid tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr. Rowlands), and he is right to mention the clawback. The assessment, which was based on the last five or six years of payment, is now made on the original five or six years. As a lawyer, the hon. Gentleman knows that the compensation took account of sick pay that was provided in the initial years.

Mr. Llwyd: This is where we might fall out. The clawback was introduced in September 1997, when the House was in recess. *[Interruption.]* I am certain of my facts. If the compensation clawback had not been introduced by statutory instrument in September 1997, it would not exist. Incidentally, it was introduced within a fortnight of the High Court issuing a preliminary judgment that it would find for the miners. We would have had to fall back on the 1989 Tory provision to exempt the miners. I question the Government's timing. However, I want them to consider their timing now and quickly scrap the recovery of compensation. It is immoral to recover large sums and a waste of time to recover smaller sums.

I am very unhappy with what the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley), told me when I argued that the miners were a special case. He said that they were not because he had constituents who were suffering from asbestos as a result of working for British Rail. I told him that I was not there to discuss them and that if he wanted to be a constituency MP, he should plead their case—but I was not interested to hear about them. He then gave a worse example and compared miners with nurses. I do not want nurses to put their backs out, but it is unlikely to kill them and they should be able to return to work. His attitude was strange. However, I am encouraged that progress is being made. It has coincided with the appointment of the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, and I hope that more quickly follows.

The right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) rightly said that the Welsh economy is good in parts, but we know that there are problems in some manufacturing sectors. No fewer than 18,000 manufacturing jobs in Wales have disappeared, and we know that the country is undergoing a structural change. We cannot look back and cling to the good old days when we had a coal industry and other heavy industry—those days are gone and we must look to the future. However, I am concerned that many of those jobs need not have disappeared.

I am sure that all hon. Members feel the same about Corus. The answers given by the company's chairman to the Welsh Affairs Committee on Thursday were unacceptable. I could use stronger words, and I have no doubt that stronger words will be used at some point. The chairman said that there was overproduction so the company could not justify keeping the plant open. Having said that the plant was one of the most efficient in the UK, he said in the next breath that the economic situation in the UK did not help the company. He then bleated on about the euro and one thing and another. He was clutching at straws and his points were at variance with each other. One has to question the gentleman's veracity, and I have no doubt that he will be put to a strict test the next time he comes before the Committee.

Mr. Ruane: What is the hon. Gentleman's opinion of Sir Brian Moffat's view that investment in productivity in the steel industry did not matter?

Mr. Llwyd: That is absolutely appalling. To my knowledge, Corus is actively investing elsewhere in the world.

Mr. Simon Thomas: Australia.

Mr. Llwyd: Yes. Although the chairman denied it, I have an article from the *Sydney Morning Herald* that says the opposite. Such remarks are offensive to us all, no matter to which party we belong. One would have thought that such attitudes were a thing of the past and that people could not treat workers in that way. However, it seems that that is not the case.

Mr. Rogers: We have been through all this before. I remember that in the early 1980s, when my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) and I were Members of the European Parliament, a company called Johnson and Johnson, which makes baby products, had a brand new factory in Pontllanfraith, built with money from the Welsh Development Agency and supplied with superb equipment. The company suddenly closed it and transferred the operation to Kuijk in Holland. The then right hon. Member for Islwyn, Neil Kinnock, and I met the company chairman at Heathrow and he said that Pontllanfraith was far more efficient than the factory in Holland, but it would take him a year to sack people in Holland, whereas people in Wales could be sacked in two minutes. The heart of the problem is labour laws in Europe. We must achieve the right equation with those laws or get out of Europe and promote our own values.

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman makes another robust contribution. No doubt that will be much quoted during the election campaign, but I am sure that he will worry

little about that. I accept his point about the difference in treatment of workers in Holland and workers here. That gap must be closed, using European law or another means.

Mr. Livsey: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the complaint made by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) could have been resolved at the Nice summit? For some reason, the Government did not resolve the problem of employment laws, which would have assisted steel workers because they could not have been sacked so summarily.

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman is one step ahead of me. I was not aware that the problem could have been dealt with at the Nice summit, but I hope and pray that it will be dealt with shortly so that, at the very least, if we are presented with a fait accompli there is no repetition of the disgraceful behaviour by Corus or a similar outfit.

The right hon. Member for Llanelli pointed out that we are behind in knowledge-based industries. We know that whatever we say about increasing our manufacturing base, it will never be as strong as it was 30 or 40 years ago. However, the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that there has to be a better partnership between schools, colleges and universities and business, manufacturing and industry. The Irish have done that very well. The Select Committee visited Ireland last year and we saw how universities are playing a proactive role in assisting industry not only in Ireland, but throughout the world. Students are bringing back PhDs from various parts of the world and bringing in investment, often from high-tech firms.

We can learn from that positive stance. Of course, there are many facets to it. Ireland has been careful to ensure that it implements all European directives and that it has good representation in the Commission and in all its key positions. It has been careful not to forget to ask for European money when it is available. In addition, the Irish people are very persuasive. I say good luck to them.

I will not get into the GDP argument except to say that there has been a 0.3 per cent. increase in Wales's GDP in the past couple of months. However, that follows a 3 per cent. fall since 1997, when the Government took office, so it has not taken us far. Objective 1 will not be a panacea for all ills, but it gives us hope that we can improve our position.

Mr. John Smith: On a point of clarification, the hon. Gentleman is referring to a fall in GDP relative to that of the rest of the United Kingdom. He is not saying that the GDP of Wales has declined—it has not.

Mr. Llwyd: The hon. Gentleman is right, and I should have phrased my remark better.

We face other problems. Parts of the UK are doing very well and other parts are doing very badly. One thinks of the north-east, the north-west and Wales. The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry recently made a telling speech about the difference between the south-east and other more prosperous parts of the UK, and the way in which Wales is still lagging behind. He said:

"Lack of investment, poor skills and education qualifications, these are some of the underlying causes we need to tackle. In the modern economy we cannot build a strong economy, a strong nation, if we have a tail of under performing regions."

Those are not necessarily the words that I would use. He continued:

"We need all our regions firing on all cylinders."

I fully agree with that.

The new earnings survey recently showed that the average income for Great Britain as a whole is £21,842, while the average income in Wales is £19,134. There is a gap and we must continue to strive to close it. We could consider having more regional economic policies. For example, there is nothing to prevent the introduction of a corporation tax cut in an objective 1 area. There is nothing to prevent us from giving rent or tax holidays or introducing cuts in employers national insurance liability. Those are valid options that could be used if the political will existed.

Mr. Denzil Davies: The hon. Gentleman referred to a corporation tax cut in an objective 1 area. I do not know what definitions would be used, or how one would compute profits, but he is saying that any company just outside that area, such as a company in Newport vis-à-vis a company in Swansea, would pay a higher rate of tax on its profits.

Mr. Llwyd: No, that is not what I am saying. I said that there was a perfectly valid case for introducing such a tax cut in an objective 1 area.

The much-quoted chairman of Corus said that none of that was possible until he was questioned, when he said that it was possible. There is nothing to stop central Government considering other deprived areas such as those in England and Wales that are outwith the objective 1 areas.

If the Government really want to operate a regional economic policy, they can do it. It is all very well the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry simply describing the problems—an accusation levelled at the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey)—as he has done in several keynote speeches, but he has not to my knowledge responded to the clamour to adopt some form of regional policy whereby regional solutions are introduced to perk up a specific region, whether that be Wales, the north-east or north-west of England, or anywhere else.

Mr. Davies: No one is against so-called regional policy. I question how one could have regional differentials in corporation tax on profits. They do not have such a system in Ireland; the rate of corporation tax in the south of Ireland is the same as applies throughout the country. I find it difficult to imagine how one could operate a policy of differentials within Wales.

Mr. Llwyd: The whole of Ireland is an objective 1 area.

Mr. Davies: It was.

Mr. Llwyd: It still is, for the time being. In addition, part of the Irish success arises from the fact that the Government have pegged corporation tax at a very low rate until 2010, which is bound to be attractive to any inward investor. I wish that we could do something similar to attract inward investment.

[Mr. Llwyd]

On the question of regional competitiveness, in a recent publication Robert Higgins of the centre for advanced studies in Cardiff makes it clear that the south-eastern regions of England are driving economic growth and that there is a great difference between their situation and that of Wales, the north-east and Yorkshire. I acknowledge that there are problems, and I have mentioned some possible answers which I believe should be given consideration. Currently, there appears to be no political will to do anything other than describe what is happening and say, "Dear, dear—there's another few manufacturing jobs gone."

The 75p increase offered to pensioners in the 2000 Budget will go down in history as one of the biggest political gaffes. The recent pre-Budget statement contained an increase of £5 for a single pensioner and £8 for a pensioner couple, and I know about the television licences and the £200 winter fuel allowance, but, backed by the Age Concern manifesto recently received by all hon. Members, pensioners are telling me that they want a proper, decent pension that they can decide how to spend.

Mr. Ruane: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Llwyd: No, because other hon. Members want to speak and it would be unfair if I did not try to finish my remarks fairly soon.

Pensioners say that they want a proper pension and that they will decide how to spend it—that message comes from every pensioners' group. I hope that, even at this late stage, the Government will heed it and address the issue. There is no doubt that pensioners are being pushed to the fringes of society. Far too many depend on state handouts and benefits: despite having worked throughout their lives and giving their all to build a better country for our generation, they are now told to stand back and accept the odd handout now and then. It really is not good enough.

On student tuition fees, I declare an interest as one who currently has two children at university. Even though the expense is ruinous, I am not entering a special plea on my own behalf, because by investing in their education I am doing the sensible thing—at least, that is what I tell myself almost every night. None the less, I have to say that tuition fees are having the adverse effect that people predicted when they were introduced. There was a 4.2 per cent. fall in overall applications between 1996 and 1999, and a 14.3 per cent. decrease in applications from mature students. A recent study by the National Union of Students of working-class pupils in Hull shows that more than 50 per cent. were less likely to apply for university because of fees and loans. At the same time, applications in Scotland have increased by 19.2 per cent. since tuition fees were abolished. That is conclusive evidence.

Having recently met students at University college, Bangor and in Aberystwyth, I believe that that issue will have to be revisited soon. Students leave university, often without a job that they can go straight into, with debts of up to £12,000 hanging around their necks. That cannot be right. I know that, in their hearts, Labour Members feel as I do. We must ensure that we have education for all. In passing, I should like to point out that my father was a retired policeman and that had it not been for the fact that I received a full grant, I should never have become a lawyer. We dare not prevent talented young people from developing their talent; otherwise, we shall for ever be saying that Wales is uncompetitive.

7.45 pm

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): We all have the current farming crisis on our mind. We welcome the Government's decisive action to end the crisis and their decision to apply for the agrimonetary compensation that, in the past, Governments have not been swift to claim. I hope that it will help farmers to get through this difficult period and that, in future, we have a Government who care for the countryside and want to develop positive policies for it.

I was extremely disappointed by the speech made by the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman. He spent almost an hour quoting press reports and historic bits and pieces, press cuttings and radio excerpts, many of which did not set out the facts, but reflected the gloss that commentators had put on what had been said. Given his frequent references to a forthcoming general election—it has not yet been announced, but he seems sure that there will be one and that it will result in a Conservative Government—I was surprised that he did not compare the 18 years in which the Conservatives were in power with the four years in which the Labour party has been in power. The comparisons are most instructive.

Let us consider unemployment. When the Conservatives left office after 18 years, their legacy in Wales was an unemployment rate of 6.5 per cent., or 80,000 people. By their standards, that was incredibly good, especially compared with the figures for some of the preceding years: at times, more than twice as many people had been unemployed during the wonderful Tory years. Yet after only four years, the Labour Government have managed to cut unemployment in Wales by about 20 per cent. There are now slightly fewer than 60,000 people unemployed in Wales. We have made significant inroads into the terrible Conservative unemployment record.

Let us examine other economic measures, such as interest rates. During the four years of the Labour Government, interest rates have been on average 4 per cent. lower than they were during the Tory years. Under the Tories, we had double-digit interest rates for four years. At one point they were as high as 15 per cent.—more than twice the rates seen under the Labour Government—and industry suffered, home owners suffered negative equity and other problems abounded. Yet in four years, the Labour Government have turned that record round: we now have the lowest mortgage rates, the lowest long-term interest rates and the healthiest prospects for economic growth that have been seen since the second world war—or even in this century. Although I am no expert in these matters, I should not be surprised to learn that the latter is true.

I shall not overstate my case, because the comparison between Labour's four-year record and the Conservatives' 18-year record makes it clear. Under the Tories, growth was 2 per cent., whereas we have managed 2.7 per cent., which is reflected in the way in which we have been able to tackle unemployment. There are about 40,000 more jobs in Wales now than there were when the Tories left office.

We have been able to turn the record round, and not by means of the boom-and-bust economics of Tory Governments. They would introduce financial cuts and

then increase public expenditure. First, we drew our breath and kept a firm hand on public expenditure over the first couple of years. Once we had the economy right, we expanded public expenditure. It is instructive to compare what happened in the last few years of the Tory Government with what has happened under the Labour Government. In the last three years of the Tory Government, public expenditure as expressed in the public service functions held by the Welsh Office increased by 2.2 per cent. and 2 per cent., and, when we came to power, the Tories were planning an increase of 0.4 per cent. for 1997–98.

We had to take some difficult decisions about not suddenly expanding public expenditure, in order to get the economy right first. After 1997–98, public expenditure under the Labour Government increased by 2.7 per cent. In 1999–2000, it increased by 8.2 per cent. It then increased by 6.5 per cent., and there are planned expenditure increases of 10 per cent., 8.2 per cent. and 7.1 per cent. These figures show clearly how the Government have grasped the economy and are now able to put additional expenditure into public services. All that has been done with an expanding economy.

Let us consider the prosperity index. There have been many arguments about gross domestic product, but in the Tory years the relative position of Wales in the GDP league of the United Kingdom declined. The Labour Government have begun to address these problems, and improvements are being made in Wales. Perhaps more important in many ways, average earnings are increasing.

In 1999–2000, average earnings in Wales increased by 4.1 per cent. That increase was greatly helped by the introduction of the national minimum wage, which the official Opposition opposed. They are now saying grudgingly that they will not oppose the increase announced today, to £4.10 an hour, because firms are beginning to get their computerised systems ready for next October. We know that most Conservative Members would like to get rid of the minimum wage, which has been so helpful in improving incomes, and especially those of women in Wales.

The working families tax credit has helped about 67,000 families in Wales. On average, it is worth about £30 more than the old family credit. Child benefit has been increased significantly—there was the greatest ever increase of 25 per cent. this year. Given all the changes that have been made to taxation and social security, families with children are about £850 a year better off than they were in 1997.

The new deal has helped to put more people back to work. We know that 28,000 jobless people have been helped. It is a new deal that the Conservative party would want to get rid of entirely. About 18,000 people have been helped back into work and about 10,000 have been helped back into education or further training.

The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) talked about pensions. We all know that the 75p increase was a mistake, but many pensioners say that they are glad that the Government are providing a winter fuel allowance of £200. They are glad also that the over-75s do not pay £104 for their television licences. They are glad as well that in April a single pensioner will receive a £5 a week increase, and that married couples will have an £8 a week increase, with promises of above-inflation increases in years to come.

Pensioners have seen the Government getting the economy right. We are now ensuring that pensioners are receiving an above-inflation share and an above-average-earnings share of public expenditure. Pensioners do not want to lose the winter fuel allowance. It is tax free and does not cause reductions in social security money if it is received as well.

The Government's record is extremely good after a difficult two years. I shall be more than proud to campaign, whenever the general election comes, on the four years of this Labour Government set against any of the 18 Tory years, safe in the knowledge that no other party could form a Government to look after the interests of Wales.

7.55 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I begin my contribution to this annual debate with the annual plea for a bank holiday in Wales on St. David's day. The Minister will have heard the plea many times; indeed, it is sometimes made by Labour Back Benchers. I shall introduce a little more information this evening. Some interesting research was conducted last summer by ICM, which claimed that we suffer from a bank holiday deficit in the United Kingdom. The findings of the research put us at the bottom of the European Union league table for bank holidays. It is well known that Wales has fewer bank holidays than even Northern Ireland, for example.

Another fact that emerged from the research was that the area of the United Kingdom that most wanted a bank holiday on its patron saint's day was Wales. It appears that 86 per cent. of Welsh people want a bank holiday first and foremost on St. David's day. If the Government were to introduce such a bank holiday, it would be popular.

I can make a claim for St. David on behalf of Ceredigion. His mother, Non, was born in Ceredigion at Llannon, and his most famous synod was held at Llanddewibrefi in Cerdigion, where the ground rose beneath him and he took on and defeated the Pelagion heresy. I will not explain that to the House, but I understand that it is the achievement of salvation through good deeds, with which we on these Benches agree.

Unfortunately, in doing so, St. David took on the Celtic Church, and romanised it. At one level, he could be viewed as a rather poor patron saint for Celtic Wales as it then was, but history is written by the victors. I think that we can ultimately see St. David as a good patron saint for Wales. He took Wales into Europe, which is the policy of my party.

St. David is accredited with saying—it was one of his last words—

"Gwnewch y pethau bychain."

That means, do the little things. I ask Members on the Government Front Bench to take that approach and to make St. David's day a bank holiday in Wales and to include a question about Welsh identity in the census form. Those little things would make the new Labour party much more popular in Wales than even it claims to be.

To move on to slightly more serious matters, it can be seen that Wales is starting to feel that new Labour has turned its back on some of the core values of the Welsh people. That is shown by the acknowledgment of the

[Mr. Simon Thomas]

Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe that apathy will rule the general election. How is it that a new Labour Government cannot encourage their core supporters to vote for the Labour party? We shall see whether apathy delivers any seats to the Conservative party. It does not deserve any seats, but perhaps apathy will deliver one or two seats to it. I think that campaigning, not apathy, will offer one or two seats to my party.

Views in Wales started on the periphery, with the Government's attitude to rural issues and to the difficulties with post offices and fuel taxes. They began with the crisis in farming, which has been exacerbated in the past few days. Those issues have underpinned problems in Wales for some time. The attitudes have reached the valleys, the core areas of Wales. They are reflected in the problems in the steel industry with Corus and in the difficulties that the Government have had with miners' compensation. We are seeing clearly that Wales is taken for granted by the Labour party, and that new Labour's sights, in terms of tactics and policy, are focused on the south and middle of England.

Whenever the general election is held, the Government will have to show how they are responding to issues that concern the people of Wales. Given the current foot and mouth crisis in Wales, I hope that the Government and the Prime Minister will not call an election when we cannot campaign in rural areas. The Minister has rural areas in his constituency, and I am sure that he has attended many marts during election campaigns. If we cannot go around rural areas attending marts, visiting farms and our constituents and encouraging them to vote, that will be seen as a poor show and shoddy behaviour by the Prime Minister in calling an election.

If the disease is under control, things may be difficult. In that context, coming to Westminster today and driving to the train station this morning was a very sad business indeed. As I passed through my constituency and that of the hon. Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams), all that I could see was empty and deserted farms. All that I saw was straw at every farm entrance; all that I smelt was the strong, penetrating smell of disinfectant at every farm entrance. With this latest blow, the countryside is in terrible shape. I know that we cannot blame that blow on the Government, but it has made the situation far worse.

I am grateful that the Prime Minister has now acknowledged, late in the day, that this Government and previous Governments have pursued policies that have exacerbated the current foot and mouth crisis. One of those policies is the encouragement of the closure of small abattoirs, leading to the transportation of stock over huge distances. When we saw the first map showing foot and mouth outbreaks and traced the disease throughout the United Kingdom, we immediately realised how the closure of small rural abattoirs had affected farming in this country.

I urge the Minister to take back three messages to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and his colleagues in the National Assembly for Wales. Although the response from the Government so far has been good and welcome, some things still need to be addressed. The first is the welfare-related movements of animals. A lot of ewes are still waiting to be lambed, and some calves are at a distance from farms; they cannot be brought back without breaking the present restriction orders. That creates welfare problems for animals and great difficulties for farmers. I hope that the Government will look at that issue extremely quickly.

Secondly, I welcome the fact that, from today, the Government are allowing some movement of animals to abattoirs for slaughter. Within that, however, we need to look at allowing some movement for welfare needs, if a flock is disease free. As for the movement to abattoirs, I hope that the Government will ensure that the remaining small abattoirs will be included in the scheme and the licensing for slaughter. A local butcher in Aberystwyth, Rob Rattray, has always had his animals slaughtered at Tregaron, which is a small abattoir. He knows that the animal that he gets from the farm is slaughtered locally and that the carcase that he gets is that same animal. He has an excellent reputation for telling his customers from which farm a certain animal comes. Credibility and faith are being restored to much of the meat industry in west Wales both by intimate knowledge of where the product comes from and the higher standards that are being followed. Mr. Rattray is rightly concerned that, if he has to use a faraway abattoir, whether in Merthyr Tydfil, the west country or wherever, he will have difficulty in giving his customers that assurance.

The third element that the Government need to look at is compensation. Of course, agrimonetary compensation is to be welcomed, but the compensation that is now being drawn down represents 54 per cent. of what farm incomes are suspected to be next year. That is how bad farming has become in Wales; £900 will be as much as 54 per cent. of a farm's income in the next year. However, that is a separate issue. I hope that the Government will not put any spin on agrimonetary compensation and say that it is something to do with foot and mouth. It is not; it is to do with the strength of the pound and the difficulties of receiving support payments as the result of the strength of the pound against the euro.

Agrimonetary compensation is welcome in helping farms' cashflow, but it has nothing to do with compensation for foot and mouth, which must be looked at. Of course, fallen stock compensation is available for stock that is destroyed, but account must be taken of consequential losses. We must be careful how far those losses can, or should, go, but account must be taken of the impact of losing so much business on a farming industry already on its knees. No doubt, the Minister already knows that the lamb market had just come back to life this spring and was ready for Welsh farmers to start rebuilding their lamb industry and consumer confidence at a decent farmgate price, when foot and mouth broke out. Ministers and the Government are not to blame for that, but they can do something to help the industry reach the position it had almost reached.

We have lost 73 farming jobs a week in Wales; we have lost 3,800 jobs in agriculture in the past year alone. There has been a 10 per cent. decline in the number of people employed in agriculture. More than 6,000 jobs are to be added to the 18,000 jobs lost in manufacturing. That drives many of us to feel that the days of the traditional family farm in Wales, which has been so important in supporting the Welsh language and culture, may be under serious threat. A recent survey, "New entrance to land

markets", found that 39 per cent. of farms were being bought by non-farmers. Stock in Wales is down by about 5 per cent. Farmgate prices, which were at a high in 1995, have undergone a 90 per cent. drop.

No industry can survive such blows without restructuring and alteration; we all understand that. The question is how to preserve the best qualities of the Welsh family farm and its huge environmental and cultural contribution and ensure that they continue in future. The right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) who, unfortunately, is not in his place, made an interesting speech and praised the contribution of the Llanelli national eisteddfod. If he looked at the individuals who contributed to that eisteddfod, he would see that an unusually high proportion of contributions were made by Welsh farming families to Welsh language and culture.

I recently saw that for myself in the young farmers' clubs annual performance night, which was of an incredibly high standard. The contributors used all sorts of media to present their ideas to an audience. When we witness that in the Welsh language, we know what we are in danger of losing, unless we do everything that we can to protect an industry, a way of life and an environment. All three things are bound up together.

In that context, the Prime Minister's acceptance that supermarkets have farmers in an armlock is to be welcomed. We did not have that acceptance last September or October, when the report on the supermarket industry was presented, but it is welcome now.

A debate on the future of farming is starting to be held in Welsh and United Kingdom public life. What are we farming for? We are no longer farming for a post-war world, and are no longer farming for all of our needs. We import much more than we farm ourselves. What is farming for? What are the unique features of British and Welsh farming that we want to preserve and encourage?

Mr. Edwards: I am following the hon. Gentleman's argument carefully. Given what he has just said about the Prime Minister's reference to supermarkets, will he acknowledge that the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs, in its inquiry into the livestock industry in Wales, recommended that the role of supermarkets should be referred to the Office of Fair Trading? That led to the recommendation of the Competition Commission that there should be a code of practice. Our Select Committee made the original recommendation.

Mr. Thomas: I certainly acknowledge that the Select Committee played an important role in that. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman accepts that the matter did not quite get to where the Select Committee would have liked it to get. However, in the context of the current crisis, there may be an opportunity to use legislation to get the code of practice that he mentioned on to the statute book, so that we have a much firmer idea of how relationships between farm producers, consumers and supermarkets should work.

Mr. Ruane: I agree entirely that there needs to be a watchdog for supermarkets. May I recommend the name "Oftrolley"?

Mr. Thomas: I am tempted to say that the hon. Gentleman is often off his trolley.

Mr. Llwyd: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Thomas: Perhaps my hon. Friend will say so.

Mr. Llwyd: We have obviously hit on an eminent Government Member who would make a very good chief executive.

Mr. Thomas: I will not go any further down that avenue, except to note that most trolleys end up in the river.

On a serious note, may I move on to what this debate engenders concerning the future of farming? Broadly, there are three ways forward for farming in Wales. First, we must improve and support the traditional family farm; there must still be a role for it. A second way is to encourage and make greater use of organic farming in Wales, support for which must be increased. A third way is non-food farming. Energy crops are a clear way forward.

The traditional family farm would still need to be supported as part of such a strategy. We must have a young entrants scheme in Wales. The National Assembly's Agriculture and Rural Development Committee has considered the matter, but unfortunately the Lib-Lab Government there have not yet seen fit to introduce such a scheme. In Ireland, the scheme has brought down the average age of farmers from 57 to 50, which is quite a success, and has allowed young farmers to enter farming. Funding is available from the European Union. As many hon. Members know, the plan hinges on an early retirement scheme, which encourages young farmers to go into farming. That needs to be introduced in Wales.

We need an identity logo for Welsh produce. The case must be argued at a European level. We will not restore faith and confidence in our produce until we can demonstrate that a cut of meat was packaged somewhere in Wales and that it is genuine Welsh produce, produced by Welsh farmers to the highest welfare standards and to the best standards for the food that we want to eat in Wales. Through the National Farmers Union British farm standard, there must be a way of working with the industry and the supermarkets to introduce a Welsh produce logo that means something.

Finally, the Food Standards Agency, which has made an encouraging start on some of these matters, must take firmer action against poor quality meat imports, as we have discovered over the past few weeks and days. It is a sad fact that the two farming unions in Wales have been saying for months that poor quality meat imported from other parts of the continent, sometimes through Irish channels directly into Wales, has been undermining our meat industry in the UK. It seems that that may have been one source of foot and mouth.

We know that meat from Germany has been found to be contaminated with spinal residue, which is not allowed under the BSE regulations. We know, therefore, that there is a big job to be done by the Food Standards Agency to give further reassurance to consumers and, more important, support to our hard-pressed farmers.

I mentioned biomass and energy crops, but as I have previously spoken about that I shall not pursue the subject now. I will, however, say a little more about organic food

[Mr. Thomas]

and farming. I am sponsoring a private Member's Bill to give greater support to organic farming. There is an opportunity now for the Government to take that jump and put into practice their warm words about organic farming.

The second report recently from the Select Committee on Agriculture on organic farming presented a positive attitude on the way forward. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has set not a target, but an outcome, as it is called, of about 5 per cent. of land in England to become organic, under the rural White Paper for England. In Wales, the National Assembly has a 10 per cent. target for organic conversion.

My Bill calls for a 30 per cent. target for organic conversion in the next 10 years. We need to achieve that. We are underplaying our opportunities. We import 70 per cent. of our organic cereals and 90 per cent. of our organic apples. We should surely be able to produce apples in the UK. We even import organic meat. In view of the condition of the meat industry in Wales and the rest of the UK, that surely should not continue. The Select Committee report acknowledged that in countries such as Sweden and Austria, setting targets had made a huge contribution to the move from a very low proportion of organic farming to 10 or 11 per cent. within four or five years.

I hope that the Government will take the opportunity to open a debate on farming and to examine the virtues of organic farming, to see how we can implement them in Wales to give Welsh agriculture a vibrant future. The Government have been able to draw down agrimonetary compensation and, on occasion, to apply sticking plaster to parts of Welsh agriculture, but there are more fundamental problems to deal with.

If we do not want Welsh agriculture, like the steel and the coal industries, to be denuded of infrastructure and to become an occupation at which people play part-time as hobby farmers, if we want real farms to produce real food that people want to eat and if we want to keep alive our countryside, heritage, traditions and language, there must be a sea change in attitude towards agriculture, not only among the Government, but throughout public policy, including much of the media.

Against the background of wider rural decline, which has seen the closure of post offices in rural areas, I shall mention a further constituency interest—the future of magistrates courts in Ceredigion. When I raised the matter in the Welsh Grand Committee, the Minister showed a flicker of interest, which was encouraging. I must tell him that matters have worsened since then. There is now a firm proposal to close all three magistrates courts in Ceredigion at Aberystwyth, Cardigan and Lampeter, and a vague proposal to build a new one at Aberaeron.

I have my constituency office at Aberaeron, on the grounds that it is equally inconvenient to all, but justice should not be equally inconvenient to all. It is vital that people can access magistrates courts in a rural area such as Ceredigion, and that victims can reach the courts to hear their cases. The Home Secretary said last week how important victims would be in the Government's latest initiative on crime reduction. Victims of crime in my constituency do not want to travel two hours a day to get to a court where their case may or may not be heard and where they may or may not see justice done.

The proposal to close magistrates courts in Ceredigion is reflected throughout Dyfed Powys. Cases from Aberystwyth may be transferred to Aberaeron. That also means that cases from Machynlleth will be transferred to Aberaeron. Cases from Cardigan will be transferred to Haverfordwest, and cases from Lampeter down to Carmarthen. I can tell the Minister that people in west Wales will fight the proposals tooth and nail.

I understand that the Government may not be happy about the possible impact of some of the changes, but the Lord Chancellor's Department is setting such stringent financial targets and such stringent targets for the process of justice that the difficulties in rural areas are not being taken into account.

Eighteen per cent. of people in Ceredigion walk to court in order to attend their cases. Closing the courts in towns such as Cardigan and Aberystwyth and forcing people to travel some distance will have a huge and detrimental effect, and will not make the Government popular. They may not have hopes of winning Ceredigion, but they may hope to win other parts of Dyfed Powys. Despite the Government's attempts to blame the magistrates court committee, the proposals are seen as part of their plans.

I close by reiterating some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) about the difficulties that we are experiencing with higher education in Wales. Unfortunately, the National Assembly, under the Lib-Lab Government, has not yet seen fit to make a specific funding allocation for the higher education sector in Wales. That is the context for the useful comments of the right hon. Member for Llanelli. There has been significant movement in higher education in England, but, as the right hon. Gentleman said, such things are not always replicated in Wales. That is partly because the education budget in Wales has been raided to provide match funding for objective 1. That is the truth, whatever Ministers may say.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy said, there has been a 14 per cent. fall in the number of mature students. I have two universities, Lampeter and Aberystwyth, in my constituency. Lampeter was a niche market for mature students—a quiet market town to which they could bring their families. The fall in numbers has had a huge effect on Lampeter, and it has been exacerbated by the closure of Dewhirst, the clothing manufacturer, with the loss of 170 mainly female jobs.

Seventy-three per cent. of students are in debt. The average graduate debt is £7,584, but that is expected to rise significantly. It is calculated that the average graduate debt after a three-year course will soon be £9,000 or £10,000. We have not yet seen the full effect. Universities are expelling thousands of students every year because, according to *The Independent on Sunday* of 28 January, they cannot pay their bills for rent or tuition. It has been proposed that there should be top-up fees for the most prestigious universities, but fortunately that has been rejected by the Government. Figures produced by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales reveal that teenagers in the valleys of south Wales are three times less likely to go to university. The imposition of tuition fees and of student loans cannot help that situation. The Government must consider urgently what has been done in Scotland and support the proposals that the National Assembly for Wales is investigating. If we do not secure

funding for students and investment for the future of Wales, we will be in danger of squandering the opportunities that may be provided by objective 1 status and of losing the high-tech developments to which my hon. Friend the Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy referred.

I turn now to my final comments—*[Interruption.]* I have spoken for less than half the time taken on behalf of the Tories, who do not even have a Member of Parliament who represents a Welsh constituency.

We hear often in debates on Wales about the wonders of job creation by Labour. Exploration of that argument from the point of view of Ceredigion will perhaps shatter the myth. Since 1997, the Government's policies, or at least the general atmosphere, has created 100 new jobs in Ceredigion. That is the total increase since 1997. Of course, I am grateful for 100 extra jobs in Ceredigion, but that increase is unfortunately not matched by the other side of the equation—the slack in the work force. The slack consists of people who could do jobs but do not appear on the official statistics, for various reasons. Unfortunately, their number has increased by 200.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My figures for Ceredigion, which were produced by the Department for Education and Employment, show that 1,581 people were unemployed in May 1997. In May 2000, however, that figure had fallen to 1,158, which shows that there had been a drop of 400 people.

Mr. Thomas: My figures, which come from the unemployment unit, are obviously different from those of the Under-Secretary. Clearly, we will have to exchange statistics.

I was about to conclude by saying that the slack in the work force in Ceredigion has increased by 200 people since the Government took office in 1997. I think that that might be correct even according to the Under-Secretary's figures. As I said, the slack consists of people who could take up jobs and want to do so, but are not yet employed.

The Government still have a great deal of work to do in west Wales and in Wales as a whole. They are likely to be returned to power after the election—not in Wales, but in the United Kingdom. They have a huge job to do and I hope that they will do it with a little more enthusiasm, rather than with the reluctance of their first three years in office.

8.22 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Having represented Ceredigion, Brecon and Radnor, Llanelli, Swansea and Carmarthen in the European Parliament for five years, I am well aware of some of the problems that have been mentioned. Before I speak about those problems, I commend to hon. Members some of the practices of the European Parliament. First, Members can obtain refreshment in the debating chamber during debates. I suspect that that would have been welcomed by the hon. Members who are now present, many of whom will now be thoroughly dehydrated. Secondly, we knew in which order we were to speak in respect of our parties, and how long we could speak for. If a Member spoke for longer than the allotted time, the excess was taken from his or her party, which affected the subsequent speakers. That was a good way of organising business. Perhaps we should consider such procedures, as well as electronic voting, when we discuss change in this place. I could speak for quite a long time about virtues of the European Parliament that could be transferred to this place.

I should like to join the hon. Members who have spoken about Cledwyn Hughes, who was a man of great generosity. When I first stood for Parliament in 1970, in a constituency that was held by the Tories with a majority of 25,000, not many people even from my own party were prepared to help a struggling candidate, but Cledwyn Hughes was one of those who were. For candidates who were standing for the first time, Cledwyn was a great help and inspiration, and I shall sorely miss him.

As the community that I represented was based half on farming and half on steel, I am well aware of the residual problems of the farmers of Wales. One of my brothers-in-law is a small farmer on Anglesey and is currently extremely worried. My other brother-in-law was a vet in Ceredigion and has recently retired. I spoke to him last night, and I am glad to say that he has never seen a case of foot and mouth disease.

Those of us who have seen against the night sky the funeral pyres of the cattle, sheep and pigs that have been burnt throughout the country during the past few days have been horrified. Many of us have asked whether such measures are necessary, and whether there is an alternative. I am told that outbreaks of foot and mouth disease occurred almost annually in the 19th century and the early 20th century, without anybody batting an eyelid. Of course people do not die of foot and mouth disease, and most animals recover from it. We are told, however, that it is an economic disease.

Modern farming is so intensive and dependent on the drive for higher productivity and lower costs, and most modern farms are run on such tight budgets, that they will not allow an animal with the equivalent of a bad cold to recover, and they cannot delay the date when it is sent for slaughter. It appears that modern farming cannot tolerate the inconvenience caused by temporarily sick animals that produce less milk and meat. I suggest that that is an appalling reflection on what we expect of our farmers.

The last time I heard the figures, there were 70 cases of foot and mouth in the country as a whole, although fortunately only three have so far occurred in Wales. Whatever the source of the current outbreak, the mass transporting of animals across Britain and over national borders from farms to centralised abattoirs has spread the disease further and faster. In the past few years, Britain's network of small local abattoirs, which some of my hon. Friends have mentioned, has almost been closed down. As a result, animals are being carried far greater distances to slaughter than ever before. That means that infectious animal diseases are much more likely to be spread throughout the country. Long journeys to slaughter make it almost impossible to confine the disease to the area from which it came, which contrasts with the days when animals were sent to a nearby abattoir.

Animal welfare groups have long argued that the practice of sending animals on long-distance journeys should be ended, as well as the live animal export trade. The UK exports about a million sheep and lambs a year to continental abattoirs. Many of them go as far as Italy and Greece. Such long journeys not only inflict huge

[Ann Clwyd]

suffering on animals, but could spread disease throughout Europe. The trade has been halted during the crisis, and it should never be resumed.

Last year, I introduced a private Member's Bill on the welfare of broiler chickens. It failed. It was talked out and the Government did not support it, which was a mistake. I am ashamed that I knew so little about broiler chickens until I gained a place in the ballot, but 800 million broiler chickens are reared for meat in the United Kingdom each year, and most are kept in massive windowless sheds that are so overcrowded that the floors cannot be seen.

The packed conditions mean that it is impossible to inspect the birds properly. Consequently, millions are diseased or injured, and die without receiving treatment. Growth-promoting antibiotics and rich diets are used to ensure that chickens reach their slaughter weight in only 41 days—twice as fast as 30 years ago. Chickens' hearts and lungs cannot keep pace with such growth, and each year several million die of heart disease before they are six weeks old.

Broilers used for breeding are put on severely restricted feeding regimes. That means that they are starved, because farmers do not want them to reach the weight of the other broilers and thereby suffer the same health problems and early death associated with reaching such weights so quickly. However, they still suffer the same health problems and early death.

Poor conditions also pose serious risks to human health. A couple of years ago, a report revealed that one in three broilers was infected with salmonella, and that 44 per cent. were contaminated with a similar disease. An article published by *The Observer* suggested that the potentially deadly strain of salmonella may have been released into the food chain by the poultry industry. Much more research has been conducted on the same subject.

Farming does not need another food scare. In the wake of BSE and genetically modified foods, consumers have shown that they are sophisticated and will not buy what they regard as unsafe food. The then deputy president of the NFU said:

"as fast as we deal with one food safety problem, another crops up".

Mr. Fabricant: I am listening to the hon. Lady's speech with great interest. She talked about the sophistication of the consumer, but does she agree that sometimes people are worried by scare stories and consumers can be a little too sophisticated, thus damaging farming, and in some instances are not protecting their families because the dangers do not exist?

Ann Clwyd: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has not heard that a few weeks ago, *Which?* considered chickens for sale in supermarkets and found that a high proportion were infected with salmonella. Most people would like to know that their purchases are safe and that they will not be infected with salmonella. The sort of production that I described is not conducive to that. The arguments for more natural methods of food production have been reopened, unfortunately through an outbreak of foot and mouth. As hon. Members have said, the Prime Minister has promised to work out a basis for sustainable agriculture for the long term.

One farmer wrote in *The Independent on Sunday* yesterday:

"My nearest abattoir is just over 30 miles away on a good road . . . it closed for six months last year but has since been rescued by a local concern. This means that my cattle have less stress and the butcher I sell to can hang them for three weeks—the supermarkets rarely hang for more than a few days."

The farmer's next comment was referred to earlier. He said:

"My local butcher includes a provenance note with his meat, explaining the rearing and treatment, food and medication the animal received.

The more you can help to reduce the intensive farming that the supermarkets encourage the better."

No one disagrees with that. However, most of Britain's pigs and poultry are farmed intensively.

Compassion in World Farming claims that such systems impose great stress on animals. That leads to their immune systems becoming vulnerable to disease. Foot and mouth disease is the second infectious outbreak to hit Britain's farming industry in months, following the outbreak of swine fever last year. That must call farming methods and husbandry into question again. In crowded conditions, animals cannot live naturally. They are therefore highly stressed and more vulnerable to disease.

We need to move to systems that are safer and more humane. Yes, customers might have to pay a little more for their food, but we could have a better farming system so long as the supermarkets played the game too. The EU spends £25 billion a year on the common agricultural policy. Part of that money should be used to help farmers move from industrialised systems to a more humane and responsible policy that also conserves and manages the countryside.

There have been arguments about the drastic policy of slaughter and about vaccination. The professor of microbiology at Cardiff university, Professor Julian Wimpenny, said in a letter to *The Guardian:*

"Total elimination of a disease without the cover of vaccination is a desperately high risk approach, especially when the disease has appeared in many other countries in recent years and is highly contagious. Humans and animals are equipped with a marvellous device known as the immune system which, if stimulated appropriately as Louis Pasteur showed more than a century ago, can prevent infection . . . The unedifying spectacle of thousands of perfectly healthy pigs slaughtered and burned could easily have been avoided if a strategy of vaccination had been pursued, especially as it seems that the Government has millions of doses of vaccine available."

I know that there have been arguments about vaccination, but Julian Wimpenny is, after all, professor of microbiology at Cardiff university. He ends by saying:

"I suppose that vaccination of animals is just too expensive for our cost-conscious society to cope with."

Finally, we are all to blame. Not many people have much idea of how our food is produced, unless a disease such as BSE or E. coli presses our panic buttons. As long as we get our ready-to-eat chickens for £2.50, or our bargain-basement beef for £3, in a hermetically sealed pack, we do not pay much attention to how it gets to us. We tolerate the fact that the animals that we eat can be fed on ground animal remains, stuffed full of antibiotics and made to live in inhumane conditions. Unhealthy animals mean unhealthy food and unhealthy human beings. Surely no one in their right mind would choose to continue to support that situation.

I shall finish with a quote from the NFU, which arrived today:

"Although the scale and long-term implications of this outbreak of foot and mouth disease cannot yet be assessed, it has potential implications for every citizen in terms of the security and cost of the nation's food supply, the economy, and the management of the environment and the countryside"—

and, I would add, humanity towards animals.

8.38 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), and I was interested to hear what she had to say about compassion in Welsh farming, as well as world farming.

Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter), I was not born in Swansea, although my mother was born in Aberavon, which is not too far from there, and I have spent a considerable amount of time in Wales. My mother was a fluent Welsh speaker. I have always been keen on learning foreign languages, if I can call Welsh a foreign language in this debate.

Mr. Simon Thomas: It is not a foreign language in Wales.

Mr. Fabricant: I suspect that "foreign" is the wrong word to use in this debate, although it is a sad fact that technically, according to the rules of the House, Welsh is a foreign language in that we are not allowed to use it other than in short, illustrative instances. It is a great regret to me that my mother did not speak Welsh to me, so that I could have been as fluent in Welsh as I am in French and German.

Mr. Flynn: Os yw'n bosib i mi siarad yn Gymraeg, rydw i eisiau dweud wrth y Tŷ bod y Gwr anrhydeddus yn ynfytyn.

Mr. Fabricant: Were my mother here, she would give the hon. Gentleman the riposte that he deserves. Were I to give him the riposte that he deserves in that language, I would be out of order. It is out of order to intervene or make lengthy contributions in Welsh, which is unfortunate—but I can understand why. Outside the Chamber, the hon. Gentleman may tell me precisely what he said. I can assume only that it was highly complimentary, because outside the Chamber he is an hon. Friend indeed.

A few hours ago, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announced a national minimum wage of £4.10 an hour. As I said then, I have never objected in principle to a minimum working wage, provided that it is set at a sensible rate. Sadly, in Wales, both in agriculture and in tourism, many people will not enjoy that minimum working wage. Three weeks ago, I was in the constituency of the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), staying at the guest house of Mrs. Pugh, which is called Dolfanog Fach, in Talyllyn, Gwynedd. I spent two healthy days there, perhaps preparing for the general election, and climbed Cader Idris in almost record time. I then went on a 17-mile walk, which would not be possible now because of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease.

I simply make the point that, like many people who work for themselves in the tourist industry, Mrs. Pugh and her son, who work at Dolfanog Fach, do not earn the minimum working wage. We should never forget that although a minimum working wage is set for those who are employed, the self-employed often cannot enjoy that luxury. That is certainly the case for many of the 31,700 farmers who work in Wales.

Let us remind ourselves of the position of Welsh farming. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) described in some detail the plight in which Welsh farmers find themselves: 3,800 people—73 every week—left the Welsh agriculture industry in 2000. They did so not because they voluntarily gave up farming, but because they simply could not make a living. A National Farmers Union audit showed that 62 per cent. of farmers were working more than 61 hours a week. The Government have set a minimum working wage and they are trying to set maximum working hours, but those are hard to deliver in practice.

I remind the House that, as I have been reminded by the National Farmers Union of Wales, at the farm gate Welsh dairy farmers receive 3p a pint less for their milk than it costs to produce. The union denounced the drastic fall in incomes and in February, before the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease, called that a "disaster for the industry". The statistics on total income from farming released by the National Assembly reveal that incomes for those working in the agriculture industry in Wales fell by a staggering £60 million in 2000, to stand at minus £2.6 million.

As recently as 12 February, Hugh Richards, president of NFU Cymru, said:

"What this starkly demonstrates is that the total value of agricultural output in Wales was actually less than the total cost of producing that output."

Other industries in farming, not just the dairy industry, have been affected. He continues:

"Our politicians talk about the tender green shoots of recovery"—

I have heard that somewhere before—

"but these figures are the clearest evidence yet that the Government's fiscal policy is decimating our industry."

The Welsh Assembly has claimed that the main reason for the fall in income was a fall in output, and in the subsidies for produce, which were £58 million lower. There is real concern about the future of farming in Wales. A 1998 survey by the National Farmers Union in England found that the children of two thirds of its members did not want to take over the farms because they could not see a future for the industry. As I said, people are already leaving the farming industry in Wales. That is desperately sad.

As we all know, the entire industry is under threat from foot and mouth disease. Wales has so far been hit by three confirmed cases, although I fear that there may be more cases by now. They are at an abattoir at Gaerwen on Anglesey, and farms at Painscastle near Hay-on-Wye and Felindre near Newtown. Others are under investigation.

The position of farming in Wales is grave. It is grave in the United Kingdom as a whole, but it is particularly difficult in Wales, which has a varied and difficult landscape in which to farm, especially for hill farmers. It is all very well for the Government to announce provisions such as the minimum working wage, but

[Mr. Fabricant]

people in farming are earning a negative income. Initiatives from Westminster often mean nothing to those people, whether in Swansea, Betws y Coed or Ceredigion.

8.47 pm

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): I am sorry that I was provoked by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), who is a friend, but this is the only Parliament that Wales has—we have an Assembly—and we are not allowed to use one of the beautiful languages of Wales, as it has the status of a foreign language in this place. He should not have rubbed that in.

I have a good news story to tell. We are overwhelmed with the trauma of bad news. We feel that we need counselling after listening to the speeches from Opposition Members and the tidal wave of negativity and misery. A remarkable change is taking place in the Celtic nations of Europe. It has passed almost unnoticed, but it is a positive and important change. My hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) referred to the Brythonic group of nations. The two groups of Celtic nations—the Gadhelic nations including the Manx, the Scottish and the Irish, and the Brythonic nations of Wales, Cornwall and Brittany—are separated by thousands of miles, but are coming together for the first time in 2,000 years. That has never happened before.

The Celtic languages and identity have, in the past, been a source of pain, poverty, division and anger against our neighbours—in Britain, it was England; and for the Bretons it was the French nation. That is now changing. In the past, the Celtic language and culture were seen as second rate. On St. David's day, a lady in my constituency, who is my age, 66, told me that when she was at school people were taught and conditioned to believe that Welsh, being Welsh and thinking about Welsh and Welsh literature were second class. We have our slave names: Jones, William and Thomas. The Cornish hung on to their names, such as Pemberthy and Trethown. The reason that the most common name in Wales is Jones, which uses a letter that is not used in the Welsh language, is because the English could not pronounce the Welsh names and called everyone John, William and Thomas. Our young people are now rightly throwing away those names and using their two first names. They take pride in having a Celtic name.

It is marvellous that the two most promising politicians in Wales at the moment are women, Delyth Evans and Eluned Morgan, who are fluent in Welsh and other languages. They are products not of the Welsh Gaeltacht in north Wales or of Gwynedd, but of Splott and of Ely in Cardiff, which are entirely English-speaking areas.

What is happening in Brittany? When I was there in the early 1970s, I spoke to an elderly man who told me that, in his lifetime, the sabot, which is like the Welsh not, was hung around people's necks, and if they spoke a word in Breton they had to take it off and pass it on to the next person. He said, "We were the petits délateurs: we were the little sneaks. That is what they made of us, the young Bretons." The language was on the point of extinction; only the elderly spoke it.

In one village, just one child was learning Breton. Nowadays it is a different story. Five thousand young Bretons are receiving their education entirely in the Breton language. There is a brand-new radio station—probably set up by the hon. Member for Lichfield, who has set up radio stations in many parts of the world. It broadcasts entirely in Breton, and is run by young people specialising in bagpipe and flute music.

Moreover, a television station has been set up for hard-headed business reasons, not to function as a cultural ghetto. Silvio Berlusconi and Rupert Murdoch have put their money into it. It broadcasts six hours of Breton every day, and is putting all the Celtic programmes together, including programmes from Wales. It is broadcasting "Braveheart" in Breton. The whole thing is aimed not just at the 3 million people living in the Breton area, but at the 8 million people throughout France who feel that they have a Breton identity.

Links are being forged between Scotland and Ireland. The magnificent, beautiful building of St. Columbia on the Isle of Skye was designed to reconnect the two branches of Gadhelic in those two countries—what a way to bring together the two communities in Northern Ireland. It is part of the tradition and heritage of those two communities, Scottish Gaelic—pronounced "Gallic"—and Irish Gaelic.

In Ireland itself, we see economic growth and a growth in self-confidence. It was De Valera who sent scholars to the Isle of Man in the 1950s to re-teach them their own inheritance. In Cornwall, there is more recognition of the Cornish identity than ever before. We should remember what was happening there in the 14th and 15th centuries—Cornwall had its own Parliament for 300 years; 10 per cent. of Cornish people voted for Mebyon Kernyw in the European elections.

We note what is happening with pride. Yesterday someone said, "Give us back our country." Some of us say that we want our country back. We want our own Parliament, ac i siarad yn ein iaith ein hunain, and not to be mocked.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. I must remind the hon. Gentleman that the language of this House is English.

Mr. Flynn: I thought of making a speech in Chaucerian English, although I shall not do so on this occasion. Such a speech would be understood by no one, but presumably it would be in order. It is an outrage that tonight we shall again refuse to pass a motion allowing Welsh to be spoken in the House. It is a continuing insult to our heritage. I should be very surprised to learn that there is a *Hansard* reporter present who can understand the simple words of Welsh that are used here, and that is another disgrace that should be put right. My earlier remarks will no doubt appear as "Interruption" in *Hansard*. That is a great shame, but I certainly will not translate that, or anything I say in other languages, for *Hansard* reporters.

A great community in the Celtic areas of Britain is under threat. It was under threat for years, and the threat is now returning. We have a real problem with people who do not speak the language. Many people arrive full of good will, with a sense of the importance of our culture and of learning the language, and for the first time the tide is turning. There has been a continuing story of decline, but we are now cherishing these languages, and the links between the countries concerned are strong.

I hope that Brittany does not go the same way as Corsica and Ireland and descend into violence. There have been signs that that will happen. Brittany has a political

party—there is a wonderful serendipity about this—called Partie d'une Organisation pour une Bretagne Libre, or POBL. "Pobl" is the Welsh, Breton and Irish word for "people". All through this, we see those links—An Gof in Cornish is also the word for "smithy" in Welsh, in Breton and in Irish Gaelic.

The strands that kept us together—there was one community 3,000 years ago—are being rediscovered. Those links are building. We shall see the positive development of the Celtic nations forming a council of the islands, a Celtic council, for identity. It will be rich and will mean that our children will regain our nations. The Irish used to talk about Sinn Fein—ourselves alone. Now we as Celtic nations can talk about Sinn el Céile—ourselves together.

8.55 pm

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): May I begin by talking about the crisis in agriculture? Although there are no foot and mouth cases in my constituency at the moment, 280 farms in my constituency are badly affected, as are the abattoir and market at St. Asaph. My heart goes out to my farmers, as does my hand. I will work with them closely to do what I can as a constituency Member to help them in their plight.

I am pleased that agrimoney has been provided by the Government and that they reacted rapidly. As soon as the crisis was announced, they took steps to stop the movement of animals throughout the country. As a result, the number of cases of foot and mouth remains at 70 and not 700. I am pleased, too, that the farming unions and, dare I say it, the Opposition have co-operated. They have not been oppositional during the crisis but quite constructive, which makes a change.

What have the Government achieved for young people in my constituency in the past three and a half or four years? For the first time ever, we have a college in the constituency: Rhyl college. That offers a ladder of opportunity—the ladder of education—to young people. I am pleased that the college will be expanded from 1,800 part-time places to 5,500 part-time places over the next five years. Indeed, there are to be outposts in Prestatyn and Denbigh. That has occurred under a Labour Government.

Young people in my constituency have had the new deal. Under the previous Government, young people were alienated, hounded and marginalised. Under Labour, they have been included and are at the centre of our policies. I am proud that we have introduced a windfall tax on the utilities to pay for the new deal to get young people back to the centre of society.

I ask my hon. Friends to consider what would happen to those colleges and to the new deal in my constituency if the Conservative Opposition were to get in. Where would the £24 million worth of cuts fall in my constituency? Would they fall on the college and on the new deal?

In 1985, 5,000 pensioners froze to death at home, not from coughs, colds or pneumonia, but from hypothermia. The advice to pensioners from the Minister at the time, Edwina Currie, was to buy some extra woollen clothes at second-hand shops and sit in the dark at home to avoid getting cold. Let us compare and contrast that with what we have done on the issue of cold weather. We have given pensioners £200 a year, bang in the middle of winter, so that they have security and peace of mind, knowing that they can turn their gas and electric fires on and keep warm. The winter fuel allowance benefits 16,000 pensioners in my constituency.

Six thousand pensioners in my constituency are benefiting from free television licences. There are also free bus passes. Next year, there will be a free bus service in the constituency. The Conservatives propose dental and eye test charges. We have abolished those. The Conservatives introduced VAT on fuel at 8 per cent. and wanted to raise it to 17.5 per cent. We stopped them and the Labour Government have reduced VAT on fuel to 5 per cent.—the lowest in the whole of Europe.

One matter that has not been emphasised in our debate so far—I have been in the Chamber for almost four hours today—is how much the poorest pensioners will benefit from our changes. In 1997, they were on £68 per week, whereas, in April 2001, they will be on £92 per week. The minimum income guarantee is excellent news for the 3,000 pensioners in my constituency who will benefit from it.

Conservative Members' tax-cutting policies would make necessary £24 million of cuts in my constituency. Where would those cuts fall? Would the winter fuel allowance be safe? Would the minimum income guarantee be safe? Would free bus services be safe? Or would Conservative Members increase value added tax, as they have proposed? My constituents would like answers to those questions.

When he was the Secretary of State for Social Security, the right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) tried to demonise young lone parents. He reminded us in his conference speech that he had a little list. We should compare and contrast his attitude to young lone mothers—which was the attitude of the previous Government—with ours.

We have a new deal for young lone mothers which has also been financed by the windfall tax. Conservative Members were prepared to let young mothers rot on the dole, but our working families tax credit has made work pay for those young women. Not only are they no longer on the dole—which costs each one of us—but they are back in work and paying taxes. We are therefore benefiting doubly from the tax credit. That makes sense to me, to other Labour Members and to the public. We have also increased maternity pay for young mothers.

Let us compare and contrast our action on child benefit with that of the previous, Conservative Government. They froze child benefit. We have not only unfrozen it, but increased it from £10.50 to £15 per week. Will that increase be safe if Conservative Members are returned to power? Will the children's tax credit be safe if the Conservatives are returned to office?

Child poverty increased threefold under the previous Government. In the past four years, Labour has taken 1.2 million children out of poverty, and we are well on track to achieve our goal of ending child poverty within 20 years. I think that we should do that within five years. If the Chancellor would like my advice on what he should announce on Wednesday, which I doubt, that would be it.

Let us also compare and contrast the previous, Conservative Government's action in my area with that of our Labour Government. In 1993, the Conservatives ended my area's assisted area status and the limited European help that we were receiving. In contrast, Labour

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has delivered objective 1. My county now will receive a slice of the £3 billion worth of European and United Kingdom aid going to 15 counties in Wales.

The St. Asaph business park in my constituency was built by the Conservatives, at a cost of £11.5 million. It was supposed to create 2,000 jobs, but it was empty for seven years and created only 100 jobs. Since Labour has been in power, the number of jobs at the park has increased to 1,100. We are delivering.

In 1993, unemployment in my constituency was between 4,000 and 5,000; it is now 1,200. Under the Conservatives, we had job losses at Shotton steelworks and at the Point of Ayr colliery. Under Labour, we have had job gains at BAE Systems, WTS (Holdings) Ltd. and the TRB car plant. In the Vale of Clwyd, we have had a 20 per cent. increase in our small and medium-sized enterprise base. I believe that all that would be threatened if the Conservatives ever got back into power.

9.4 pm

Mrs. Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): I want to use the few minutes available to me in this debate to be a spokesperson for the farming industry in my constituency. In an intervention on the Minister, I mentioned a short Welsh phrase, which I hope the *Hansard* reporters will include in the *Official Report*, and I shall translate it for them. It is, "Heb waith, dim iaith", which basically means, "Without work, there is no language." In my area of Wales, the rural economy and farming are vital to work and to the language of west Wales.

I spent two hours with the National Farmers Union in my constituency on Friday night. Farmers clearly say that they are grateful, on several counts, for what the Government have done for them. They are grateful to the Government for the agrimonetary compensation that they are providing. We hear much rhetoric from Conservative Members about agrimonetary compensation, but we must not forget—the farmers have not—that, when in government and when such money was available for our farmers in 1996 and 1997, they did not claim it. Farmers have no reason to believe that they would do so now.

Farmers are particularly grateful to the Government because they know that £129 million of the £157 million that they will receive in the latest round of agrimonetary compensation will come from the British taxpayer, because of the way in which those now on the Opposition Benches negotiated the Maastricht treaty. They are grateful to the Government for the swift action that they have taken, in partnership with the Welsh Assembly, to halt movements in the countryside to try to stem the spread of foot and mouth—an awful disease.

Farmers are also grateful to the Government for introducing the scheme for licensed animal movements today. I congratulate Pembrokeshire county council on its work. I know from a conversation with the council's environmental health department that it issued its first licence within two hours of those arrangements being implemented. They are also grateful to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for telling them that they can go ahead and graze cattle on set-aside land and for the fact that MAFF will fight their corner if any questions are asked about that in Europe.

I want to raise one or two small but specific points that are pertinent to my constituents. I hope that, if the Under-Secretary cannot deal with them now, he will at least discuss them with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The first point relates to ports. Already during this outbreak, foot and mouth has been identified at several sites on the United Kingdom mainland and in Northern Ireland. Farmers have considerable concerns about vehicles moving from Ireland to the United Kingdom. Vehicles leaving ports such as Rosslare are currently disinfected by the Irish Ministry of Agriculture and Food, at its expense. However, port operators have discretion over whether to disinfect vehicles that enter the United Kingdom from Ireland. Tim Johns—a member of Pembroke NFU—told me that he went to Fishguard yesterday, and 10 lorries came in direct from Irish abattoirs. Farmers are anxious that MAFF should take on board that important matter, perhaps making the disinfection of vehicles mandatory, rather than discretionary, at the expense of the port authorities.

Secondly, the over-30-months scheme was mentioned in last week's debate. I want to make a special plea for Pembrokeshire's farmers, who take a responsible attitude to maturing their cattle. They mature them on grass; they keep them for as long as they can and as near as possible to the 30-month limit. So many farmers are concerned that those cattle will go over the 30-month limit because of the restrictions on movement, and they will receive only the 30-month compensation, not the full market price.

We have heard today about direct costs and consequential losses. Farmers who have animals with the disease or that are considered to be dangerous contacts are compensated at full market value, but there is no compensation for consequential loss. I want to make the case that such losses are not consequential; they constitute different types of direct loss brought about, yet again, by the Conservative party's mismanagement of the BSE crisis. Those farmers stand to make a direct loss, just as though those animals had caught the disease. I ask the Minister to consider the issue in those terms.

Another problem is involved in the crisis. Farmers have already told us that prices have dropped, by 10p a kilo for beef and 20p for lamb, under the licence scheme. That is perhaps understandable for lamb, given the proportion of Welsh lamb that is exported, and exports have stopped, but there is no excuse for a drop in the price of beef, especially as we read in the newspapers that beef and other meat prices are set to double in the supermarkets. If we are not careful, someone will profit at the expense of our farmers. I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will consider what the Government can do about that.

Journey times are another problem. Farmers have expressed concern because they understand—it has not been confirmed—that under the new licence arrangements the maximum journey times for getting animals to slaughter is four and a half hours. The journeys must include a detour around any infected area, which is creating massive problems in Pembrokeshire and in Cornwall and other areas of the west country. Will my hon. Friend clarify the arrangements for journey times, so that our farmers know what the position is?

Stray animals and escaping sheep are a major problem. I spoke to Pembrokeshire county council this morning and it expressed its concern. Several incidents have occurred

and it costs the council £300 or £400 each time. The stray animals may be perfectly healthy, but if they cannot be identified, they have to be destroyed. That is a real problem, and I wonder whether there is anything that we can do to assist our local authorities.

Tack animals have already been mentioned. One farmer in my constituency has 150 cattle that are due to calve. They are currently on land where there are no milking facilities, which creates tremendous animal welfare problems. In another case, 400 sheep are on 8 acres that are separated from the main holding. Again, there will be major animal welfare problems if the issue is not addressed. As we progress, is there any possibility of allowing limited movements within a certain radius or within counties in unaffected areas?

Future policy on animal movements is another issue that has been raised. The National Farmers Union suggested that it would be sensible to set a 28-day limit during which animals could not be moved after they have been brought on to a farm. They would be kept there without being moved again, and any disease would manifest itself in that period. At the meeting, one farmer pointed out that he had bought sheep that had been on 11 different holdings in the previous two months. He did not know that until he had got them back to his farm.

There is an urgent need for MAFF to get the available payments to farmers as soon as possible. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture has assured us that he will try to do that, but we have had that assurance before. Can we make absolutely certain that there will be no delay in getting the payments to our farmers? That is vital for them. They appreciate what the Government are doing, but I want an assurance, on behalf of Pembrokeshire farmers, that the payments will be made and that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary—in conjunction with the Assembly and my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture—will do everything possible to help west Wales farmers in this difficult time.

9.12 pm

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I intend to keep my remarks brief to allow hon. Friends to speak. It is a pity that I have to do so, because many of us look forward to this debate so that we can speak about important matters that relate to our constituents.

I wish to pay several tributes. I would like to be associated with the remarks that have been made about Lord Cledwyn. Many of us, especially the newer Members, are indebted to him for the help that he gave us when we came to the House.

I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales for his speech and for all that he has done in the past year to improve the quality of life for the people of Wales and my constituents.

I also pay a special tribute to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans), for his unique contribution to the re-election of many Labour Members. I have never heard such an appalling speech in all my life. It showed us that the Tories have not a hope in hell of winning the next election and that he is unlikely to be the Secretary of State for Wales—at least not in my lifetime.

I was appalled not so much by the hon. Gentleman's snide remarks, although they were bad, or his half-baked facts relating to steel jobs and crime, but by the sheer irrelevance to the everyday lives of the people of Wales of 95 per cent. of what he said. He prattled on about English nationalism, the devolution settlement, the euro and all the rest of it, whereas the majority of people in our country are concerned about the issues that matter to them on a day-to-day basis.

Our Government's track record has been good; a great deal has been achieved. As the hon. Gentleman is not here, may I pass a message on to him through you, Madam Deputy Speaker? I can tell him, "It's the economy, stupid." In the past couple of years in my constituency and throughout Wales, we have achieved the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years, the lowest inflation rate in 30 years and the lowest long-term business rates in 35 years. We have one of the most stable economic environments since the second world war. As a result of our economic policies, our capacity to create wealth is growing dramatically. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State mentioned the substantial growth in incomes, which has—rightly—exceeded growth in other areas. We have achieved much, which has had an effect on my constituents.

Let me give a quick anecdote. Yesterday, on one of my Sunday morning walks through my constituency, I bumped into a constituent in Gibbonstown in north-east Barry whom I had not seen for 18 months. When I last called on him, he was at home, struggling, did not have a job and was trying to cope with bringing up a family. Yesterday, he said, "Mr. Smith, I've got a job. It doesn't pay fantastic, but its reasonable. I've managed to save enough and I'm going to be able to move on and buy my house. My family, at last, are looking forward to some security."

We have made a difference to people in the real world. The Vale of Glamorgan housing needs survey showed that, prior to the 1997 election, the average gross income per household, including all non-housing benefits, was what many hon. Members would pay for one meal. My constituents had to support a family on that. The minimum wage has had a dramatic impact.

We have made huge strides, but there is still much to do. Although we are slowly but surely narrowing the gap between wealth creation in Wales and elsewhere, especially London and the south-east, it still exists. An essential condition for closing that gap is to have an internationally renowned airport in Wales to serve our business community. I am not alone in that view. South Wales businesses were recently asked for their opinion on the most important business infrastructure project. They wanted a dual carriageway to the airport so that they could get to their business destinations and help the Welsh economy grow. Any economy in Europe, north America or south-east Asia could not be successfully regenerated without a viable international airport. Our airport is good. It is modern and has a large capacity, but it will not be the airport that we want if we do not deliver that road.

There is an additional reason to deliver on that. My right hon. Friend might have seen the Welsh Development Agency's statement in which it announced that it was conducting a feasibility study with the Defence Aviation Repair Agency, which is based at RAF St. Athan, on the location of 2,000 highly skilled jobs at Cardiff international airport. I was furious about that because there are 3,000 jobs at the agency. However, I am delighted to say that the chairman of the WDA, Sir David Rowe-Beddoe, has assured me that most of the jobs will

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move to Cardiff. Some will remain at RAF St. Athan, but not a single person will be made redundant as a result of the move. I have been seeking that assurance for months.

As a result of the feasibility study, 3,000 aero engineers might be located at Cardiff airport, in addition to the airport business and the British Airways maintenance centre. It might be necessary to change the way in which RAF St. Athan workers get back and forth to work and goods and services are transported to the airport. My point is simple: at the moment, they have to use the A4050, which is wholly inadequate because some parts of it provide only single-lane access to the airport. I plead, as I have done before, for my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Minister to reconsider that issue. The consultation period on aviation policy in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is almost over. I know that the Welsh Assembly has considered the matter. We must get our act together if we are serious about regenerating the Welsh economy to the extent that it can catch up with the rest of the country.

9.19 pm

Ms Julie Morgan (Cardiff, North): I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me at this late hour. I share the frustrations of my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). I wish that we had some of the practices of the European Parliament, so that we knew when we were to be called and had more opportunity to make our points.

I am glad that we are having this St. David's day debate, which is a good opportunity to express our views about Wales on behalf of our constituents. This week, we also celebrate international women's day, and in the short time that I have I want to concentrate on the issues that especially affect the lives of women in Wales and bring them to the attention of the House.

This week marks the end of the consultation on the Department of Trade and Industry Green Paper on parents and work, which considers options for making it easier to combine work and parenthood. One of the Government's key aims is to deal with the dilemma faced by families in which both parents need to work and by lone parents who need to work but who have no one to look after their children.

I had a consultation meeting at Llanishen in my constituency at which I tried to find out what people, particularly women, felt about the issue. One of the Government's hallmarks is that we are going out of our way to consider the issues that affect many people's daily lives. The mothers, grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers at the school gates in Whitchurch, Llanishen and Llandaff North were very pleased that they were being asked what they thought. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) said that some seats would not continue to be held by Labour Members, but the people to whom I spoke gave a tremendously warm response to my questions. The key point is that the Government are tackling difficult issues and trying to help parents cope. They are trying to achieve a better balance between improved provision for maternity, paternity and parental leave and the demands on employers.

It is interesting that the Equal Opportunities Commission in Wales reported that employers in Wales were much more sympathetic to such provision than their counterparts in England. The commission received a good response from employers about issues that have often been regarded as burdens on them.

The clear message from my meeting in Cardiff, North was that maternity leave should be extended beyond 18 weeks and that the flat rate of maternity benefit should rise and be extended. It was generally felt that unpaid maternity leave is only for the well-off middle classes and that most women could not take it. All surveys show that most women return to work before they want to. Another clear message was that periods of leave should be combined with the need for breast feeding and that employers should make every effort to accommodate breast-feeding mothers if they have to return to work before that time is up. We have, of course, failed to address that issue in the House, although I hope that we will do so soon.

My constituents' views have been echoed by the Women's National Commission, the Fawcett Society and many other bodies. I urge my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in this week's Budget to extend maternity leave and increase maternity pay. I hope that some of the rumours that I have heard turn out to be right because they certainly reflect my constituents' feelings.

My constituents also want paid parental leave. The Government are considering that in their consultation document, but they think that it may be too great a financial burden. If parental leave is not paid, it will not be taken up, especially not by men. It is important that men have an opportunity to be closely involved with their children at an early age. I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement about paternity leave, but all the European examples show that men in particular do not take up parental leave unless it is paid.

Parents in Wales generally share the views held throughout Britain on the need for reform, but my constituents also believe that such help should be extended to all carers—for example, those who care for elderly people. I think that more women look after elderly people than care for children. My constituents also think that more help is needed for parents of disabled children. I warmly welcome the appointment of the Children's Commissioner for Wales and the remarks made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I hope that the commissioner will take on board the needs of disabled children in Wales and try to get them a fairer deal.

Last week, a group of mothers from my constituency came to see me; all have disabled children, most of whom suffer from autism. They were full of praise for the school that their children attend—the Hollies school—but told me about the problems arising from the long, six-week holiday, when they have to cope with children who need a great deal of attention, whom they love dearly, but who are difficult to cope with for long periods. The women are fund raising to run a play scheme in the special school that their children attend so that they have somewhere to go in the summer holidays.

The women face all the problems of trying to cope with children who have special difficulties, but have to fund raise to set up a play scheme themselves. Their children do not fit in with the local authority schemes, because their special needs make integration extremely difficult. Their mothers, who are struggling to raise funds, told me about the day-to-day problems of looking after the

children whom they love so much and for whom they do so much. It strikes me that we have to have the sort of society in Wales that offers help to the struggling parents of children who have such needs; we must be there for them. Such people should not have to struggle against the system.

Since I became a Member of Parliament four years ago, parents have brought many children to my surgeries. The children have special needs and their parents always seem to be engaged in a fight against the system, trying to get their child into one school or another, or to get a statement. Everything seems to be a fight. My test of the new Wales that we want to create is that, when people have a problem, we help; they do not have to fight, because we try to make things easy for them and try to make things better.

I have spoken about the needs and aspirations of some of my constituents in respect of maternity and paternity provision, parental leave and children with special needs. I think that we are making great progress in some of those areas. The previous Government never recognised the need to combine work and parenthood nor examined the important issues that face people every day of their lives, whereas the current Government are concerned about community and supporting each other. It is vital that we recognise that issues that are sometimes not regarded as major political issues none the less have a huge effect on people every day and make their lives bearable or otherwise.

Constituents who bring those issues to my attention do so against a backdrop of a huge reduction in unemployment in Cardiff, North. There was never high unemployment in my constituency, but it has decreased by 40 per cent. and youth unemployment has decreased by 70 per cent. We have gained many jobs: Cardiff Gate business park is now one of the most flourishing business parks in Wales. We have suffered the loss of manufacturing jobs—we lost Aeroquip and Alloyed Wheels last year—but more jobs are coming in than are going out. Given the relative prosperity in my constituency, it is important now to try to get to grips with everyday issues that make a fundamental difference to people's lives. The Labour Government have made huge strides, but we have a long way to go.

9.30 pm

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): It has been a welcome debate, even if it is a couple of days late for St. David's day. I have witnessed what I expected, which was a rehearsal of spin by Labour Members. At times, it verged on fantasy when set against reality. That is understandable when we consider that a general election is probably a month or so away. Many Labour Members will be losing their seats, so they may wish to make their valedictories today.

I picked up on the fantasy that it is almost as though we have had a Conservative Government for the past four years. There are some in old Labour who think that we have a Conservative Government, but in reality we have had a Labour Government for nearly four years. It is reality also that it is the Government of Labour Members who have been responsible for the deterioration of the national health service in Wales. It is their Labour Government who are failing to deliver on education in Wales. It is their Labour Government who have been presiding over the greatest fall in Welsh farming incomes in living memory. It is their Labour Government who have sat powerless as thousands of jobs have been lost in Wales in recent months. It is their Labour Government who insulted pensioners with a measly 75p increase in pensions last year. It is their Labour Government who increased the tax bill for the average family by £640 a year.

I shall deal with some of the contributions of Labour Members, but they cannot escape the clear fact that Labour runs Wales. I remind them that it is Labour that is in power in the National Assembly for Wales, propped up by its Liberal Democrat toadies. Labour is dominant in local government in Wales, and it is in power at Westminster.

Let us consider some of the speeches by Labour Members. The right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael)—the spirit of Cardiff—had a good warning for the nationalists. However, before he claims too much pride in country, let us remind ourselves that he is the only member of the National Assembly to have resigned his seat to return to Westminster.

The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) delivered a moving speech—I think he admitted that it was his valediction. We wish him well in his retirement. I suspect that his departure will be marked by the demise of the Liberal Democrats in mid-Wales. We look forward to welcoming Felix Aubel as the new Conservative Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, following in the footsteps in recent years of the late Tom Hooson and Jonathan Evans as Tory Members for that seat.

Where is the hon. Gentleman's colleague, the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik)? I use "colleague" advisedly because he is seen increasingly as a Government supporter. I know that Labour has—

Mr. Livsey: My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) is in his constituency. I believe that there has been an outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Church Stoke. I had to be absent from the Chamber on Thursday because I had two outbreaks of the disease in Painscastle and Velindre. It is a serious matter.

Mr. Walter: That is certainly a serious matter. There was a suspected outbreak on the borders of my constituency over the weekend. However, I stayed away from farms in my constituency and dealt with the outbreak on the telephone, which I thought was the safest way of doing so. I have had telephone conversations with the National Farmers Union every day during the outbreak, and we have also conversed by e-mail and other means that do not lead to the spread of this ghastly disease.

Getting back to the performance of the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire, it is noticeable that the Labour party has not selected a candidate for that seat—[HON. MEMBERS: "We have."] Well, that is most interesting news. I have raised that matter on several occasions, most recently in the Welsh Grand Committee. Neither the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire nor his Labour colleagues mentioned that a candidate had been selected. Perhaps Labour Members can name their candidate.

Mr. Ruane: Does the hon. Gentleman know the name of the Conservative candidate in my constituency, without being told by his hon. Friends?

Mr. Walter: Of course I know who the Conservative candidate is. I have a piece of paper with his name on, but I do not need to refer to it as I know that his name is Brendan Murphy. I shall come to him in a minute.

I am intrigued, because if the Labour party has selected a candidate, he has not made much noise, has not made himself known and does not appear on the Welsh Labour party website. For most people in Montgomeryshire, he does not exist; they were led to believe that the current hon. Member for Montgomeryshire would be the Labour candidate and they would be denied a Liberal Democrat candidate.

Enough of that; I shall deal with other contributions. The right hon. Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies) made a good plea for the greater need for wealth creation in Wales, while dealing with other problems in his constituency and elsewhere in the country. The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) dealt at length with a matter that he has raised in the House on several occasions—the miners' compensation scheme, which, he feels, should be dealt with quickly. He dealt at length with Corus but went on, I am afraid, to areas of fantasy, suggesting that there should be different corporation tax rates in different parts of Wales. That is probably an accountant's dream, but it is a Treasury nightmare.

The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths) claimed that everything was perfect in Wales under this Government and that any problems must have been caused by the previous Government. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) made his regular plea for a bank holiday on St. David's day. We all support his views and have sympathy with the farming community in his constituency and other constituencies, which are suffering as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak. The hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) delivered a worthy speech on animal welfare, but I am not quite sure where it fitted into a debate on the Government's record in Wales.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) talked about the Welsh language and the minimum wage. Let me make it clear that we regard the Welsh language and the English language as having equal merit in Wales. Unlike some members of Plaid Cymru, we do not regard English as a foreign language. We shall make that case on many occasions.

The hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) delivered a cultural tour de force, if he will forgive that foreign language phrase. The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) spent 10 minutes on a fantasy trip in his constituency under a new Conservative Government, speculating on what would happen. Not only did he get it hopelessly wrong, but he forgot to say that life would be much brighter when Brendan Murphy, whom I mentioned earlier, was the new Member for Vale of Clwyd.

The hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) made an impassioned plea for her farmers, particularly as a result of the problems of foot and mouth. The hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith) gave us some political knockabout, which tempted me to remind him that the 12.5 per cent. swing recorded last Thursday in a local government by-election in Cowbridge would be sufficient to place Susie Inkin in the House of Commons. I thank the hon. Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan) for a worthy speech, as always, on equal opportunities, but as usual I suspect that her desires will not be shared by the Government.

I shall deal with some of the issues on which the Labour Government will be judged at the general election. The latest figures show the employment rate for the three months to November 2000 at 69.2 per cent., down from 69.6 per cent. over the same period in 1999. The unemployment rate was 6.5 per cent., compared with 7.4 per cent. a year earlier. Unemployment has been falling in Wales for almost a decade, but the rate of job creation and the rate at which unemployment is falling have both slowed under Labour. Unemployment in Wales is still higher than the UK average.

The recent job losses announced by Corus at Llanwern, Ebbw Vale, Shotton and Bryngwyn; by Dairy Crest at Lampeter, Marshfield and Carmarthen; and by Valeo in Gorseinon, all point to a structural problem to which the Government have not yet faced up.

The Government were elected on the slogan, "Education, education, education." The first of their five early pledges in the 1997 manifesto was to

"cut class sizes for five, six and seven year olds to 30 or under, by phasing out the assisted places scheme."

The success of the Government's policy has proved, at best, patchy across Wales.

The percentage of under-fives receiving full-time nursery school education has remained at 1.1 per cent. since 1997. The percentage in part-time nursery classes has increased, but only from 25.8 per cent. to 27.7 per cent.—hardly a realisation of the Government's vision for nursery education.

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Walter: I am conscious of the time, so I am afraid that I will not give way.

The average class size in maintained primary schools has decreased from 26.4 to 25.2 pupils, and pupil-teacher ratios have fallen slightly in primary schools, by 1.1 per cent. However, the effects of cutting class sizes in primary schools can be seen in the statistics for secondary schools, where class sizes have risen in Wales from 20.6 in 1997–98 to 21 in 1999–2000. The pupil-teacher ratio has also risen by 0.2 per cent. That was one of Labour's key pledges before the last election. The Government have failed to deliver on that pledge.

Labour's greatest failure in Wales is its waiting list pledge. It pledged in its manifesto to

"cut waiting lists by treating an extra 100,000 patients as a first step by £100 million saved from NHS red tape."

The latest figures, dated 28 February, for NHS waiting lists in Wales show that the number of Welsh residents waiting for in-patient or day-case treatment has gone up from just over 67,000 in 1997 to 75,000 on 31 January. That represents an 11.5 per cent. increase. The number of patients waiting more than 18 months for in-patient treatment has gone up from 1,402 to 4,818. That is an increase of 243 per cent. However, the worst figure of all

is the number of patients waiting more than six months for their first out-patient appointment—that has risen from 5,956 to 48,506, an increase of more than 700 per cent.

The Conservatives have a series of policies to make Wales prosper. We will review the workings of the National Assembly to ensure that it starts to deliver for the people of Wales, and ensure that Wales continues to have a strong voice at the Cabinet table. We will oppose the plans for a new building for the National Assembly and support agriculture by getting rid of unnecessary regulation. We will cut red tape and bureaucracy in the national health service and set our schools free. The next Conservative Government will deliver for the people of Wales.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): We have had a positive debate, to which 13 contributions have been made by a range of right hon. and hon. Members. My hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) and for Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith), my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael), the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey), my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North (Ms Morgan), my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Mr. Davies), my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd), my hon. Friends the Members for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Mrs. Lawrence) and for Bridgend (Mr. Griffiths), the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) have all contributed.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Newport, West said, this St. David's day debate has provided an opportunity to celebrate the Celtic culture and Wales. I wish only that the hon. Member for Lichfield, who said in an intervention that he had visited Wales recently, had told us more about that visit. I am sure that as well as celebrating St. David's day, we would then have celebrated the advent of a Tory Member of Parliament in Wales, so a description of the visit would have made an interesting contribution.

I thank hon. Members for mentioning Cledwyn Hughes. I know that his death was felt strongly by Labour Members, but I appreciate the comments made by hon. Members from all parties in support of Cledwyn, his achievements and his family. Furthermore, I echo the tributes paid by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth and by the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy to Ian Spratling, who died at the weekend. I was with Ian last Wednesday at the Phoenix centre in Townhill, Swansea. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister opened the centre on Friday. I understand that that was the day of Ian's death, which occurred shortly after the presentation. I met Ian only once, but I was impressed with his work and I echo the comments that have been made.

I welcomed the speech by the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, who said that he was retiring at the general election. I hate to disappoint him, but I remind him that that could be as far as 15 months away. I hope that we will have the opportunity for further Wales day debates in due course, but in case we do not have such an opportunity, I pay tribute to him now for his work in the House. In addition, I pay tribute to any other right hon. or hon. Members who are retiring. I refer especially to Labour Members, several of whom are retiring at the general election.

Mr. Fabricant: Voluntarily?

Mr. Hanson: They are doing so voluntarily.

I remind the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) that as recently as Thursday last week, an opinion poll conducted in Wales showed that Labour had 52 per cent. of support. The Tories had 22 per cent., the nationalists 14 per cent. and the Liberals 10 per cent. I hate to inform the hon. Gentleman that that means that at least 34 Labour Members will be elected at the next general election. I was disappointed by his contribution, which contained no vision and no apology, but merely disappointment. There was nothing about another term for a Conservative Government. All that he said was that many Labour Members and Welsh Members in general would be second class Members of Parliament. Of course, he does not represent a Welsh constituency, and there would be only second class Members of Parliament under a Conservative Government.

Mr. Martyn Jones: Do the percentages to which my hon. Friend referred mean that there will yet again be no Tory Members of Parliament representing Wales?

Mr. Hanson: My hon. Friend is correct; there will be no Tory Members in Wales. However, I suspect that that will have nothing to do with opinion polls, but with, for example, the 2000 spending review and the outstanding settlement for Wales. My hon. Friends have mentioned that, and it is important that I refer to it in a review of the year. An increase in expenditure in Wales from £7 billion to £10 billion by 2003–04 represents a real increase for public services. Many hon. Friends have mentioned that important investment in, for example, health and education.

The hon. Member for North Dorset (Mr. Walter) and the hon. Member for Ribble Valley have complained about waiting lists, education spending and a range of other issues. It is important to ask them where Conservative Members would make cuts if they formed a Government in future. It is no use saying that there are great difficulties without committing expenditure, as the Government are doing, to resolving them. There will be a genuine choice in the election, whenever it happens, between public investment in our public services and reductions in such investment.

Several other key issues were mentioned. For example, my right hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli and my hon. Friends the Members for Bridgend, for Vale of Glamorgan and for Vale of Clwyd referred to unemployment, which has decreased in the 40 constituencies in Wales, thanks to the manufacturing base, the new deal, low inflation and stability.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth said, recorded crime in Wales decreased by more than 10 per cent. in the 12 months ending in September 2000. In that period, it fell by nearly 5 per cent. in Dyfed-Powys, 7.2 per cent. in Gwent, and

[Mr. Hanson]

16.9 per cent. in south Wales. Crime has risen slightly in north Wales, but between May 1997 and September 2000 there were an extra 146 officers on the beat in Wales. That is a genuine investment.

Plaid Cymru Members mentioned Corus, among other matters. I appreciate that they, like Labour Members, have strong feelings about that, and many points have been made about manufacturing. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said on many occasions, a range of difficulties exist, but I ask hon. Members and people outside: who do we trust to handle those problems in future? Would we trust a Government of the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) and the hon. Member for Ribble Valley or that of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor? There is still time for Corus to reconsider its decision. I hope that, in due course, and after pressure from my right hon. Friend, it will do that.

Let us consider the minimum wage. Labour Members welcome today's announcement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry of an increase to £4.10. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend and the hon. Member for Lichfield mentioned the minimum wage. Let us be clear in our St. David's day debate about the reason for the increase to £4.10. My hon. Friends and I voted for it whereas the majority of other hon. Members did not.

As my hon. Friends have mentioned, more than 60,000 people in Wales benefit from the working families tax credit. Pensioners are benefiting from the winter fuel allowance, which my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd mentioned, and we are helping the poorest pensioners in our community.

I am pleased that the hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy welcomed the actions of the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), on miners' compensation. A total of £29 million has been paid—we are aware of the issues that affect compensation recovery, which my hon. Friend and other colleagues are considering.

My hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire and others made important points about foot and mouth disease. The hon. Member for Ceredigion again made a thoughtful contribution about farming and rural affairs. Foot and mouth disease has led to a devastating series of incidents, but I hope that my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Clwyd, for Cynon Valley and for Preseli Pembrokeshire and the hon. Member for Ceredigion will welcome the strong action that the Government have taken to stop livestock movements until at least 16 March to help to contain and eradicate the disease. I hope that hon. Members will also welcome the new scheme to license the movement of animals to abattoirs or to holding centres, and the Government's commitment to provide the full resources of the state veterinary service—some 1,300 strong—to support farmers during this crisis.

I shall certainly look into the point raised by hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire. As she mentioned, more than £150 million worth of agrimonetary compensation has been made available to the beef, sheep and dairy sectors, in addition to the £18 million worth of compulsory agrimonetary compensation that has been made available to support the industry at this difficult time.

Hon. Members will welcome the fact that, to date, some 12 approved red meat abattoirs in Wales have been granted approval to slaughter under the Foot and Mouth Disease (Declaratory Control) (England and Wales) Order of this week, and they are now available to help with animals that need to be slaughtered under licensed control. They range from operations in north Wales—in Corwen, Amlwch, Llanrwst, Machynlleth, Caernarfon and Wrexham—through Powys in mid-Wales to Swansea, Llanelli, Lampeter, and Tregaron, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ceredigion.

Mr. Livsey: Will the Minister inform us as soon as he knows when his right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will come forward with a solution to the problems of moving in-lamb ewes and calving cows to safety? That is a huge problem at the moment in rural Wales.

Mr. Hanson: I shall certainly look into that. I hope that all hon. Members will accept that the Government are taking strong initiatives that are occasionally difficult, and that our purpose is to ensure that we control the spread of foot and mouth disease and give financial support to those who are most affected.

The Government have taken a number of farming initiatives, such as the rural development plan, in conjunction with the National Assembly, the "Farming for the Future" consultation document that the National Assembly has produced, and—to take up the point raised by the hon. Member for Ceredigion—the agrifood partnership that the Assembly has undertaken that will look at action plans for the lamb, beef, dairy and organic sectors. In addition, there is the hill livestock compensatory allowance reform consultation exercise. The Government are, therefore, providing a tremendous amount of support.

We have been at great pains to point out on a number of occasions that the provisions that the Government have introduced, such as the working families tax credit, the minimum wage, child benefit and the children's tax credit are all available to support people in rural areas. That includes rural areas such as Montgomeryshire, where Paul Davies will fight the forthcoming election as the Labour candidate, and my own area, in which we have a proud record on which to work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, North mentioned the success of this Government. By the time we hold the next Welsh day debate, whether that is before or after the election, Wales will have faced a choice. That choice is between a Government committed to further investment in people and services and a Conservative party led by the right hon. Member for Richmond, Yorks that is committed to £16 billion worth of cuts. That is £24 million worth of cuts in each constituency, from Vale of Clwyd to Vale of Glamorgan: cuts in public services, policing, education and the health service.

Wales will also have faced a choice between a positive role in Europe and five years of isolation, and a choice between hon. Members who have a full role to play in this House and part-time Members who would not be full Members of the House under a Conservative Government.

The choice is between extending the new deal in a caring society with social justice, or scrapping it. Those are choices for Wales. There is also a choice between the Government's policies and the isolationism and lack of British Government investment that a nationalist party would bring to Wales. I say to this country and to Wales that the Government have a proud record, and my right hon. and hon. Friends have a strong record to defend. They will defend it, and when they do, last Thursday's opinion polls will be proved correct.

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [28 February],

That the Motions in the name of Mr. Secretary Straw relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if they related to instruments subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) in respect of which notice has been given that the instruments be approved.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LANGUAGE OF PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

Resolved,

That—

(1) this House approves the First Report from the Procedure Committee, Session 2000-01 (HC 47); and

(2) the Resolution of 5th June 1996 on the Language of Parliamentary Proceedings be amended accordingly by inserting, after the word 'Wales,', the words 'and at Westminster in respect of Select Committees'.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Ian Pearson be discharged from the Education and Employment Committee and Mr. Kerry Pollard be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley.]*

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. John McFall be discharged from the Public Administration Committee and Mr. David Lammy be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Keith Bradley.]*

Abandoned Vehicles

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Touhig.]*

10 pm

Jane Griffiths (Reading, East): I am grateful for the opportunity to draw attention to the problems caused by abandoned vehicles, which are becoming particularly acute in Reading and in many other places. I have initiated the debate because those problems and the number of abandoned vehicles are on the increase in Reading and Woodley. More than 2,000 suspected abandoned cars have been reported to the council in the past nine months alone—up 60 per cent. on the previous year.

A sign of the magnitude of the problem is this week's launch of the "Enough is enough" campaign by my local weekly newspaper, the *Reading Chronicle*. In an excellent article on the problem, which I commend to my hon. Friend the Minister, it said:

"The familiar sight of burnt out or smashed cars is ruining Reading's image as an aspiring city. They make our roads dangerous and are a magnet for vandals and thieves."

There is also a serious problem with untaxed cars. Between 1 October and 31 December last year, Reading magistrates, who cover a different area from the borough council, heard 245 cases of using a vehicle without an excise licence. The problems of abandoned and untaxed cars should be treated no differently from any other waste problems: if vehicles are not where they should be, they are rubbish and should be removed.

We know the cause of the epidemic. The decline in the scrap value of cars means that it costs people to have a vehicle taken away. That has resulted in cars being left on the street or being taken somewhere quiet to be dumped. Some abandoned cars are the consequence of joyriding and are torched to remove the evidence of who was involved in the theft.

I have personal experience of the problem of abandoned vehicles, as there has been a van outside my constituency office for more than six weeks. It has had a "police aware" sticker on it for most of that time and pieces of it are being removed every day. It has also become a magnet for children who attack it, smash its windows and cover it in graffiti. The bulk of the damage was done in school half-term week and the dangers to children presented by such activity should be obvious to all.

There is evidence that an unscrupulous garage owner is dumping vehicles on the streets of the constituency of my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter). I believe that there is a public meeting in the area tonight, which was called by a constituent of mine who is a councillor there. Councillor Askar Sheibani has done sterling work against the scourge of abandoned vehicles in Southcote. However, it is an uphill struggle.

A case in Whitley, which is in my constituency of Reading, East, concerns Mr. Clifford of 113, Blagdon road. This man, who is believed to be secretary of the local Hell's Angels chapter, has made his neighbours' lives a misery for almost 20 years. He has kept tens of cars on the street as part of a vehicle breaking business that he runs. In 1998, a neighbour of his complained to me of the 30 or more vehicles that had been outside Mr. Clifford's house and on the highway for eight years. Contractors in the Reading area have all been threatened by Mr. Clifford and refuse to take the abandoned vehicles away. No one would call that a lawless area.

The late Councillor Maureen Lockey worked hard to get something done about the problem, but to no avail. I know that Councillors Wilf Wild and Chris Goodall have worked hard, and still are doing so, to get action taken to end this nuisance for local, law-abiding residents.

I had further discussions with residents about the problem in Blagdon road on the day of last year's by-election, which saw the election of Councillor Christine Grieve. Since her election, she has also been working hard to try to tackle the problem, but has come up against the same brick wall. This morning, I received a copy of a letter to a resident in Blagdon road from Councillor Grieve, and was delighted to read:

"I have now received a reply"—

from the chief executive of Reading borough council—

"in which it is suggested that the residents near to number 113 need only be patient for a little longer, as negotiations between the different agencies are well advanced."

I am pleased that Mr. Clifford has been successfully prosecuted by the council's planning enforcement officers for running a business from a residential property. Like local residents, I look forward to the day when negotiations between the different agencies are complete and action is taken to remove the rubbish from his garden and the untaxed vehicles in various states of destruction from the public highway in Blagdon road.

Those are extreme examples of the problems caused by abandoned and untaxed vehicles, but such problems are everywhere. Putting those extreme examples aside, what is the nature of the problem, what remedies are there and what can be done to improve the process of removal of abandoned vehicles? Reading borough council expects to have received 2,800 reports of abandoned vehicles in the year to 31 March 2001, which is a 60 per cent. increase on the previous year. This year, £9,309 has been spent removing abandoned vehicles against a budget of £3,000. It is expected that the full-year cost will have doubled since last year. Those figures take no account of the cost of the housing officers and environmental maintenance inspectors who spot, report and attach notices to the vehicles. Two full-time posts are devoted to abandoned vehicles, and the administrative overheads amount to £36,000.

The problem is also increasing in the Woodley and Earley parts of the Wokingham district that I represent, although the scale of the problem in Wokingham district is not as large as it is in Reading. From 1 April, Reading borough council will introduce a carrot and stick approach. For the cost of its removal, a vehicle will be taken away and disposed of. On council-owned land, the council will use its power as a landowner to remove abandoned vehicles, with a seven-day wreckers' notice speeding up the removal of the vehicles. The council will also charge the last registered owner for the removal, and it now has a link to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency computer to speed up the identification of the last registered owner.

One problem experienced when trying to deal with abandoned cars is that people do not pass on registration documents at the point of sale. The details of up to 80 per cent. of abandoned vehicles have not been passed on to the DVLA. I am indebted to my hon. Friend the Member

for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) for that information. I welcome the measures in the Vehicles (Crime) Bill that will make it an offence, punishable by fine, not to pass on a registration document, so it will be easier to track the registered owner of a vehicle.

The problem with untaxed vehicles remains. The manager of the Reading office of the DVLA has no field staff, and has the smallest enforcement team in the whole southern region. The enforcement team is entirely office based. Thames Valley police, together with the DVLA, have begun a clampdown on untaxed vehicles in Reading. They had an advertising blitz telling people to license their vehicles, and aim to step up enforcement shortly.

This morning, I was holding my regular surgery at the Whitley advice shop near to Blagdon road. I was pleased to receive a copy of the *Surveyor* of 22 February from Celia, who works in the advice shop and had read about this debate in the local papers. The article in *Surveyor* outlines a scheme in Lewisham whereby the council has the powers of the DVLA to remove untaxed vehicles as if they were abandoned. People must then pay to get their vehicles back.

The magazine goes on to say:

"The new measures will send a clear message to an anti-social minority of motorists that the public highway cannot be regarded as a convenient dumping-ground for their scrap metal.

And with parking spaces in short supply, it will free up capacity for the law-abiding majority who understand that using a car is a privilege that must be paid for."

I entirely agree with those sentiments.

Reading borough council has now taken on parking enforcement. It is starting to make a real difference, with people being caught and fined for parking illegally. It is the first time in a long while that that has happened. I am pleased that the introduction of decriminalised parking enforcement in Reading is proving to be such a success, but it would be even better if Reading could also be allowed to pilot the Lewisham scheme, freeing more space for people to park legitimately and allowing the rubbish of abandoned vehicles to be removed from our streets even more quickly.

There is also the problem of removing abandoned and untaxed cars from private land. Reading borough council is working towards a concordat with private landowners in the area, allowing the removal of such abandoned and untaxed vehicles.

What can be done for the future? As I said earlier, I do not see why cars should be any different from anything else: if they are not where they should be, they are rubbish and should be removed. In the short term, the agencies involved could work together even more closely. I have already asked for a scheme like the one in Lewisham to be introduced in Reading; there is another pilot scheme in Kent, where untaxed vehicles are clamped and, if not taxed within a day, are removed and disposed of.

The figures in the Disposal of Vehicles Regulations 1986 are weighted in favour of vehicle owners. The penalties that a local authority can impose on the owner of an abandoned vehicle should be increased to cover at least the cost of removal and destruction. After all, why should the community pay through its taxes for the anti-social behaviour of a few? I favour an increase providing for penalisation of people who dump vehicles.

In the longer term, dealing with abandoned or untaxed vehicles should become the province of one authority, with power to remove abandoned vehicles swiftly, to charge for removal and to impose a penalty. An opportunity to introduce such a proposal is provided by the European Union end-of-life vehicle directive, which states that manufacturers of vehicles must meet all or a significant part of the costs involved in establishing and operating a vehicle disposal system under which last owners may dispose of their vehicles free of charge. I hope that the introduction of such a scheme will lead to a reduction in the number of abandoned vehicles; however, I believe that any scheme introduced under the EU directive must still allow for people abandoning vehicles, and for people not taxing their vehicles.

As the DVLA in Reading has not the enforcement capability on the streets to deal with the problem in Reading, I would like the councils that cover Reading and Woodley to be given powers to remove untaxed and abandoned vehicles. I also believe that the last owner of a vehicle should be made to pay the cost of such a service: I do not see why council tax payers should deal with other people's anti-social behaviour.

I end by returning to where I began. Enough is enough. The anti-social minority abandoning vehicles, or not taxing vehicles, is on the rise in Reading and Woodley; Reading borough council and Wokingham district council are starting to do something about the problem, but there are things that could be done to speed up and clarify the process for removing this rubbish from our streets. I hope the Minister will give serious thought to the ideas that I have suggested in relation to the disposal of vehicles regulations, allowing Reading borough council to trial a pilot similar to those in Kent and Lewisham, and the implementation of regulations implementing the EU end-of-life directive.

I am grateful for the chance to raise an issue that is so important to my constituents. I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend's reply.

10.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) on securing the debate and on choosing this topic, which is of concern in many parts of the country. As she says, abandoned vehicles are a major headache for Reading borough council. I understand that since April last year it has had more than 2,000 cases, and is now proposing action.

My hon. Friend may be interested to know that while I was preparing for the debate it came to my attention that other hon. Friends are equally concerned and are taking action. Indeed, only last Friday, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen) called a summit in the city of Nottingham to try to make the action proposed there more effective.

Abandoned vehicles are a problem for many local authorities in England. All too often, vehicles are abandoned in residential streets, become an eyesore and attract the attention of vandals. That is a serious problem. The police also have to get involved where abandoned vehicles are dangerous to members of the public, as they often will be if they are left for a long time. As my hon. Friend said, local authorities often have difficulty in tracing the last known keeper of a vehicle. The problems are being accentuated by the falling price of scrap metal.

May I tell my hon. Friend what powers are available? Local authorities have a duty under section 3(1) of the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978 to remove any

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

vehicle that has been abandoned on any land in the open air, or on any other land forming part of a highway in their area. The maximum penalty for abandoning a vehicle is a fine of £2,500, three months' imprisonment or both. Local authorities and the Environment Agency have additional powers under section 59 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 to effect the removal of abandoned vehicles and to recover the costs from those responsible. In addition to that duty, local authorities have to deal with vehicles abandoned on private land.

In all instances, before it can remove a vehicle, the local authority must ensure that it has made every effort to trace the owner and can demonstrate that it has done so. That is done by fixing a warning notice to the vehicle for a specified number of days. The period of notification will depend on whether the vehicle has been abandoned on the highway or on private land. After that statutory notification period has elapsed and any representations have been considered, the local authority can remove the vehicle.

There are certain circumstances in which the police, under the Removal and Disposal of Vehicles Regulations 1986, can remove a vehicle. Those are: where a vehicle is left in breach of local traffic regulation orders, is causing an obstruction, or is likely to cause danger and is broken down or abandoned without lawful authority. If a vehicle to which a warning notice has been attached deteriorates to such an extent that it becomes a danger to the public, the council can ask the police to remove the vehicle immediately.

I am aware that there are a number of difficulties for local authorities when dealing with abandoned vehicles. I have already mentioned the difficulty of tracking down the last known keeper of the vehicle. Suggestions have been made, including by my hon. Friend, that the person shown on the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's database as the current keeper should be held responsible for the removal and storage costs when the vehicle is abandoned. Others have suggested that the various notice periods need to be shorter, so that the vehicles are not left on the road for so long. We are actively considering those suggestions as part of a review of legislation covering abandoned vehicles, and will consider what action needs to be taken, which might include primary legislation.

The DVLA is responsible for unlicensed vehicles but not for abandoned vehicles. The agency operates a nationwide scheme to wheelclamp and to impound unlicensed vehicles to tackle the problem of vehicle excise duty evasion. To date, about 53,000 vehicles have been clamped or impounded and about half have been disposed of, mainly by crushing.

The scheme is very successful and has already encouraged more than 333,000 extra motorists to relicense voluntarily, bringing in more than £39 million in additional revenue. The police are supportive, as they recognise that such evaders are frequently also committing other road traffic offences. I raise that issue because, as my hon. Friend herself has recognised, there is a strong link between unlicensed and abandoned vehicles.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Will the Minister follow up the request from the hon. Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths) and say whether she is prepared to extend to local authorities the DVLA's powers to remove untaxed vehicles, so that untaxed vehicles—which are often abandoned—can be removed without delay? In my constituency of Kingston and Surbiton, my constituents are being adversely affected by the problem of untaxed and abandoned vehicles. I think that strengthening the law as the hon. Member for Reading, East suggests would go some way towards enabling the local authority to tackle the problem without delay.

Ms Hughes: As I said, we are considering various suggestions to deal specifically with abandoned vehicles, and the DVLA scheme to deal with unlicensed vehicles is very successful. Moreover, local authorities already have powers to remove abandoned vehicles after going through the current process. I accept that that process can sometimes take an unacceptably long time for local residents, but I am not convinced that simply giving the powers currently held by the DVLA to local authorities will address that issue effectively. Various considerations have to be balanced. I think that vehicle owners have the right to expect an attempt to be made to find a solution. The question is how long we should allow that process to continue. There are some difficulties, but, as I said, we are examining them.

A number of pilot schemes are being run, demonstrating the agency's willingness to operate in a joined-up manner with other agencies to counteract the problem of unlicensed and abandoned vehicles. The first of the schemes began in Kent on 22 January, and involves the agency joining forces with Kent police, Kent county council, Medway borough council and Kent fire service. The agency's wheelclamping contractor will for the first time target abandoned vehicles under the 1978 Act, as well as wheelclamping unlicensed vehicles. That is perhaps another way of addressing the issue that the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) raised.

We shall examine the results of that pilot, which will run for two months in the Medway towns and be jointly funded. If it is successful, we hope to establish a permanent operation to cover the whole of Kent. Results to date have been very encouraging, with large numbers of vehicles removed. A full analysis will be completed shortly.

The second initiative involves two London boroughs—Lewisham and Newham—which will use their own contractors to target unlicensed vehicles under the agency's wheelclamping regulations. They understand that wheelclamping for tax evasion is unlikely to be self-funding, but recognise that the operation could bring with it economies of scale. They will be able to retain the release fees and storage fees. The Newham pilot will start on 2 April, with Lewisham following shortly afterwards. Both will run for 12 months. Both councils will utilise their existing compounds, which are currently used for abandoned vehicles, to store the unlicensed vehicles during the pilot.

Those three pilot projects comprise the first action that we are considering and taking. Additionally, the Local Government Association has established a working group—in which the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the DVLA and the Association of Chief Police Officers are included—to examine the problem. Apart from data gathering, the group's main aims are to suggest improvements to the current

arrangements and to disseminate examples of good practice. Last year, the LGA conducted a survey on the scale of the problem, how it was being managed locally and the operating costs involved. The work of that group will feed into my Department's current deliberations.

Furthermore, the Institute of Wastes Management has established a working group on abandoned and end-of-life vehicles, to examine the problems caused by abandoned vehicles in the local environment and some of the technical issues of best practice in disposal.

Abandoned vehicles are often associated with so-called joyriders. We appreciate the problems that joyriders cause and, as my hon. Friend said, we are introducing measures to help to combat them under the Vehicles (Crime) Bill, which is currently going through Parliament. Under the Bill, the time limit for prosecuting a person for taking a car without authority will be extended from six months to three years, although to ensure that proceedings are not unnecessarily delayed, a prosecution must be brought within six months of evidence becoming available. The impact will be to allow the police to make greater use of DNA and new technology and bring more people who commit that offence to justice.

As my hon. Friend knows, measures will be introduced under the Bill to regulate the motor salvage industry and to require businesses to keep records of transactions. Nothing in the Bill will make it an offence for a motor salvage operator to sell a vehicle to someone who is under 18, but it is, of course, already an offence for a person who is under 17 to drive a car. Under the new provisions, the police will be able to trace the driver more easily, as the records kept by salvage operators will give details of the person who bought the vehicle.

In addition, it will be compulsory under the Bill for any previously written-off vehicles to have an identity check before they are allowed back on the road. That is primarily intended to ensure that the vehicle is the one that it is purported it to be, not a disguised stolen car. However, owners will be made aware that their vehicles have been previously written off and will be encouraged to check that they are roadworthy.

Clearly, the European directive on end-of-life vehicles, which my hon. Friend also mentioned, may contribute to a reduction in the number of abandoned vehicles in the United Kingdom, and we are now focusing on how it can be implemented to achieve that aim. The directive is due to be implemented in the United Kingdom by spring next year, and requires member states to introduce legislation to allow last owners to deliver their vehicles to an authorised treatment facility free of charge. That requirement must be introduced by July 2002 for vehicles put on the market from that date, and by January 2007 for all vehicles on the road. However, we have the option to introduce free take-back for all vehicles from 2002, and we are carefully considering whether we could do so, because it would clearly help to reduce the number of abandoned vehicles substantially. In addition, the directive requires systems to be set up for the collection of all end-of-life vehicles, with adequate availability of such facilities across the United Kingdom.

A system of so-called bounty payments to the last holders of end-of-life vehicles—another possible option—could be funded by a charge on new car purchases or by an increased annual excise duty. That could also reduce the number of abandoned vehicles. Some EU member states already operate such systems, which obviously provide a direct financial incentive for end-of-life vehicles to be handed in. That would also ensure that all vehicles were sent for reuse, recovery and recycling, thus contributing to the targets set out in the directive.

Mr. Davey: The Minister is talking about the resources that might become available to deal with the problem. I am sure that she is aware that local authorities—whether in Reading or in Kingston—want to tackle the problem, and they need resources to ensure that they have the necessary full-time officials to track down the abandoned vehicles, to liaise with the DVLA and to ensure that those vehicles are taken off the streets. Will she consider that matter as part of the resource analysis that the Department is undertaking?

Ms Hughes: I am certainly not going to put on my other hat and be drawn into a discussion of the local government settlement. I remind the hon. Gentleman of the very significant increases that all local authorities have received from the Government during the previous three years, and will receive in the forthcoming three years as a result of the spending review. Although I recognise that such problems involve spending pressures, all local authorities have pressures of one kind or another, and they must decide how to spend their money. The best help that we can give them is to facilitate the process as much as we can by changing the legislation or the procedures so that they are not so lengthy and time-consuming. I accept the main point that the hon. Gentleman makes—that for local authorities to undertake extensive searches for owners while the vehicles are still on the streets certainly not only takes a long time, but involves local authority resources, which are all too precious.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 6 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*
Order for consideration, as amended, read.
To be considered on Tuesday 13 March.

MEDWAY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*
Order for consideration, as amended, read.
To be considered on Tuesday 13 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Ministerial Correspondence

1. **Mr. Robert Syms** (Poole): If she will make a statement on recent correspondence between her Department and the Irish Prime Minister's Office. [150733]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Helen Liddell): I wrote to the Taoiseach on 28 February to confirm my conversation with him and to invite him to make an official visit to Scotland as a guest of the First Minister and myself.

Mr. Syms: The Carfin affair has caused great embarrassment north and south of the border. Is it too much to hope for a full statement on the matter and, indeed, an apology?

Mrs. Liddell: I doubt whether the hon. Gentleman even knows where Carfin is. However, may I point out that the Taoiseach and I had a conversation? He knows that no offence was intended, and he took none. He will come to Scotland at an appropriate time to unveil the memorial at Carfin grotto.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Will the Secretary of State pay tribute to the interparliamentary body that is working hard on strand 3 of the peace agreement? Will she acknowledge that five Members of the Scottish Parliament have been accepted as full members of that body? Will she ensure that she gives it full support, recognising that we are building bridges and bringing hope? Anyone from the Dail and the Northern Ireland Assembly will be given a warm welcome in Scotland, whenever they come.

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Lady makes a good point. All of us in Scotland are conscious of the fact that the peace process in Northern Ireland is at a difficult stage. Our hopes and good wishes are with Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Dail and our own Scottish Parliament and, indeed, with the Prime Minister, who will have discussions on those matters in the next few days. The hon. Lady made a much more appropriate comment on the situation than the hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms).

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Will the right hon. Lady explain why, if no offence was given to the Taoiseach and this is not a diplomatic incident, her Parliamentary Private Secretary, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Mr. Roy) resigned?

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend resigned because he is a man of honour who did not wish to cause continued distress to his family. Opposition Members' activities in trying to make political capital out of the matter are disgraceful. Those of us who know Carfin know its history. It was built by miners from Scottish communities, and from Poland and Lithuania, during the great depression; it is a sign of their working together to create employment for themselves and in recognition of the Church that they supported. My hon. Friend supports those miners and will continue to do so.

Mrs. Browning: I am trying to establish what responsibility the Secretary of State and the Government take for foreign affairs and relations with other countries—relations that concern Scotland. Under the Government's proposals, and if Labour wins the general election, would not the right hon. Lady be the last Secretary of State with responsibility for Scotland? The roles of the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Northern Ireland and for Wales, and responsibility for the English regions, would be rolled into one Cabinet post. Having seen the mess created by the Secretary of State's PPS, what hope do we have that relations with foreign countries will be any better when there is no longer a dedicated Secretary of State for Scotland in the Cabinet?

Mrs. Liddell: I find it interesting that the official Opposition could not even put forward the shadow Secretary of State today.

Mrs. Browning: I am the shadow Secretary of State.

Mrs. Liddell: Oh, the hon. Lady is now in that position. There has been another change—a further sign that the Opposition cannot even put up a Scottish Member as shadow Secretary of State. I note that the Leader of the Opposition is suggesting that he would retain the post of Secretary of State for Scotland and that that post should be filled by a Member representing a Scottish constituency. I therefore say to the hon. Lady: win one.

Drugs

2. **Mrs. Irene Adams** (Paisley, North): What recent discussions she has had with the First Minister concerning the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [150734]

6. **Mrs. Ann Winterton** (Congleton): What recent discussions she has had with the First Minister concerning the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [150739]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes): My right hon. Friend regularly meets the First Minister to discuss a range of topics, including the Government's anti-drugs strategy.

Mrs. Adams: Does my hon. Friend agree that legalisation of any drug, other than for medical purposes, would be absolute folly? Will he join me in stating publicly that he will march against drugs on 1 April, shoulder to shoulder with *Daily Record* readers?

Mr. Foulkes: My hon. Friend is right on both counts. Some people are trying to denigrate the march on 1 April, but I think that the *Daily Record* deserves nothing but praise for organising a march that will focus attention on the menace of drugs and the terrible toll—*[Laughter.]* Opposition Members are laughing. The menace of drugs takes a terrible toll in death, illness and crime. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is out of order. He knows that he is out of order.

Mr. Foulkes: The right hon. Gentleman is out of order in more ways than one.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will be on the march, and we hope that as many hon. Friends as possible will join us. If Opposition Members can find their way to Glasgow, they are welcome to join us, too.

Mrs. Winterton: What discussions has the Minister had with the First Minister about setting up in Scotland United States-style drugs courts, which aim to bring together enforcement and treatment and to take people out of a life of criminality? Bearing in mind that almost 70 per cent. of offenders use drugs illegally, and that in Scotland up to 90 per cent. of those released from prison go on to reoffend, does the Minister agree that the matter is of the utmost urgency? Will he consider ensuring that those who push drugs are not released early from prison?

Mr. Foulkes: I am glad that the hon. Lady, unlike some of her right hon. and hon. Friends, is treating the matter seriously. The First Minister has met Mr. Hellawell, who is in charge of drugs policy in the United Kingdom as a whole, as well as the Cabinet Officer Minister responsible for drugs policy. An announcement has been made about drugs courts, and we will take account of the points that the hon. Lady has sensibly made.

Mr. David Marshall (Glasgow, Shettleston): May I, too, congratulate the *Daily Record* on organising such a relevant march on 1 April, and say how pleasant it is that so many hon. Members will participate in it? Will my hon. Friend outline the recent measures announced by the Government to seize the ill-gotten assets of people who traffic in drugs? That seems to be one of the best ways of tackling the problem and getting rid of the insidious evil in our midst.

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend; he is right. The Government are taking strong measures to deal with that menace and other profits from crime, to ensure that they are taken into custody. I commend the initiative of my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) in proposing the setting up of a register of serious drug dealers. I know from my constituency the tragedy and appalling waste of life and talent involved. We are working with the Scottish Executive on their drugs action plans to deal with the availability of drugs, the treatment of addicts, the education of young people and, above all, the provision of community support for people who take drugs. The police have an extremely important part to play in that.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Unusually, I commend the hon. Member for Paisley, North (Mrs. Adams) for her courageous work against drugs over many years. I find some of the Minister's remarks perfectly reasonable—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry if that is offensive to him. On the matter of drugs, as on other important policy matters, what steps does the Scotland Office intend to take to ensure that, during any forthcoming general election campaign, announcements will not be made by the Scottish Executive that could be construed as using public funds to help Labour candidates or their partners in coalition, the Liberal Democrats?

Mr. Foulkes: I thank the hon. Lady for her nice remarks, and congratulate her on her recent good news. We all wish her well, and our thoughts will be with her over the next few months.

Every year, the Scottish Executive spend more than £250 million dealing with sickness, absenteeism and crime caused by the awful problem of drugs. It would be ludicrous to put that work on hold and to stop any announcement just because of a United Kingdom general election. If there is any announcement to be made or any work to be done, it should be made and it should be done.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the police in my constituency, as well as the partners who work with them, on reducing crime by 20 per cent? This morning, I spoke to the sub-divisional commander, who told me that he estimates that about 80 per cent. of crimes involving dishonesty, including car thefts, relate to the misuse of drugs. Does my hon. Friend agree that to break that connection we need a long-term strategy that does two things? First, through legislation that can be passed in this Parliament, the strategy should target the dealers. Secondly, and in partnership, it should deal with drug users by imposing a structure on their lives that will lead them out of their habit. Orders to achieve that aim could be imposed by the drugs courts introduced by the Scottish Executive.

Mr. Foulkes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, whom I congratulated earlier on his initiative to establish a register of serious drugs dealers. It would be too much to

congratulate him again. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] All right; why not? His work certainly deserves underlining. He is absolutely right that the police play a very important role, and has been discussing the matter with them. Indeed, all Scottish Members are concerned and have been speaking to the local police. Many have also been involved in local community activity to try to wipe out the drugs menace. It is increasingly appalling, if not embarrassing, that Opposition Members treat with such levity a problem that has killed hundreds of people every year in Scotland. I think that the people of Scotland will have noted that.

Barnett Formula

3. **Mr. Michael Fallon** (Sevenoaks): What recent discussions she has had with Treasury Ministers about the operation of the Barnett formula. [150735]

The Minister of State, Scotland Office (Mr. George Foulkes): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have regular discussions with Treasury Ministers about a range of matters. The Barnett formula continues to provide a fair deal for Scotland within the United Kingdom and we have no plans to change it.

Mr. Fallon: Now that education and health spending are at least 25 per cent. higher per capita in Scotland than in England, and as that difference is paid for through the formula mainly by taxpayers in England, would not it be reasonable to invite the Scottish Parliament to use its tax-raising powers to enable Scottish decisions on higher teachers' pay or free nursing care, which it is fully entitled to take, to be financed with enthusiasm and integrity by Scottish taxpayers?

Mr. Foulkes: I do not think that the hon. Gentleman understands the question. The spending allocations in Scotland were originally based on a needs assessment. The Barnett formula allocates the increases each year according to population, so they are updated annually as the population changes north and south of the border. I have been considering his constituency, which has an unemployment rate of 1.5 per cent. My constituency has an unemployment rate of 6.6 per cent.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Blame the MP!

Mr. Foulkes: The hon. Gentleman says "Blame the MP"; I thought that he was going to say "Blame the Government". I suppose that it is the same thing.

Although the rate has been reduced by a third since Labour came to power, it is still 6.6 per cent., which is more than four times that in the constituency of the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon). All the other indicators there are better than those in my constituency, too, which suggests that Scotland still has needs that do not exist in his part of England. Some parts of England will be receiving higher per capita expenditure than Scotland, however, as they also have substantial needs.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Does my hon. Friend agree that those who seek to abolish the Barnett formula are doing Scotland a great disservice? Will he speculate on their motive for doing so?

Mr. Foulkes: I do not think that such people can be motivated by a desire for re-election in Scotland, which has clearly been abandoned by the Conservatives. Sometimes, Opposition Members say that the decisions taken by the Scottish Executive, who have a finite budget, create preferential treatment north of the border. Devolution means that they decide their own priorities. If they choose to spend more on one area, it means that less will be spent on another area. However, that spending is in the context of the fastest increasing budget in living memory north and south of the border. By 2003, the Scottish Executive will have £3.4 billion extra to spend because of a Labour Government, and they will spend it according to the priorities decided in Scotland.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): Will the Minister concede that, year on year, the Barnett formula reduces the percentage of Government expenditure in Scotland? Despite that, the Government surplus of revenue from, against expenditure in, Scotland in the next couple of years will be approximately £7.7 billion, which should help to subsidise some Members and their constituents.

Mr. Foulkes: I find this a bit strange. The Tories from the leafy suburbs in the south-east claim that the settlement is too generous, while the nationalists whinge as usual and say that it is not generous enough. That suggests that it is about right.

It is good to see the hon. Gentleman in the Chamber. I am glad that we have fine weather for his day trip to London. I have here the Scottish National party's voting record in the House of Commons; it is appalling. There is one consolation: it is not the worst, simply the second worst after that of Sinn Fein.

Mr. Michael Connarty (Falkirk, East): Will my hon. Friend assure us that the Barnett formula will be the prime method of calculating spending in Scotland, and that he will oppose the statements of Sir Malcolm Rifkind, who said that the Tories could not guarantee maintaining spending in Scotland and that there were

"several areas of spending the Tories would like to see cut"?

Will my hon. Friend assure us that during the election campaign we will defend the Barnett formula against such an assault by the Conservatives?

Mr. Foulkes: As I said earlier, the Barnett formula is fair; it does not squeeze, but continues to provide a fair expenditure allocation to Scotland, based on need. Not only the Barnett formula but the Labour Government's huge increases in expenditure across the board benefit Scotland and, indeed, the rest of the United Kingdom.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Does not the Minister realise that spending increases in the past two years have been to make up for the massive cuts in the first two years of the Government's tenure? At the end of their term of office, the percentage of gross domestic product that is spent on public services will be less than that under the Conservatives. The Barnett formula determines the amount of money that is available for investing in public services in Scotland. When the Minister discusses it with Treasury Ministers, does he

appreciate that, in tomorrow's Budget, the Chancellor should put such investment before tax bribes for the election?

Mr. Foulkes: The Chancellor has put investment in public services at the top of the agenda. The Government have provided four times the increase in education expenditure that the Liberal Democrats requested. Whenever the election takes place, voting for the Liberal Democrats or the nationalists in Scotland will be one way of returning a Tory Government—

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): My hon. Friend defeated a Tory.

Mr. Foulkes: Who can tell the difference between him and a Tory? A Tory Government would not be committed to increases in public spending.

Rail Franchise

5. **Mr. Brian H. Donohoe** (Cunninghame, South): If she will expedite the awarding of the Scottish rail franchise. [150737]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mrs. Helen Liddell): The current franchise agreement ends in March 2004. Public consultation on the priorities for rail services in Scotland ended on 28 February, and Scottish Executive Ministers will take account of that in the directions and guidance put to the Strategic Rail Authority for the Scottish passenger rail franchise.

Mr. Donohoe: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. However, she will know that awarding the contract for the new franchise to ScotRail has been delayed. That affects its ability to place new rolling stock orders. Will she make further representations to facilitate the process and thus enable the Scottish travelling public to travel on trains that have seats for everyone?

Mrs. Liddell: I know of my hon. Friend's interest in the matter. The Scottish Executive have been anxious to concentrate on getting the process right rather than on speed. However, I will make sure that my hon. Friend's representations are made available to the Scottish Executive, and I am sure that they will take them into account.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that in Aberdeen and the north-east of Scotland the need for that matter to be resolved is urgent? Recent developments of traffic problems around Aberdeen demonstrate that we need an upgrading of the service between Aberdeen and Inverness, and investment in a commuter service between Inverurie, Stonehaven and points further north and south. The sooner the matter can be resolved, the sooner we will be able to secure the investment that will deal with the traffic problems and congestion.

Mrs. Liddell: I am aware of the hon. Gentleman's concerns, and I understand them. The problem is a consequence of many years of underinvestment in our railway network, and the Scottish Executive will take that into account when they roll out their plans for the rail network in Scotland.

ADVOCATE–GENERAL

The Advocate-General was asked—

Devolution

24. **Mr. Malcolm Savidge** (Aberdeen, North): If she will make a statement on the number and types of devolution issue cases that have been intimated to her. [150758]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): As at the end of February, more than 1,200 devolution issues have been intimated to me. The vast majority have focused on the right to a fair trial, which is enshrined in article 6 of the European convention on human rights. Some of the matters raised include delay and the question of a trial within a reasonable time; the right to an independent and impartial tribunal; prejudicial pre-trial publicity; cases under the Road Traffic Acts concerning the presumption of innocence; and legal aid questions. Devolution issues concerning convention rights other than those in article 6 have also been raised.

Mr. Savidge: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that response. Will she tell the House which cases have been referred to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council?

The Advocate-General: So far, seven cases have been referred. They are Brown, the drink-driving case; Montgomery, the pre-trial publicity case; McIntosh, the case relating to the confiscation of criminal assets; McLean, the case involving fixed legal aid fees; Anderson, the mental health case; the temporary sheriffs case; and the district court challenges.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the Advocate-General tell us whether any case has been referred to her on the issue of devolution, particularly on the constitutionality of an electoral system that allows the Labour party, which came first in the elections to the Scottish Parliament, to share power with the Liberal Democrat party, which came a poor fourth?

The Advocate-General: Under the Scotland Act 1998, any member of the public who is litigating is entitled to raise a devolution issue if they can plead themselves into the Act. I have not noticed the Conservatives in Scotland making such a plea, but if they do, I will consider it.

McIntosh Case

25. **Mrs. Rosemary McKenna** (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): What advice she has given on the implications of the Privy Council decision in the case of McIntosh. [150761]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): I give advice to various Departments on various matters. In relation to the McIntosh case, which concerned a confiscation order following conviction for a serious drugs offence, I presented arguments to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in January. On 5 February, their lordships delivered their judgment and decided that the current legislation was compatible with the European convention on human rights.

Mrs. McKenna: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that answer. Does she agree that that is an important decision for human rights legislation and particularly for the campaign against drugs in the whole of the United Kingdom? Will she advise the House of the main arguments advanced in the case?

The Advocate-General: I considered the case an important one. It was a challenge to the statutory scheme that succeeded at first instance and had implications for the rest of the United Kingdom, where similar legislation exists. The main arguments, which were advanced over about two days in the Judicial Committee, were that the presumption of innocence in article 6(2) of the convention did not apply to the making of a confiscation order following conviction, and that, even if it did, the statutory assumptions were within the reasonable limits permitted and, therefore, lawful. It took us a considerable time to develop those rather basic arguments, but the judgment is now available if anyone would like to examine it in detail.

Criminal Justice and Police Bill

26. **Mr. Desmond Browne** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): What assessment she has made of the human rights implications of the new powers of seizure and for the disclosure of information proposed by the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. [150762]

The Advocate-General for Scotland (Dr. Lynda Clark): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has made a statement of compatibility under section 19(1)(a) of the Human Rights Act 1998 confirming that, in his view, the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill are compatible with the convention rights.

Mr. Browne: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for reminding me of that. I am aware that when the requirement for information to be disclosed under the Bill lies in the hands of a public authority, article 8 of the convention will protect an individual's privacy. However, when the information lies in the hands of a private person or private body, how will an individual obtain protection for his or her right to privacy under the Bill?

The Advocate-General: It will be a matter for the courts to perform the balancing exercise required, taking into account the provisions of the Human Rights Act and, of course, the statutory regime under the Data Protection Act 1998, which gives certain protections to the individual.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Does not the Advocate-General think that it is a disgrace that those provisions, like many others before the Committee considering the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, will not be considered in detail simply because of the appalling programme motion that the Government have inflicted on the House?

The Advocate-General: If there were less filibustering and more focused argument, the provisions could be considered.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Parliamentary Secretary was asked—

Crown Courts

27. **Mr. David Ruffley** (Bury St. Edmunds): How many Crown courts have been *(a)* closed and *(b)* merged since May 1997. [150763]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): None.

Mr. Ruffley: The Minister will be aware of the concern in my constituency about the threat of closure that Bury St. Edmunds Crown court is under as a result of plans to centralise court services in Ipswich. Will she throw aside her Department's institutionalised complacency on the matter, review the case personally, note that my constituents want their justice administered locally in Bury St. Edmunds and come to the only sensible conclusion, which is to keep Bury St. Edmunds Crown court open?

Jane Kennedy: There are no plans currently to close the court at Bury St. Edmunds. The Court Service is not complacent about the provision of trials and hearings for those cases that cannot be compromised. The hon. Gentleman may not like to hear this, but it is the truth: it has been proven that pooling resources at courts with a number of judges and courtrooms leads to the quicker and more efficient disposal of cases, which must be in the best interests of the parties and his constituents. The new Crown court buildings will substantially increase the capacity to deal with cases in the area—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) has asked a question and I expect him to listen to the answer.

Jane Kennedy: A decision on whether to follow the procedure to close the court at Bury St. Edmunds would be taken only nearer to the completion of the new buildings, which is expected in 2003.

Charter of Fundamental Rights

28. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien** (Eddisbury): What meetings he has had with the Lord Chancellor to discuss the impact on the English legal system of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. [150764]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): I regularly meet the Lord Chancellor and have wide-ranging discussions covering all aspects of the business of the Department except, of course, matters concerning the appointment of judges.

Mr. O'Brien: The new charter forms part of the Nice treaty and is, in effect, legally binding on the English courts because, as the European Commission said, it is treated as mandatory by the courts. Last month, it was prayed in aid in an English court, so does the Minister really agree with the Minister for Europe that the charter will be no more binding than the *Beano*? Does he deny that it will have a massive effect on our legal system by subverting the decisions of our courts, thus making the charter, as Conservative Members have repeatedly said, a key element in taking this country into a European constitution and, thereby, European integration?

Mr. Lock: I anticipated a xenophobic rant from the hon. Gentleman and I am afraid that that is what we got. The charter is not the law, here or in the European Union. It is a political declaration aimed at making citizens' rights more visible. It expressly states that it does not establish any new power or task, or modify powers or tasks defined by the treaties. I encourage him to read article 52 and to be slightly more accurate in future.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Many Members in all parts of the House welcome the incorporation of the European convention on human rights into law, but will the Minister confirm that the EU charter of fundamental rights does not impinge on the law and litigation conducted either in this country or in the EU? Furthermore, does he agree that if it did impinge on our law, it would be a recipe for uncertainty, confusion, conflict of laws and never-ending litigation?

Mr. Lock: The hon. Gentleman raises an important and sensible point, in contrast with the previous one. There must not be confusion between the ECHR, which is part of our law under the Human Rights Act 1998, and the political statement, which is declaratory, in the charter. However, the relevant charter provisions are based on the ECHR, as are the human rights provisions of the treaty on the European Union.

As the charter gives no rights that are justiciable in the English courts, there should be no problem; but I entirely understand and support the hon. Gentleman's view that, having incorporated human rights in English law, we should not have a second charter in English law that is confusing. That is why the Government's success in maintaining this as a political rather than a legal set of rights is so welcome.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): During his meetings with his noble Friend the Lord Chancellor to discuss human rights and other issues, has the Minister raised the view of his hon. and learned Friend the Member for Medway (Mr. Marshall-Andrews) that the one thing no Minister must conceivably do is attempt to solicit funds for political purposes from those over whom he has influence, power or patronage? That strikes me as so obvious as to be incontrovertible. Has not the Minister's noble Friend betrayed his office, and ought he not now to resign?

Mr. Lock: I am afraid that raising his voice does not make the hon. Gentleman's points any better.

The fact is that the Lord Chancellor's is a political office, and he, like earlier Lord Chancellors, has acted politically. On the "Today" programme, the shadow Lord Chancellor, Lord Kingsland, has said:

> "I believe that the Lord Chancellor has behaved with the utmost probity in selecting judges."

That, I think, puts an end to any suggestion of a link between political activity and the appointment of judges, and no repetition of such a suggestion by the hon. Gentleman—even in a very loud voice—will make any difference.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): If I am running and racing around the country raising money for all the Labour MPs in marginal seats, why is it that the Lord Chancellor cannot pull his weight as well? I expect him to raise more money than me: he is a posh lawyer. I am pulling my guts out raising money, and I hope the Lord Chancellor will carry on raising money and save my breath.

Mr. Lock: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support in raising money for a worthy cause—the re-election of Labour Members and a Labour Government.

My hon. Friend is quite right. The Lord Chancellor is a member of the Cabinet and a member of the Labour party, and he is perfectly entitled to raise money for the party. Given that he was raising money from lawyers who have done extremely well under this Labour Government, I am delighted that those lawyers were encouraged to contribute to the re-election of a Labour Government.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): So that we can conform with human rights legislation, it has been decided that no prisoner—no defendant—may be seen in a public part of a court in handcuffs. In my constituency, that will require £197,000 in Oswestry, £167,000 in Market Drayton and £132,000 in Whitchurch to bring the courts up to scratch.

Is this not a complete waste of money, given that the arrangements are adequate now? Moreover, will it not constitute an intolerable attack on the human rights of my poorest constituents if those courts are closed and witnesses, including elderly ladies, must go all the way to Shrewsbury or Telford to give evidence?

Mr. Lock: Again, the claim is put in stark terms but is somewhat exaggerated.

It is important for the human rights of individuals to be respected, and it is somewhat dismaying to hear them being decried by Conservative Members day after day. Decisions on how aspects of the Human Rights Act 1998 that are relevant to magistrates courts should be interpreted is a matter for individual magistrates courts committees, and the Government are confident that we have given those committees the resources that will enable them to discharge their duties.

Child Contact

29. **Ms Margaret Moran** (Luton, South): When he will conclude his review of child contact issues. [150765]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): The Government endorse the report of the Children Act sub-committee of the Lord Chancellor's advisory board on family law, entitled "Contact Between Children and Violent Parents". We agree with the sub-committee that primary legislation in this area would be premature, but note that the guidelines have nevertheless been partially incorporated in law following judgments by the Court of Appeal. The sub-committee will shortly produce a consultation paper on the equally sensitive issue of the facilitation and enforcement of contact orders. In all these areas, the Government consider the interests and welfare of the child to be paramount.

Ms Moran: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, and I welcome the Court of Appeal's June judgment. However, is my hon. Friend aware that, in the past four months, there have been three cases in which contact orders have been granted although there has been clear evidence of abuse or violence to women and children, including one attempted murder and one child death—that of Daniella Hurst, who was found dead in her father's car after a child contact visit? Will my hon. Friend now act on the Children Act sub-committee's year-old recommendation that practice guidance on the subject be issued to all judges, so that we can avert further such tragedies?

Jane Kennedy: Yes, it is an appalling fact that children are often killed by their parents. The Government very much want to encourage consistency and good practice in contact when domestic violence is an issue. We shall work in partnership with the president of the family division to ensure the widest possible promulgation of the guidelines. The Children Act sub-committee and my officials are meeting on 15 March, when they will consider the duration and the best means of monitoring the effectiveness of the guidelines. We shall consider the need for amending legislation in the light of that monitoring.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What input to the review has been provided by police forces and particularly by their domestic violence co-ordinators, who have immense experience to contribute?

Jane Kennedy: They will have been among the groups that the Children Act sub-committee consulted in producing its guidance. Last year, that guidance was used by the High Court in determining appeals. The High Court's decision will now have been noted by judges dealing with those matters across the country.

Solicitors (Wales)

30. **Mr. Elfyn Llwyd** (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): How many solicitor practices in Wales undertook publicly funded criminal defence work in 1997; and how many hold community legal service franchises. [150766]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): In 1997–98, the Legal Aid Board made payments for criminal proceedings to 539 solicitors' offices in Wales; 251 solicitors' offices in Wales hold the community legal service quality mark for diverse spheres of civil law. Some of those offices also have the quality mark for providing criminal law services.

Mr. Llwyd: I thank the Minister for that rather ingenious answer; he did not say how many firms have criminal franchises. May I tell him that, in my constituency, prior to 1997, almost every firm had at least one good criminal practitioner attached to it? Now, two firms have criminal franchises. How does that square with the Government's intention of ensuring access to justice for all?

Mr. Lock: There are 251 firms in Wales that are eligible to do criminal work. Moreover, the firms that have franchises received 91 per cent. of the payments that were made in 1997-98. We are confident that the services being provided by each of those firms are of a suitable quality. We must ensure not only a geographical spread of services, but that, whenever those very important services are provided, we and the defendant can be confident that they are of the right quality. That is the purpose of the quality mark. I would encourage any firms in the hon. Gentleman's constituency or elsewhere that have not yet applied for a quality mark to do so. If they do, they will be able to sign up to the very attractive new contracts that are now available.

Courthouse (Colchester)

32. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): When his Department plans to announce the result of the bid for a new courthouse at Colchester. [150768]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): I commend the hon. Gentleman on his persistence in asking that question, and I can tell him that his waiting is now over. The Essex magistrates courts committee's bid for inclusion in the next phase of the Department's private finance initiative building programme has been successful. That scheme will include the provision of a new magistrates court to replace the existing unsatisfactory facilities at Colchester.

Mr. Russell: I am delighted that persistence has paid off. Could the Minister give some indication of when work will commence, and when the new courthouse will actually be open?

Mr. Lock: It is never enough, is it? I can tell the hon. Gentleman that representatives of the magistrates courts committee and the paying authorities will discuss the procurement process with my officials. The best estimate that I can give him now is that the buildings will be available for use in about four years. I am sure that, if there is a general election in the foreseeable future, he will welcome in the leaflets that he puts around the decision of the Labour Government to invest in his constituency,

Auld Report

35. **Mr. David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): When he expects the Auld report to be published. [150771]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Jane Kennedy): Sir Robin Auld expects to complete his review shortly.

Mr. Taylor: My hon. Friend will know that the continuing uncertainty and delays in the publication of the report is doing nothing for the morale and effectiveness of the lay magistracy, which has support on a grand scale across the political spectrum, as demonstrated by early-day motion 123. Will she confirm that her Department will fight vigorously against any attempt by the cold and clammy hands of Treasury and Home Office accountants to diminish and reduce the effectiveness of the lay magistracy in terms of its relationship to district judges, who many believe are likely to replace lay magistrates in many important respects?

Jane Kennedy: My hon. Friend will be aware of the oft-stated support for the lay magistracy, both from my noble and learned Friend and from my ministerial colleagues and me. The topics that Sir Robin Auld is looking at are complex and interrelated and he has received more than 1,000 submissions to analyse. We need to wait until we have the full details of his analysis and the full proposals before we can comment further on the ideas that he may wish to share with us.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The President of the Council was asked—

Legislative Programming

42. **Dr. Howard Stoate** (Dartford): What progress there has been on programming of legislation. [150778]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): Since the House agreed to the new Sessional Orders on 7 November 2000, most Government legislation in the Commons has been programmed. The process is experimental and the forms of programme motion and the resolutions of Programming Sub-Committees have varied according to circumstances.

Dr. Stoate: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. She will know that the programming of legislation has enabled hon. Members, particularly those of us who can commute from their constituencies, to be far more effective in combining the dual role of representing our constituents and calling the Executive to account. What plans does she have to extend the scheme, and can she suggest ways of making the parliamentary timetable even more efficient?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend is right to say that programming legislation, as was intended, enables hon. Members to use their time more efficiently to the benefit of their constituents. It is also one of the many ways in which we can gradually improve the transparency of the running of this place, which again will be of assistance to hon. Members in using their time effectively. As my hon. Friend said, it offers advantages to all hon. Members in that respect, but it also offers particular advantages to the Opposition, should they be wise enough to take them, because it enables them to have a real say in which debates are taken at what time.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Is the President of the Council suggesting that she is wholly satisfied with the programming of legislation, or does she recognise the need to make some amendments? Does she not acknowledge that it is a little absurd for the House to have to decide a programme before we know which hon. Members will be on the Committee considering the legislation concerned? Does she not acknowledge that if the system is to be credible and acceptable to the House, Opposition parties must have a substantial say in determining which legislation should be programmed, and what the priorities and time allocation should be?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I do not accept that there are huge problems, although there is a need to look at particular issues and try to resolve any difficulties that arise. That is indeed under consideration. I do not accept—and I think that there is a genuine misunderstanding in the House about this—that some innate problem is caused by the Government publishing at the earliest possible opportunity, on Second Reading, the date at which, for the management of their overall business and the programme of legislation, the Government intend a Bill to finish consideration in Committee. Every Government have done that in precisely the same way; the framework is known to the House. To be perfectly blunt with the hon. Gentleman, the only potential losers are the Government. We have known all along—as every Government know what they have in mind—when we expect Bills to come out of Committee, but until now the information has never been shared with the rest of the House. Certainly we believe that there is room to create even more opportunity for input from hon. Members.

It may be that over time, if the present resolution of the House is carried over, all legislation will be programmed. Equally, we may find that that is not necessary and that will give us more flexibility and room for manoeuvre, but we have to have that fall-back position so that we can manage the business of the House effectively for the benefit of all hon. Members.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Does my right hon. Friend not have a scintilla of doubt about what she has just said? Does it not occur to her that in fact the deliberate programming of all legislation would not only be anti-democratic, but would do exactly the opposite of what she has declared? Back Benchers have the right to raise individual points on behalf of their constituents, but they are totally constrained by programming. Any suggestion that the Government somehow have the right to slot legislation through the House without proper consideration is not in the interests of either the electorate or the Labour party.

Mrs. Beckett: I am never without doubt about a range of issues, and I am always prepared to listen to other points of view, but my hon. Friend is a very experienced

Member of Parliament and I know that she is perfectly well aware that to pretend that programming is a new invention by this Government is, frankly, rubbish. To my knowledge, the issue of programming, and the advantages that it can offer to the House, have been under discussion for 10 years at least. The matter was discussed by the Jopling Committee.

I accept my hon. Friend's point that it is perhaps a pity that the Government have found it necessary in this experiment to consider programming all legislation, but she knows as well as I do that that is because of the process that I have described as working to rule, which has led to the inefficient use of the House's time. If my hon. Friend subscribes to the notion that there were halcyon golden days in the past when it was open to Back Benchers to use the House's time as they chose, when Governments never had target dates for Committees and never made sure that such targets were stuck to, she is describing a process that has not been in place while she and I have been Members of this House.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The new regime means that great swathes of legislation are going through the House with wholly inadequate scrutiny, and the new system of synchronised voting on Wednesdays is bringing the House into disrepute, but the Labour party does not seem to be getting into its collective bed any earlier than previously. Against that background, would it not be better to scrap the experiment and start again?

Mrs. Beckett: The right hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well that that is not the case. Swathes of legislation are not going through the House with inadequate scrutiny. Well prepared legislation is going through on a perfectly ordinary time scale—

Sir George Young *indicated dissent.*

Mrs. Beckett: It is no good the right hon. Gentleman shaking his head. If he looks at the pattern of dates for Bills coming out of Committee under previous Governments, he will find no change whatever—other than that this Government are starting to introduce legislation that requires less Government amendment than was the case under his Government.

As for the notion that the time allowed has been inadequate, I believe that it has been perfectly par for the course. On at least two occasions this Session, a Bill has been reported from Committee slightly before the due date originally set.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): The right hon. Lady knows that the changes to Standing Orders were forced on the House by the dreaded Modernisation Committee—which she chairs—even though the Opposition published a minority report saying that they did not support the move. The experiment has been a shambles. It is no good the right hon. Lady saying that all is well: I give her examples at business questions every week of where the system is failing. I am sure that the hon. Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate) is not alone in not understanding that the role of Members of Parliament of all parties is not to do their shopping in their constituencies during the week, but to be here in the House scrutinising legislation and holding the Executive to account.

If the right hon. Lady is going to introduce proposals to improve the working of programme motions, will she confirm that she will have the courtesy to bring them to the Floor of the House for further deliberation by the whole House? In that way, at least the process can be a tad democratic.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) seems to have forgotten that the current experiment was brought to the Floor of the House, and that the decision to implement it was made by the whole House. She said that the decision was forced on the House by the "dreaded Modernisation Committee", but she has either overlooked or forgotten the contents of the minority report that she keeps citing. That report did not say that programming was a bad thing, nor that it was damaging to democracy. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) alleged that programming somehow deprived Back Benchers of their rights, but the minority report did not say that either. It said that to programme all legislation was a substantial and major step which the Opposition could not support.

However, before either the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton or I served on it, the Modernisation Committee agreed unanimously that we should stick with the regime under which all major legislation was programmed. Opposition Members appear to be suffering from a collective failure of memory when they think that they have never supported the programming proposals. That is not the case: they have supported them.

I entirely agree—and have long argued, before the hon. Lady's time in her present post—that it is a pity that the Government have found it necessary to put in place a framework that allows us to programme all legislation. However, if the House deals with its business efficiently and well, and takes the time that is allowed for scrutinising legislation to do so, there is no reason why we should not see a better conduct of business without quite that degree of rigour.

As for the hon. Lady's remarks about my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate), I know that Conservative Members are worried about the much better attention paid by Labour Members to their constituencies, but that is their problem.

New Members

43. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What plans she has to ensure that newly elected hon. Members are able to begin their work quickly and effectively after their election. [150779]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I am pleased to say that the Departments of the House are working to ensure that newly elected Members are given speedy access to the facilities of the House and that introductions to the House's work are readily available.

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. I recall, when I was first elected, a period of confusion and muddle, in which people who taught new

Members the procedures of the House were not skilled in teaching even though they were skilled in the procedures of the House. To help the House get down to its business well, it would be useful to ensure that those who are responsible for teaching new Members about procedures have some teaching skills. Has any progress been made on that? Could existing Members act as mentors for other Members to enable them to understand the procedures of the House quickly, and quickly to become effective Members of Parliament?

Mr. Tipping: I know that my hon. Friend has a teaching background. I will take her as a volunteer, when she is returned after the general election, to take part in such induction courses.

There has for a long time been an unofficial mentoring scheme, and my hon. Friend's proposal is worth considering. I shall ensure that her comments are considered and taken forward by the working party involving all the Departments of the House, which considers such subjects.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): When the successor to the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) arrives in this House, she will have to buy her own computer, deal with her own staffing and so on. I understand that the Senior Salaries Review Body report is with the Leader of the House, although I may be wrong. The right hon. Lady shakes her head. However, the SSRB report will suggest a complete change in the way in which we do things. Can we have emergency action from the Privy Council Office so that we can see the report and implement its recommendations? In that way, when the successor of the hon. Member for Slough arrives, she will not have to change horses halfway through.

Mr. Tipping: I know that the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) takes a great interest in election results. He should do—he has a majority of just 77, and is clearly counting every vote that is straying away from him. More seriously, the hon. Gentleman knows, and the House knows, that the SSRB is at present considering the issue. I look forward to seeing its report and to its recommendations being implemented as quickly as possible.

"Shifting the Balance"

44. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What representations she has received from hon. Members since 17 February on the first report of the Liaison Committee, "Shifting the Balance". [150780]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): None.

Mr. Bercow: That deficiency must now be made good. As an admirer of the talents of the right hon. Lady, I urge her to shift the balance in her own work by recognising that she is not only the Government's representative in the House but the House's representative in the Government. Given that the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) has acknowledged that the Government have a hand in picking the Committees that scrutinise their work, why does not the right hon. Lady cease to defend the indefensible and resolve to scrap a system which is a charter for Back-Bench sycophancy and Front-Bench skulduggery, and replace it with one based on independence, transparency and accountability?

Mrs. Beckett: I take seriously my governmental responsibility for the House, which is one reason why I have some anxiety about some proposals in the report to which the hon. Gentleman alluded. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) is quite right; many Members on the Conservative Benches share those anxieties. There is a danger that such proposals may introduce a system that would have effects other than those expected, which could damage the conduct of the House.

I am forcefully struck by the fact that further representations on the matter are not the only area of silence. In our many discussions on the Liaison Committee proposals and on the advice that some means should be sought to provide a more open process of appointment, to which there would be input, we have repeatedly described the system that operates in our own party. It is by no means perfect, but it includes many of the features recommended by the Liaison Committee. Yet no Opposition party has made it plain that its procedures match those standards. If the Opposition want to put matters right, I suggest that they start with their own parties rather than meddling with the whole House.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Advocate-General for Scotland, in an answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), suggested that there had been "filibustering" in the Committee that considered the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. I have raised the matter in advance with you, Mr. Speaker, and ask you to confirm that the three Chairmen of the Committee—the hon. Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood), my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) and the hon. Member for Paisley, North (Mrs. Adams)—would have intervened had there been any filibustering. Since the issue has been raised, each of them has confirmed that all the Committee's proceedings have been in order. The Advocate–General for Scotland should apologise, and withdraw her comment.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his point.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. My hon. Friend has made one of the points that I intended to make, but I take personal exception to the point made by the Advocate-General for Scotland. I received uncalled-for compliments from the Minister in the Standing Committee about how pertinent my remarks had been. Quite apart from the question of filibustering on Committees, the programming of the Committee will mean that 50 clauses will be dealt with on the final day. It is not the Government who are losing out, but the people of this country who will face legislation that has gone entirely unscrutinised.

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for me. As far as the Committee is concerned, the Chairmen on the Speaker's Panel are excellent, and I make no criticism of them.

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. At the beginning of Scottish questions, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning)—not a famous Scottish location since it is in Devon—appeared to suggest that she was the shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. Were you made aware of that, Mr. Speaker, as no such courtesy was extended to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I respond, since the hon. Gentleman gave me no notice that he would make that point? If he and his colleagues study carefully, they will find that I have shadow Cabinet responsibility for the constitution, which includes Scotland and Wales.

Mr. Speaker: That puts the matter right.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Are you aware that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has been touring the television studios? In particular, he appeared on Sky News, making what appear to be announcements about foot and mouth disease rather than making time to come to the House. Have you received any indication that the Minister will come to the House today to answer questions from hon. Members, including me, who have serious concerns on behalf of constituents worried about the foot and mouth crisis?

Mr. Speaker: The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will most certainly be here on Thursday for his Question Time, so the hon. Gentleman need not worry.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will recall that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food gave an undertaking last week that he would be available to the House to keep us properly informed and updated about the crisis. Since that undertaking was given to you as well as to the House, are you satisfied that the Minister seems to deem it fit to be in the television studios to make what amount to daily announcements but does not come to the House to be questioned by Members whose constituents are affected by the crisis?

Mr. Speaker: It is a matter of judgment for the Minister. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is quite right: the Minister gave the House an assurance that he would come to the House, and he has given an assurance to me. However, the Minister is entitled to use his judgment.

Macedonia

3.35 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): I beg to ask leave to move the Adjournment of the House, under Standing Order No. 24, to debate an important matter that requires specific and urgent consideration, namely,

the situation in Macedonia in relation to KFOR and Albanian aggressive action.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for allowing me to make an application for an emergency debate. This matter is definite, in that there are constant reports of the consequences of the incursions into Macedonia—basically, a Slav republic—by official and unofficial Albanian forces.

I do not know whether news bulletins are an indication of the importance of items, but at 5 o'clock this morning the situation in Macedonia was the No. 1 item on the BBC World Service news. Indeed, the respected correspondent, Mischa Glenny—known to many of us because he frequently comes to the House—who is not given to gross exaggeration and is the historian of the Balkans, used the careful words that perhaps we are getting into the situation of another war in the southern Balkans.

We understand that, this morning, the Government of Macedonia appealed to the Government of the Ukraine, which is in the Chair at the United Nations, for some kind of UN help. We also understand that the Americans, so concerned are they about what is happening, are supplying night vision equipment and other important equipment to the Macedonian Government.

Surely, the House of Commons should have an opportunity to discuss these complex and serious matters before there is an outbreak of major and sustained fighting, rather than holding debates after such events have taken place and we can do little about them. On those grounds, I believe that we should hold an emergency debate on the situation in the southern Balkans.

Mr. Speaker: I have listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) has said. I must give my decision without stating any reasons. I am afraid that I do not consider that the matter that he raised is appropriate for discussion under Standing Order No. 24, and I cannot therefore submit his application to the House.

Job Losses (South Devon)

3.38 pm

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I beg to ask leave to move the Adjournment of the House, under Standing Order No. 24, to debate an important matter that requires specific and urgent consideration, namely,

redundancies at Nortel Networks, the largest private sector company in the Government office of the south-west region.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for giving me permission to raise a matter of grave importance in my constituency. Four weeks ago, Nortel Networks announced 700 redundancies, and last Thursday announced a further 700, bringing the total to 1,400. Compared with the 1,300 job losses at Corus in south Wales, 1,400 such losses in our travel-to-work area, with its higher unemployment rate and lower incomes, are significant. Furthermore, our area has suffered for some time from the decline in agriculture, tourism and the fishing industry.

One of the big problems is that the losses are in full, all-year-round jobs rather than the seasonal employment on which our economy used to depend before the very welcome investment by Nortel. Those job losses and their effect are important not only to my constituency but to the constituencies of other hon. Members in south Devon and in the whole region, because south Devon has become the European centre of the fibre optic industry—a position that we want to retain.

The matter is urgent because we are beginning the 90-day consultation period between the company and the affected staff, and because the foot and mouth crisis is affecting the hinterland of south Devon. That has a knock-on effect on the other industry in the area—tourism. People are considering whether to take holidays in our area. This week, we heard the appalling news that the Austrian Government were advising people not to travel to this country. That affected one of the language schools—another industry in the area—in my constituency, at which a party of Austrian students were due to study an English course. For those reasons, I seek permission for a debate under Standing Order No. 24.

Mr. Speaker: I have listened carefully to what the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) has said. I must give my decision without stating any reason. I am afraid that I do not consider that the matter that he has raised is appropriate for discussion under Standing Order No. 24, and I cannot therefore submit his application to the House.

BILL PRESENTED

Food Poverty (Eradication)

Mr. Alan Simpson, supported by Dr. Jenny Tonge, Mrs. Alice Mahon, Mr. Dafydd Wigley, Mr. Tony Benn, Ms Diane Abbott, Mrs. Margaret Ewing, Mr. David Chaytor, Dr. Howard Stoate, Mr. John McDonnell, Mr. David Drew and Mr. David Taylor, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish and implement a strategy for abolishing food poverty; to require the setting of targets for the implementation of that strategy; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 20 July, and to be printed [Bill 56].

Education (Student Loans) (Amendment)

3.40 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the law relating to student loans in respect of the entitlement of borrowers to defer repayment of loans and in respect of the rate of interest payable on loans.

The Bill gives all hon. Members a very special opportunity—the chance to spur the Government into correcting an injustice that was created by Ministers and that hon. Members on both sides of the House agree should be corrected. Nearly four years ago, the Government scrapped student grants and replaced them with loans, which must be repaid by graduates who earn as little as £10,000 a year. What has been the effect of that action?

Increasing numbers of school leavers from poorer homes have been deterred from taking up university courses. Their numbers, which had doubled in the 10 years to 1997, during the great expansion of higher education under the previous Conservative Government, have stood still since then. This Government's target, which was to build on our success by ensuring that up to 50 per cent. of school leavers went to university, is now in tatters. Yet again, we see how a Labour Government, who promise more and take more, have delivered less.

As the Secretary of State for Education and Employment told the House only the other week, the number of students from the very poorest homes has risen slightly since 1997—by about 500—to 5,000 a year. However, the total number of students from poorer homes—totalling about 65,000 a year—has declined during the first three years of this Government.

It is no use blaming the universities. The Chancellor of the Exchequer tried that last year, and all the evidence since has shown how wrong he was. Our universities try as hard as they can to attract the top talent, wherever it comes from. Labour's decision to force students to repay their much bigger loans when they earn as little as £10,000 a year is the real deterrent today.

The Bill gives the House the chance to choose between two ways in which to correct that injustice. The first is Labour's way. Labour want to focus on where students come from, offering them extra support if they live in deprived areas, as designated by Whitehall officials. That will simply create a postcode lottery. A child from a Georgian house in Lambeth will qualify for the grant; a school leaver from a Guildford council house will be denied the support that he or she needs.

Universities UK told me in a letter today that it shares my concern about the accuracy of using postcodes, saying that

"in some postcode areas, wealth and poverty live side-by-side."

Yet again, we see how Labour's obsession with people's backgrounds fails to address the real problem. I want to focus on where students go, not where they have come from. That my way and is what my Bill would achieve.

Most students make it into well paid jobs. The average starting salary for graduates is £15,500 a year; for those in graduate-type jobs, it is more than £18,500 a year. Most graduates can therefore afford to put back into the system a fair share of what they have gained from it. By so doing, they help others to follow in their footsteps.

Some graduates, however, will never earn a high wage. Students from homes whose family income has only ever reached £10,000 a year must think twice before embarking on a course at university when they have to repay a loan despite earning just £10,000 a year. My Bill will require graduates to repay their loans only when they are earning £20,000 a year, sending a clear signal to those from less well-off homes that we really believe in their potential.

Graduates who will never earn £20,000 a year will be let off the hook. That must be paid for, and I will explain how. Indeed, I would not be allowed to introduce the Bill if its framework did not provide the means to pay for that. One of the scandals of the Government's handling of student finance is the way in which they have sold off part of the student loan book at the thumping loss of £150 million. Students were charged £150 million in tuition fees, but what did the Government do with the money? They blew it on a lousy deal with banks in the City, because the student debt was unmarketable. Now they are creating even more of that unmarketable debt through their loan system.

I know that the previous Government had pencilled in the sale of the student loan book, but we would never have let it go at such a low price. As the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Barking (Ms Hodge), knows—she was the Chairman of the Education Sub-Committee of the Select Committee on Education and Employment—I wrote a memorandum on this subject and it appeared in our Committee's first report. I suggested that universities should manage the debts, so that if debts had hidden value it would be unlocked in the hands of those who need it most—the universities themselves.

The next Conservative Government will not repeat Labour's mistake. We will hand over the outstanding debt to the universities at the same time as freeing them from being tied to the grant system of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. We will ensure that the hidden value in the loan book is unlocked in the hands of the universities.

The thrust of my Bill is to reform the student loan system, so that it is transparent, efficient and, therefore, properly fundable without our ever having to give money away to the banks again. That means that the loans must bear a market rate of interest. Today's loans are charged at the rate of inflation—about 2 per cent. a year. A market rate in line with mortgages would be about 6 or 7 per cent. a year.

The Government tell us that the cost of the interest rate subsidy is 20 per cent. of the amount of the loans. The typical graduate now leaves university with a loan of about £8,500. The cost of removing the subsidy would, all things being equal, be about £1,700 per graduate. However, we do not stop there. The Conservative plan promises a tax change. It is outside the scope of this Bill, but it will be within the scope of tomorrow's Budget. Tax relief on loan repayments can and should offset completely the additional interest charged for students.

On that basis, I am glad to welcome the support of the National Union of Students for the principles behind the Bill. Earlier today, it told me:

"We do feel that the threshold for repayments should be raised, as the current threshold of £10,000 does not adequately reflect the effort and risks of studying for a degree."

[Mr. Nick St. Aubyn]

We would not expect the representative body of students to endorse the raising of the threshold if that were funded by a shift from a subsidised rate of interest to a market rate. However, when taken with the Conservative tax pledge, we are not proposing to do that. The Bill's proposed changes would be paid for out of the efficiency gains from making the loan system simple and transparent.

My Bill will address one other vital issue. Universities UK also told me today:

"We are particularly concerned about students from poorer families who may be debt averse."

I agree. The Education Sub-Committee heard evidence that in many colleges the Government have cut grants for providing students with careers advice by up to 50 per cent. That is a disgrace. We must properly fund the advice that people receive before they take their exams because that is when they decide whether to go to university and obtain a degree.

The combination of my Bill and modest changes in tomorrow's Budget would allow us to tackle the problem. The Government were recently big enough to admit their mistakes on secondary school reforms and to congratulate Guildford on the changes that we have made at one of our schools. Will they learn from Conservative policy on this matter and help our students as well?

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Nick St. Aubyn, Mr. Stephen O'Brien, Mr. David Ruffley, Mr. Andrew Robathan, Mr. Patrick Nicholls and Miss Julie Kirkbride.

EDUCATION (STUDENT LOANS) (AMENDMENT)

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn accordingly presented a Bill to amend the law relating to student loans in respect of the entitlement of borrowers to defer repayment of loans and in respect of the rate of interest payable on loans: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 23 March, and to be printed [Bill 57].

Orders of the Day

International Development Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

3.51 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The purpose of the Bill is to establish in legislation the reduction of poverty as the aim of United Kingdom development assistance and to ensure that it is spent for that reason alone. The House will be aware that over the past four years, we have established the reduction of poverty as the guiding principle of all our efforts. I am pleased that the change has been widely supported in the House and the country, and by the International Development Select Committee, which is chaired so ably by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells).

Existing legislation allows the Secretary of State to do virtually whatever that person may wish. Without change, a future Minister or Administration could reinstate the use of the aid budget to soften the terms of commercial contracts through mixed credits, as under the old aid-and-trade provision. An Administration could re-tie aid, thus distorting its use and decreasing its efficiency, as under the previous Government, or use that aid budget to serve the short-term political or commercial purposes of the UK. We believe that it is much better to clarify the purpose of our country's development efforts to ensure that our legislative power means that our funds and efforts are devoted single-mindedly to the systematic reduction of world poverty.

The House will know that the Government have led the international effort to place the systematic reduction of poverty and the meeting of the international development targets at the core of the international development effort. We have not simply refocused our bilateral programme on the reduction of poverty; we are using our influence throughout the international development system to get a commitment to reduce poverty systematically in every poor country across the globe.

We have had remarkable success in that effort. The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the United Nations development agencies, the UN millennium assembly, which met recently, the African Development bank, the Asian Development bank, the European Union and the Cotonou agreement, the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the G7 have all firmly lined up to make the international development targets the objective of the international development effort.

We believe that that is very important. The biggest and best UK programme cannot alone ensure that the international development targets are met across the world. However, an international development system dedicated to that objective can do so. As hon. Members will know, the world is on track to meet the first of those targets—halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty between 1990 and 2015, enabling a billion people to make the journey out of extreme poverty. That is a considerable achievement, but we need to go on,

as the world population will grow. The Bill's purpose is to underpin the improvement in the quality of international development efforts and the contributions that we make both through our own bilateral programme and through multilateral development agencies.

The second major objective that the United Kingdom Government have pursued in their development efforts is achieving a shift in the way in which international development assistance is applied. Far too often in the past, it was applied through a massive fragmentation of well intentioned charitable projects in developing countries, which led to a weakening, rather than a strengthening, of the capacity of developing country Governments to improve their economic performance and the delivery of health care and education services to their people. Such services improve people's prospects of bettering their life opportunities and climbing out of the condition of extreme poverty.

For that reason, we have tried to redirect the whole international effort by supporting poverty reduction strategies laid down by Governments of developing countries, which have been openly consulted on with their people and which combine macro-economic policy and social policy objectives to make sure that resources from revenue, debt relief and aid funds can all be directed through Government institutions to make a much stronger effort to improve services and economic management. Again, that requires international development efforts to have as their objective the systematic reduction of poverty, which is leading to a massive improvement in the capacity of the international system.

World Bank research shows that if aid is focused where the poor are and where the national Governments are committed to reform, the effectiveness of the US $50 billion or so in the international development system is increased by 50 per cent. The United Kingdom Government have worked hard on that objective, and the Bill requires that a much more effective international development system focused on the systematic reduction of poverty be the objective of the Secretary of State, unless that person introduces alternative legislation in the House of Commons.

All of that is of profound importance to the poor and the future stability and safety of the world; it was the basis on which the House approved the reversal in the decline of the development budget under the previous Administration. There has been an increase in the contribution of 0.26 per cent. of gross national product that we inherited from that Government to 0.33 per cent., to which we are committed. I hope that growth continues, so that we get our country's aid budget to the United Nations target of the 0.7 per cent. of GNP. As the House has increased the budget on the basis that those resources would be spent on poverty reduction, not on ulterior objectives, it is right that the legislation underpinning the spending of that money should entrench the requirement that any Minister or Administration use those funds to achieve the systematic reduction of poverty.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): The Secretary of State went straight from the 1997 position to looking at least two years ahead to the figure of 0.33 per cent. What percentage of gross national product did the Government spend on aid at the end of the last financial period, three years into a Labour Administration?

Clare Short: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has noticed, as he is busy writing press releases and does not usually read much published by my Department, but we will achieve 0.29 per cent. this year, as we said we would.

In our 1997 White Paper, we committed ourselves to considering the case for new legislation. The overriding response to our consultation, which took place in two rounds of policy forums across the country, was that there is popular support for a change of legislation to entrench the objective of reducing poverty.

The current legislation on the statute book is the Overseas Development and Co-operation Act 1980, which is a consolidating Act drawing its provisions from 33 previous statutes. Much of the Act is outdated or obsolete, and we need new legislation to update it, to entrench the poverty reduction objective, and to take new powers to support civil society and to provide financial guarantees and hold securities when we try to develop the private sector in developing countries, in order to enable those countries to grow their economies and thus to reduce poverty.

The House should note that the courts found in the Pergau dam judgment, which shamed our country so deeply, that the powers in the existing legislation were so widely drawn that they caused the Minister to mislead himself into believing that he could use aid to back economically unsound projects. We would all agree that it is desirable to protect any future Minister of any conceivable alternative Government from making such a mistake.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. Given that the Government indicated by a written answer on 10 April last year that they intended "as soon as possible" to bring forward legislation to enforce the OECD convention on bribery, and on the assumption that the right hon. Lady did not judge the Bill to be the appropriate vehicle for achieving that objective, can she tell the House when she intends to act on that important subject?

Clare Short: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the subject is enormously important, but it is not the responsibility of my Department to introduce such legislation. The Bill would be rather longer than it is, and legislation has not been prepared, although the Government have made a commitment in principle to enact stronger legislation. I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman when it will be introduced, as it is not in my remit, but I share his view that that should be done as urgently as possible.

I should draw to the attention of the House two exceptions to the overriding requirement set out in the Bill that poverty reduction must be the purpose of spending on international development assistance. The first exception relates to assistance given to the overseas territories. The Government recognise the responsibility that the UK has for the overseas territories beyond a commitment to help them reduce poverty, although any assistance that we provide would include that objective. The requirement

[Clare Short]

that assistance to the overseas territories must be likely to contribute to a reduction in poverty is therefore set aside and replaced with a requirement that our assistance to those territories must be provided for the purpose of furthering sustainable development or improving the welfare of their population.

The second exception relates to assistance provided in response to disasters or emergencies. Obviously, such assistance will not be likely to contribute to a reduction of poverty in all cases. For example, the terrible earthquake in Gujarat, which we all agree was of overwhelming concern, affecting as it did such large numbers of people, occurred in an area that was not the poorest part of India. If the requirement to provide humanitarian assistance always had to serve the poverty reduction objective, it would restrict our ability to move rapidly across the world when people are in trouble, and maintain the UK's record for speed and flexibility, of which hon. Members in all parts of the House are proud. Exceptions should be made in those two cases.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. Would she consider it appropriate to consider in this context the aid that we might give in Sierra Leone? As the right hon. Lady is well aware, we are giving a great deal of military aid to Sierra Leone, where there is an amputee camp which her hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) and I visited recently. More than 200 victims of the Revolutionary United Front rebels had their hands chopped off—in one case, a little girl aged only 13 months. We were shocked to see people trying to manufacture artificial limbs unaided by any skilled help or, apparently, any outside help. In that context, will she consider providing aid for the victims of war in especially deserving cases?

Clare Short: Yes; indeed, we already provide such aid. I have visited the camp about which the hon. Gentleman speaks, which was a deeply moving and distressing place. The Government are absolutely committed to the current effort in Sierra Leone to retake 50 per cent. of the territory that is held by the Revolutionary United Front, a criminal gang that is interested mostly in diamonds and which seeks to use the power of terror instead of fighting. That is why it uses amputation, and it should be defeated. We have provided help to the amputees in the past and we will continue to support such objectives. As a country, we are the biggest supporter of the part of Sierra Leone that is controlled by the Government. We provide about £35 million of support a year and we will see it through until all of Sierra Leone is in Government hands. Thus, people who have suffered amputation can at least look forward to peace and a decent life in future.

The House should understand clearly that the overriding objective of poverty reduction does not mean that development efforts are restricted to the provision of social assistance or charitable handouts. Our second White Paper, "Making Globalisation Work for the Poor", makes clear the conditions that are needed to reduce poverty in developing countries: economic growth that benefits all people, not merely a small number, and the provision of quality education and health care for all. To achieve those conditions, Governments need all the capacity of an effective modern state. They need the capacity to manage their public finances well, to raise revenues properly and fairly, and to provide regulatory systems for their banking sectors so that they can keep their savings at home and attract inward investment. It is one of the tragedies of Africa that 40 per cent. of the continent's savings leave the continent because the banking system is so deficient.

Work on security sector reform, which is relevant to the issue raised by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), is also needed. Over-large armed forces that are not transparently funded or properly accountable to a democratic power are often a cause of coups and instability. Work to ensure that the security sector is properly accountable and properly and transparently funded is part of developing an effective modern state that can give people the stability and security that they need to grow their economy and reduce poverty.

We also provide support to health and education Ministries. Such aid seeks to ensure that a quality basic primary education system is in place for all the children of a country rather than only those who attend city schools that serve better-off people. Similarly, the presence of primary health care systems throughout a country is important, and health Ministries should be capable of maintaining and sustaining such services.

When we say that poverty reduction is our main objective, it should be borne in mind that that means helping countries to create modern and efficient states that will enable their economies to grow and ensure that good quality services can be provided to all their people. We are speaking about an effective state and a well organised and well regulated private sector that can grow, attract inward investment and thus reduce poverty.

The test of any of the work that we currently undertake is whether its purpose is the reduction of poverty. Such work can also be done for other reasons, but the Bill requires its purpose to be the reduction of poverty. It will not allow priority to be given to the commercial or political interests of the UK. Under the previous arrangements, the Overseas Development Administration of the previous Government had a sort of semi-autonomy, but was accountable to the House through the Foreign Secretary. The UK's development effort was always subject to considerations involving its commercial and political interests. Every country has legitimate interests of that sort, but development is a different business. It takes more than short-term considerations to help some of the poorest countries to establish arrangements to enable them to grow their economies and provide better services for their people. Such considerations, which were allowed and encouraged under previous arrangements, are not permitted by the Bill, and I hope that the House agrees that that is desirable.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The Secretary of State raises an interesting point about the way in which the House will call the Department to account. The Bill's objective is to reduce poverty. If it is clear that matters have not improved, but deteriorated after a long period of involvement with a country, will that be a reason for withdrawing from it? If not, how can the House call the Department to account?

Clare Short: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Select Committee for International Development discussed that

matter recently. The Department publishes strong output objectives that contribute to fulfilling international development targets. They include economic growth, getting more children into school and providing better health care services. Of course, ascertaining the extent to which the United Kingdom's contribution drives the objectives forward requires refining the method of evaluating the effort. However, our published objectives tie us down to evaluating our achievements against them. The House can therefore effectively call us to account through the Select Committee and by comparing our performance with the published objectives.

A country could do everything in its power to achieve the objectives, and there could be a military uprising, such as that in Sierra Leone, or a natural disaster. None of us wants to turn away from a country in trouble, which might have slipped backwards through no fault of its own.

There is another problem: how can we support people who live under bad Governments? They are often the poorest and most oppressed people in the world. Clearly, we cannot support their Governments, but neither can we turn away from those people. We must find methods of providing humanitarian, and, if possible, additional aid to enable some of the poorest people in the world to demand better Governments and thus a better future.

Such matters are complex, but we are open in publishing our objectives and our methods of measuring our success. We are much more transparent about that than previous Governments. That enables us to have intelligent and detailed discussions in the Select Committee and to be properly accountable to it. I hope that Select Committee members agree that that has helped us to improve the quality of UK overseas development assistance.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): We cannot turn away from people who live under bad Governments, neither can we abandon people who live in areas of conflict. Millions of people are denied access to humanitarian or development assistance because they live in countries that are ravaged by conflict. How will the Bill and the Government's policy make Departments work together to tackle the resolution or prevention of such conflict?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right. Twenty per cent. of the population of sub-Saharan Africa live under conditions of conflict. Post cold war, most conflict breaks out within rather than between the poorest countries in the world. In some countries, one group tries to take all and thus divides the people, and in some weak states, such as Sierra Leone, which are rich in natural resources, groups try to plunder them.

The Bill makes clear our duty to provide humanitarian assistance to all who are in need, wherever they are. That provision is not governed by the requirement to reduce poverty. We must simply respond to people's need. We and the international system do all in our power to provide humanitarian relief to all those who are affected by conflict. However, in, for example, Burundi, which my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) visited, the circumstances are too dangerous for United Nations and non-governmental organisation workers. People in such countries are in desperate need, but do not receive help.

The answer for grossly impoverished places such as southern Sudan, where conflict has continued for such a long time and 1.5 million people have died, is not the endless provision of humanitarian relief but a greater effort to resolve conflict. We have established joint funding arrangements to achieve a more tightly collaborative effort between my Department, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence and thus use our influence to improve the capacity of the international system to resolve conflict.

Sierra Leone is the first big test, and we will succeed there. Sierra Leone has the largest UN peacekeeping operation, costing $500 million a year, although it is a small country of only 4.5 million people. The first problem that we had there was that many of the UN peacekeepers were taken hostage. Secondly, although there is supposedly a ceasefire agreement with the Revolutionary United Front, the UN forces have not moved forward.

We must all be determined to succeed in Sierra Leone, but we must learn from the arrangements there how international peacekeeping efforts can and must be improved. We are, of course, going on from Sierra Leone to the Democratic Republic of Congo, which has not had good government since Leopold of the Belgians. I hope that it had it before him. That country is as big as western Europe, and the task for the international community of bringing peace to the DRC, which is crucial to the development of Africa, will require a greater strength, capacity and effectiveness than we have at the moment. The operation of the joint pool is meant to improve the UK effort in that regard.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): The Secretary of State mentioned southern Sudan, which I have visited. I am very concerned about the situation there. Does she think that when conflicts have gone on for decades, as they have in southern Sudan, we should concentrate a little more on development aid? We are very good at giving humanitarian aid to areas such as southern Sudan, but the provision of more educational facilities, for instance, would only need to be very simple and might lead to a more rapid resolution of the conflict.

Clare Short: I agree with the hon. Lady's aspirations, but I do not agree that that is the way forward. The crunch is that in such disorder, most of the people are displaced. Of course, when people are in refugee camps, we must try to ensure that the children are educated so that they are not under a life sentence but can look forward to a settled life in which they can improve their circumstances.

What Sudan needs is peace, desperately and overwhelmingly. I believe that if there were greater efforts and energy in the international system, there could be a prospect of a confederal solution for Sudan that would bring peace to that tortured country, where poverty is growing and people are suffering. If it were possible to enhance humanitarian aid in ways that enabled people to survive, we should do that, and we do. However, those who call simply for enhancement of humanitarian aid should realise that 90 per cent. of those resources are spent on aeroplanes and airlifts; very little of it gets through to the people, and it has been proved that the fighters take some of the resources. Therefore, more aid

[Clare Short]

is not the answer. We have to do what we can to get help through, but peace is the answer in southern Sudan and we need a stronger international call for that.

Dr. Tonge: The Secretary of State has not visited southern Sudan. Does she not agree that the simple provision of primary education—and the training of the southern Sudanese people to give simple primary education—would require no school buildings or special equipment, and that if the people were displaced the education could go with them? Generations of children in southern Sudan have had nothing to do except wait for the next attack by the raiders from the north. It is very sad that we cannot provide such simple facilities for them.

Clare Short: I agree with the hon. Lady that the situation is very sad, but I do not agree that the answer is to try to provide spots of education or health care for people who are constantly being displaced, impoverished and threatened with violence and fighting. We should do what we can to keep them going, and to provide services to displaced people and refugees. The answer is a peace settlement, and, in my very strong view, not enough people in the international community are making an effort to achieve peace in Sudan. It worries me when people who are concerned about the situation there focus all their efforts on calling for more aid, because that will not provide the answer. The people there desperately need peace.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): Further to what my right hon. Friend was saying about countries with awful Governments—I can link this question a little to Sudan—and about encouraging people to press for a change of Government, I feel quite desperate about the situation of the women in Afghanistan. Can my right hon. Friend offer any small ray of hope on what we could do through aid to help the women of Afghanistan become something more than machines for bearing children, which is how the Taliban regard them?

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend that the situation in Afghanistan is terrible and deeply worrying. As well those beautiful old Buddhist statues being destroyed, girls have been deliberately excluded from school and women from hospital. Women doctors are not allowed to work and provide health care. That is so backward and unbearable. The situation is deeply distressing and I cannot offer her the hope of immediate change, but we have worked hard to ensure that the United Nations system will not concede on the principle of equal provision for women and girls. If everybody stands together, there is a prospect that there will be no collusion with the undesirable ruling that the regime has made, and we shall hold on to that.

The UK has been disadvantaged in trying to help in Afghanistan because there was clear security information that UK nationals were probably under threat. However, we shall reconsider that policy. I can promise my hon. Friend that we shall do all in our power to ensure that women and girls receive education and basic health care, but I cannot tell her that we are optimistic about achieving major change in the short term.

Dr. Julian Lewis: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Clare Short: I should get on, if the House will forgive me.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Clare Short: Okay.

Mrs. Gillan: I am most grateful. May I take the Secretary of State back to the remarks that she made before so generously taking all those interventions? I am trying hard to understand exactly what will be ruled in and what will be ruled out by the new focus on poverty reduction. Can she explain whether it will exclude aid to projects such as using Customs and Excise to improve taxation systems, drugs monitoring, and systems in the overseas territories where aid has gone in the past? Will projects such as good governance, which she mentioned in relation to Africa, also be excluded? The focus on poverty appears to move us away from any focus on good governance.

Clare Short: I have already dealt with that point—the hon. Lady cannot have been listening. As we say in our globalisation White Paper, poverty reduction is maximised by an effective modern state creating the conditions for a private sector that is not allowed to be monopolistic or to abuse its powers, which happens behind high tariffs in some countries where nationally owned private sectors have high prices and shoddy goods. Another condition for an effective private sector that will grow the economy and attract inward investment is the provision by an effective modern state of regulatory arrangements that encourage good banking and good revenue systems.

We do such work all over the world and there is no question of our not continuing to do it. Countries need those arrangements. That is what good governance is, right across the board—not just action against corruption, important as that is, but effective systems that enable an economy to grow and to provide proper services for people. That has been the central focus of our efforts since we formed our Government and that work will continue.

The Bill includes new powers such as the provision that we can support work that improves development awareness and advocacy, both at home and overseas. I am concerned that there is a mindset that considers development to be not part of the mainstream of creating a more just world order and modern, effective government, which enable countries to grow their economies, but a residual that comes after politics and provides funds that are charitably distributed to those who are lacking. If we are to have any kind of safety and security, we need a UK public who understand the urgency of those efforts.

We also need to be able to support work in developing countries so that people there have sufficient knowledge and feel entitled to demand of their Government better governance and better use of public resources. That work, which we have strengthened since we formed our Government, will be funded under new powers, but such funding is currently committed under the annual Appropriations Act, and not the main legislation under which we operate.

The Bill also provides for the use of a wider range of commercial instruments—the taking of shares, loans, convertible loans, options and guarantees. Let me give a couple of examples of the way in which the powers will be used. We have done some work in this regard, but currently we must obtain permission from the Treasury as a one-off on each occasion.

I do not know whether hon. Members have come across the Day chocolate company, which produces Divine chocolate bars. It is a fair trade company, owned partly by a Ghanaian cocoa farmers co-operative and partly by some British non-governmental organisations. It is marketing the chocolate throughout the country on the basis that towns can become Divine towns. If hon. Members would like their constituencies to be Divine, they may wish to sign up. The aim of the initiative is to create a commercially viable enterprise that will improve the lives of Ghanaian cocoa farmers who have experienced a deterioration of their terms of trade and hence their income levels over the years.

Under our legislation, we have only the power to provide a grant, and grants are not always helpful to enterprises that need to be commercially viable. We therefore wanted to guarantee a loan from the National Westminster bank, which was not willing to make the loan without such a guarantee. The Day chocolate company and its trade in Divine chocolate bars now seem to be prospering. That is the kind of intervening that we want to be able to do, and under the Bill we shall no longer have to obtain one-off permission from the Treasury to enable countries to grow their economies and local people to improve the activity of the private sector.

My Department has been lobbied by a number of bodies seeking to embed certain policies in the draft Bill—for example, a commitment to children, to empowering women, to dealing with HIV-AIDS or to whatever their favoured objective might be. Let me make it clear that we will resist all such pressure. We agree that children are key to development, and that our task is to ensure that this generation of poor children have the chance of education and health care so that they do not become parents of even poorer children. We also agree that dealing with HIV-AIDS is a major international priority. The Department is giving ever growing commitments to such work, not just in Africa but in China, Bangladesh and India, where HIV-AIDS is also spreading and needs to be contained before it reaches the vast population of the rest of Asia. We agree, too, that poverty has a woman's face: 70 per cent. of the world's poor are women, and the poorest children come from women-headed households.

Nevertheless, we believe that any attempt to entrench such objectives in legislation will impair our adaptability and flexibility. The flexibility of our current arrangements makes the United Kingdom one of the most effective development organisations in the world. The needs of countries and regions vary; performance varies from country to country. We hold all those objectives dear, but we deploy our resources where they can make a difference to a country's need and what other development partners might do. Tying down proportions of our work or focusing on particular priorities in the Bill would create a rigidity that is illustrated by the United States development programme. Its legislation involves a lot of earmarking, which prevents it from responding flexibly in many of the countries in which it is working.

I strongly commend the Bill. Its purpose is simple, but profoundly important. One in five of the world's population—the 6 billion people who share this planet—still live in conditions of extreme poverty: the sort of conditions that our country experienced at the time of the industrial revolution. There is a lot of child labour, and many people cannot expect to live beyond their 40s. Many are illiterate, and many die of simple diseases such as diarrhoea and measles.

Given the world's levels of abundance and knowledge, it is a shame and a disgrace that the world still has such levels of poverty and inequality. It is a profoundly important moral issue. However, it is not only a moral issue. If the world continues with such division and those levels of inequality, we shall hand on to our children mounting instability and environmental degradation that will endanger their future, wherever they are.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): I am very grateful to my good friend the Secretary of State. The legislation is a tremendous step forward, and I am very proud that our country is taking this action. Obviously, however, we cannot do it alone. It would be excellent news if we knew that other countries that are among the wealthiest in the world, and other bodies such as the European Union, were minded to set themselves similar policy objectives. Has my right hon. Friend anything to say on widening the participation by others in what we are trying to do in the United Kingdom?

Clare Short: I am sure that the whole House is very pleased to see my hon. Friend. We know that she has not been well, and it is delightful to have her in the Chamber today. I also honour the fact that, throughout her political life, she has worked on the issue of international development. It is lovely that she returns when we are discussing this legislation.

As I said, we have worked very hard to obtain central commitment to the poverty eradication targets, to try to co-ordinate the objectives of the entire international development system—including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, regional development banks, all the United Nations agencies and all the bilateral agencies. We do not want a plethora of fragmented, different projects in countries, but to pool our resources in the budgets of Governments who have clear, explicit and measurable poverty-eradication objectives. We are increasingly receiving co-operation across the international system in achieving that objective, which is increasingly being accepted as the way in which we should proceed. I am proud that our Government have led in much of that work.

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): My right hon. Friend mentioned the issue of poverty reduction strategies, to which we are all signed up. However, is not one of the big issues in the world the need for poor countries to trade with rich countries? As poor countries are said to be losing out, to the tune of about £500 million annually, to the rich countries, that trade is clearly a transnational issue. Clearly, when we consider that that £500 million loss is 14 times more than those countries receive in overseas aid each year, trade is also a central issue. I am delighted that my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Chancellor have mentioned that fact in some of their previous speeches.

Clare Short: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, who describes an aspect of the process of separating the

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issue of world poverty from the charity box. Development efforts are not simply the administration of an aid budget. We have to consider all the instruments of government in determining how we can create an international trade system that is fairer and gives developing countries a chance to grow their economies. It is therefore very welcome that Pascal Lamy, the European Union Trade Commissioner, proposed the everything but arms initiative to improve trade access for the world's poorest countries to the European Union market, which is the world's largest. Although those countries account for only 0.4 per cent. of world trade, there was resistance to the initiative—which had to be watered down somewhat before it could be passed by qualified majority voting. Nevertheless, it was passed. That is a very important first step, and I hope that there will be very many more steps.

As I said, the Bill's purpose is to entrench poverty reduction as the purpose and objective of United Kingdom development policy. We are working hard to entrench that objective around the world. We live in a time when—with the new wealth and technology created by the new information technologies, the abundance of capital and the way in which we can share knowledge around the world—there could be massive progress in poverty reduction. I think that we are at a turning point. We shall either make massive progress or see the poorest people and countries more marginalised and impoverished. The Bill entrenches in United Kingdom statute the certainty that United Kingdom Government efforts will be absolutely focused on securing a systematic reduction of poverty.

4.34 pm

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I agree with the spirit of the Secretary of State's comments, particularly when she described the world as we know it. The Opposition share a common objective with the Government: we seek to alleviate world poverty. We, too, seek a more stable world in which every person has access to basic living standards, a basic education and primary health care—a place where children are free from involvement in violent conflict. We also seek to pursue that vision. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State and her Department for what they have done in the past four years to move towards that common objective.

In the past two years of doing this job, from something of a standing start, I have become absolutely persuaded that the right kind of help can make a very real difference. I have seen with my own eyes as I have travelled to some of the poorest parts of the world that focused development works. I have seen projects, relationships and work being done in all parts of the world that make me proud to be British, whether it involves our own Department for International Development, British charities or British people making their own contribution to alleviating grinding poverty and helping people to be free from poverty and stand on their own two feet. We can change lives and bring hope to many, and so we must.

I felt it was right to start by putting on the record very clearly the fact that we share a common goal and that we agree with many of the steps that the Government have taken to work towards it. We have always been happy to support the Government where we believe that they have acted in the best interests of developing countries. Hon. Members will agree that on several occasions I have recorded in the Chamber my support for certain actions taken by the Department. I particularly agree with the Secretary of State's comments today about the importance of Governments working with each other and with multilateral organisations and other agencies in a concerted effort to bear down on global poverty and instability.

So we are singing from the same hymn sheet this afternoon. We do not oppose the broad thrust of the Bill, but we have a number of questions and reservations about some of its contents, and I will exercise my constitutional duty in raising as forensically as I can, during my short remarks this afternoon, my concerns about certain aspects. Of course we will continue with that approach in Committee.

In the past four years, it has been a great pity that there have been so few opportunities for the House to debate international development. In 1997 the Government said that they envisaged an annual debate on international development. That has not happened. The Labour manifesto said that international development would be brought back into the mainstream of Government decision making, yet we have not had a single debate on international development in Government time since 1997.

In the Queen's Speech, the Prime Minister described how the Government planned

"to shape the forces of globalisation"—[*Official Report*, 6 December 2000; Vol. 359, c. 4.]

by means of the globalisation White Paper. It was a massive claim and a good White Paper, yet the House has never been given the opportunity to debate it. It was not even presented by way of a statement to the House. A White Paper that was going to shape the forces of globalisation and was important enough to be included in the Queen's Speech was not important enough, it seems, to be brought to the House by way of a statement.

Clare Short: I share the hon. Gentleman's view that we should have more debates on international development. I believe that there is a lag in all parliamentary systems across the world, in that international development is in the charity box and not in the mainstream of politics. That is immoral and an error as regards the future stability of the world.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the lack of a statement on the globalisation White Paper. As hon. Members would imagine, I pressed for a statement and was told by the usual channels that the Opposition would be irritated because they had other objectives. A bit of honesty about this is in order. Have the Opposition been pressing for more debates on international development, and did the hon. Gentleman try to exercise his influence through the usual channels to get a statement, as I most certainly did?

Mr. Streeter: I am flabbergasted by what I have just heard. We certainly pressed for a statement. As someone who used to be part of the usual channels, polluted though they are, I can tell the House that there was no way in which we would have tried to block a statement. We were calling for a statement on an important White Paper that was going to shape the forces of globalisation. You may remember, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I complained, on a point of order, about the absence of a statement on the

day in question. It is all very well for the Secretary of State to say that she was pressing for a statement, but she has talked in the past about joined-up Government. It is a pity that she was not able to influence her colleagues and ensure that that important statement was brought to the House.

Mrs. Fyfe: To enable the House to gauge the sincerity of Opposition attitudes on this matter, will the hon. Gentleman remind us of how many White Papers on international development were published between 1979 and 1997?

Mr. Streeter: I was going to welcome the hon. Lady back after her recent illness, but now I am not so sure. To be serious, I am afraid that I do not know how many White Papers were published in that time. However, had the previous Government produced one, a statement would certainly have been made about it, as that Government did not bypass the House of Commons. I hope that the hon. Lady finds that answer—never mind the quality, feel the width—satisfactory.

We have heard a lot in the past four years about the Government's contempt for Parliament. Nowhere has that contempt been more clearly demonstrated than in their handling of the vital subject of international development. I do not like the Secretary of State's expression "charity box", as I think that it demeans the vital role that charities play in development, but I agree with her that the world is waking up to globalisation and to interdependence.

In every country in the developed world, our responsibility to the developing world is becoming more and more politically mainstream. That is in part because of the impact of our globalised and interdependent world, and in part because more and more people are taking an interest in this vital subject. To that extent, therefore, I agree with the Secretary of State that international development is becoming a centre-stage concern, and that the system may sometimes lag behind the new realities.

British aid and development enjoy a high reputation all over the world. British aid charities often lead the way, and the newly branded Department for International Development has built on the impressive achievements of the previous Administration. I am able to pay a genuine tribute to the work done by the Secretary of State's officials in many different countries.

In the space of just a few moments, I have praised the Department for International Development several times. That clears the way for a damning attack on the Secretary of State later in my speech.

The Secretary of State told the House in November 1997:

"I have paid my tributes, and they were genuine, to Lynda Chalker".—[*Official Report*, 5 November 1997; Vol. 300, c. 320.]

The OECD said in 1997:

"At the last Aid Review of the United Kingdom, the Committee recognised the well organised, business-like character of the British bilateral programme, drawing on substantial national expertise. The last DAC aid review was impressed by the internal procedures of DFID's predecessor agency."

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) who was involved in that predecessor agency and who helped to secure that impressive report.

However, Labour Members sometimes give the impression that history began on 1 May 1997, and that they invented overseas aid on the same date. Britain has always had a strong record on aid and development. For many years, under the previous Conservative Government and under this Government, Britain has also led the world in debt relief. Part of our historic and strategic role in the world is to play our full part in relieving global poverty and working for global stability.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the shift in policy to untie aid from trade was correct? Will he make statements in support of the change, especially given that British companies and businesses sometimes raise the matter?

Mr. Streeter: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me the first of what I hope will be many opportunities this afternoon to plug the Opposition's policy paper on this subject. It clearly sets out that a Conservative Government coming to power on 4 May would not reconnect aid and trade.

The next Conservative Government will build upon the fine tradition that I have just outlined. Against that background, I turn to the Bill. I have already said that we stand ready to support policies that are effective in reducing global poverty. I listened very carefully to the Secretary of State's address; none the less, my first question is whether the Bill is necessary at all.

The Bill gives the Secretary of State the power to focus development policy on poverty reduction, but she already has that power. If she does not have it, much of her activity over the past four years has been illegal. The Bill gives the Government power to carry out humanitarian assistance, but they already have that power. It gives the Government the power to promote development awareness, but they are already doing that.

What is the point of the Bill? Why introduce it just before the election? What difference will it make to the way in which the Department for International Development goes about its work? How will it improve the British aid effort? Once the Bill becomes law, what difference will it make to the way in which the Secretary of State does her job? I suspect that it will make no difference, so why introduce it? I would like the Under-Secretary of State for International Development—whom I welcome to his newish position—to deal with these questions in detail in his winding-up speech. I have a feeling that he may have plenty of time in which to do so.

Mr. Bercow: In recognising the wisdom of the Secretary of State's point that poor people should not be obliged to pay for the misdeeds of their tyrannical Governments, and acknowledging in the process that Governments often face appalling dilemmas as to whether and when to turn the tap of Government assistance on or off, will my hon. Friend press the Under-Secretary to explain how, in allocating aid, we can give more effective teeth to the criterion of good governance?

Mr. Streeter: Not for the first time, my hon. Friend has gone straight to the heart of the matter. I wish to talk quite a lot about good governance. He is right to want the Minister to say more about what will be done to bring good governance centre stage.

I have some specific concerns about the Bill. It seeks to set a new focus on poverty reduction. In one sense, who on earth could disagree with that? However, are there

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not hidden dangers in setting such a narrow legal framework? What does that mean for work and funding linked specifically to democracy building, support for good governance and the rule of law? Everyone in this Chamber knows that these are fundamental to strengthening the framework in developing countries if global poverty is to be reduced. Indeed, the next Conservative Government will bring them centre stage. Is the right hon. Lady certain that a court would construe these activities as being within the definition of poverty reduction, if challenged by judicial review? Has she taken expert legal advice on that matter?

Clare Short: Yes.

Mr. Streeter: I am glad that the right hon. Lady trusts her lawyers. That is good.

What about action to deter the topical and very evil trade in trafficking human beings? Is that within the poverty focus? What about support for a clamp-down on the illicit drugs that destroy so many lives? How about action on the flow of small arms to regions engulfed in conflict? The right hon. Lady will no doubt have read my policy paper and seen our new commitment to introducing a scheme to crack down on the flow of small arms in regions of conflict. If the Bill makes progress between now and 3 May, will I be able to introduce that scheme on 4 May?

Clare Short: In the areas of good governance or dealing with the harm that drugs do, many interventions can be made. In all government systems, people regard the development budget as a residual to fund their particular concerns. Those may be completely proper and honourable matters, but they are not always to do with the reduction of poverty.

When people grow drugs because they have no other livelihood, supporting them so that they can have other livelihoods and a better, legitimate life is a proper part of development assistance spending. However, the large amounts of money that could be spent on preventing drugs from flowing across the world—desirable as that is—would not come within development budget funding.

The answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is: yes, in all regards, if the point of the reform is to create conditions under which poor people will have the chance of a better life and poverty will be reduced. The answer is no if the objective is desirable but it has nothing to do with improving the lives of the poor of the world. That is the legal advice that has been received, and that is the intention of the Bill.

Mr. Streeter: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for making matters clearer, but she has, in one sense, given weight to my concern. Aspects of support will be defined as poverty reduction, according to her opinion, and other aspects will fall outside that definition. The Bill rightly gives her that discretion, but she will be giving a subjective opinion, and one can anticipate a challenge to future DFID funding and support by well intentioned, well motivated people concerned that the Department is funding one aspect rather than another about which they feel passionate. I simply ask the Secretary of State to make sure that the Bill is robust enough to withstand judicial review. We shall wish to go into that point in detail in Committee.

Dr. Tonge: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that poverty reduction measures can be achieved by the Department for International Development only if other measures, such as arms control, are introduced by other Departments? That is what we lack.

Mr. Streeter: I certainly agree that we have had precious little joined-up thinking in the past four years from a Government who promised it.

Mr. Browne: When he asked whether the Bill's terms were robust enough to allow the Secretary of State to do what she wanted in relation to good governance, the hon. Gentleman referred to his own policy paper. I confess that I have not read it, but I shall correct that omission as soon as possible. He suggested that if the Conservatives came to power, good governance would be a stated objective of development assistance. Presumably, they would support good governance only for the purposes of development. Would they support development for any purpose other than poverty reduction?

Mr. Streeter: Good governance would certainly be the focal point of the next Conservative Government's development policy. There is no question but that we shall support countries in their march towards good governance, without which there would be no framework to sustain the investment and entrepreneurial activity that cause living standards to improve. That will take centre stage in our policy.

The Secretary of State has answered the questions that I have put so far. Would the Bill permit steps to facilitate private investment, which can work faster than anything else to reduce poverty? Will she give her definition of poverty—perhaps in Committee? What are the benefits of imposing the narrow approach in the Bill? How would it make us better off?

We shall wish to explore those questions at length in Committee, and I hope that the programme motion will allow enough time, which the motion on the Order Paper certainly does not. Given that we have had few opportunities to hear from the Secretary of State in the House—though it is always an illuminating experience—will she confirm whether she will serve on the Standing Committee?

Clare Short: I do not intend to serve on the Committee. I have an incredibly able deputy to do that job for me, and we can expand the activities and achievements of our Department by not wasting our resources on performing the same task.

Mr. Streeter: I am disappointed, since the Secretary of State's input would be important as this tricky matter passes through Committee, but I hear what she says.

The Government's poverty focus is inextricably linked to international targets on poverty reduction, which the Secretary of State mentioned in her speech. We all support those targets. The Government subscribe to the 2015 target of halving global poverty. Who would not? But are there not real dangers in hiding behind remote long-term

pledges? Targets are not the same as outputs. As we have seen with hospital waiting lists, the wrong target can be counterproductive. We have already seen how progress towards international poverty targets is failing. Recently, the UN stated that the current rate of progress towards halving world poverty is less than a third of that required to fulfil the 2015 target—a worrying admission.

Even when those targets are broken down, there are problems. For example, under the DFID public service agreement for 1999-2002, the allocation of aid to the poorest countries was supposed to be 80 per cent. last year; instead, it was 69 per cent. That is lower than in the previous year. Little progress has been made on maternal mortality, which led to the target being scrapped altogether this year. DFID could not obtain sufficient data on the target for enrolment in primary schools. If the Government cannot achieve even their smaller targets, what realistic hope is there for their global targets?

What a new Labour approach it is to set a target, announce it with fanfares in the press and include it in all the glossy brochures but, when it becomes clear that the target will not be reached, quietly to forget about it. Targets are worth while only when they are consistently applied so that progress can realistically be measured. They do not work if one keeps moving the goalposts.

For example, last October the Secretary of State said that 35 countries were eligible for debt relief and that it would be a disaster if we did not get three quarters of them on track by 2000. Three quarters of 35 is 26, but only 22 countries have qualified—four fewer than the right hon. Lady's target—so presumably that is a disaster. No, apparently it is not; instead of admitting that the target had been missed, she simply downgraded it. In a written answer, she said:

"I am pleased to report that 22 countries have qualified for exceptional debt relief . . . exceeding our target of 20 countries qualifying by end of 2000."—[*Official Report*, 10 January 2001; Vol. 360, c. 577W.]

Meaningless targets, continually downgraded, do not help hungry children. We want a clearer, more specific focus for British aid. I shall say more about that later in my speech.

The Bill gives the Secretary of State wide discretion as to how to apply the objective, supported on all sides, of reducing global poverty—rightly so. We support that wide discretion. However, when considering how the Secretary of State is likely to exercise her powers, if the Bill becomes law and in the unlikely event of the Government's re-election, we are entitled to examine the policies that she has pursued to date.

The Government have begun to establish a clear pattern in their approach to international development. Increasingly, they are moving to a sector-funded approach and adopting a Government-to-Government approach—turning their back on some excellent work done by charities. This afternoon, the Secretary of State confirmed—more or less—that that is her approach.

Clare Short: As ever, the hon. Gentleman shows that he does not understand these matters. One cannot create effective modern governance—good governance—without engaging with Governments. It is the role of charities to bolster civil society, or to run pilot projects that show what is doable. As a Government, we are providing £195 million a year to UK non-governmental organisations that are involved in development assistance; that is more than we provide to the World Bank or to the UN development agencies. The hon. Gentleman is pursuing two contradictory objectives. If we want good governance, we have to engage with Government systems. If we put more effort outside Government, we will not achieve more effective Government systems. There is a contradiction in the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

Mr. Streeter: I am sorry to say that it is the Secretary of State who does not understand. The whole point of engaging with Governments should be to improve their governance, but her engagement with Governments all over the world does not have the specific focus of improving the quality of their governance; it is to deliver projects in those countries that are more often run by her officials than by their Ministers.

The right hon. Lady referred to the allocation of £195 million to charities and NGOs. That sum constitutes 8 per cent. of the DFID budget—no wonder the Conservatives have pledged that in our first Parliament we will double the proportion of DFID money to be spent through NGOs and charities. We believe in the quality of their work and in the excellent outcome of all their efforts. The Government have begun to establish a clear pattern of sector funding, Government-to-Government aid, and talking tough but acting soft in their attempts to improve the failing European Union aid programme, which wastes 30 per cent. of British aid money. I should like to examine each of those issues in turn.

We have serious reservations about the sector-wide approach to aid. It is dangerous to pour money into a developing-government programme with no clear knowledge of or control over how it is used, and the Department has highlighted those concerns. A research paper that it produced in 1998—entitled, "Social Development Issues in Sector Wide Approaches"—states that

"donor governments will have to come to terms with accepting the loss of direct control which project processes brought to donor staff in many instances".

It also states:

"Any individual donor's agenda is likely to be subsumed within a collective donor approach",

and will involve

"handing over the control to national institutions in partner countries."

It continues:

"Individual donor agencies joining a common programme with key partners in the country concerned lose a certain level of direct control over activities they support".

Of course, for a Government and country committed to poverty reduction and good governance, sector-wide programmes may well succeed, but in countries with no real commitment to good governance, taxpayers' money will simply be poured into a black hole. I believe that the Government need to be more cautious in their use of those programmes if public support for development is to be achieved.

The confidence of the British people in Government-to-Government aid is very low. We know that from the survey of opinion that appears on the Department's own website. The survey clearly shows that the majority of British people believe that Britain is a soft touch when it comes to aid. Although the British people have, time and

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again, shown themselves compassionate and generous in their support for people in crisis—whether in Mozambique, Kosovo or Gujarat—those same people have a low opinion of governmental spending on development. So the Government must win back lost trust and confidence by ensuring that British aid is not abused or misused; but that has not always been the case in the past four years. The Government are ignoring the findings of their own survey.

Let us consider Malawi. Far more than half the population over which the Malawi Government preside live in absolute poverty and more than 40 per cent. cannot read and write—so how could the Government of Malawi afford to buy a fleet of luxury Mercedes cars for Ministers? The British high commissioner knew that that would be unacceptable to British taxpayers, who have stumped up £46 million for that country this year alone. When I raised the issue in the House with the Secretary of State, she denied that there was a problem. However, there was a problem and the cars had to be sold, but the damage was done. How can the British people have confidence that their money, pumped directly into the Government of Malawi, is not simply freeing up resources that enrich the elite?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman misleads the House, and I am sure that he would not wish to do so. I told him that no corruption was involved in procuring those cars, but that it was outrageous extravagance, engaged in by the previous Finance Minister. The current Finance Minister of Malawi made it clear, at the conference in London last Monday, that I had been in touch with him and that he had announced that the cars would not be procured for Ministers; they would be sold and the funds spent on poor people in Malawi. The hon. Gentleman simply misleads the House, as he so often tries to do, in suggesting that I—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The right hon. Lady must not make such a remark, and I invite her to withdraw it. No hon. Member misleads the House.

Clare Short: I should like some advice from you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman has said that my response when he raised an issue was other than it was. I am sure that that was inadvertent, but it misled the House, and I need to correct the record.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is perfectly in order for the right hon. Lady to say that an hon. Member may have said something that was incorrect, but it is offensive in parliamentary terms to suggest that an hon. Member has misled the House.

Mr. Streeter: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The right hon. Lady confuses her recent response on Malawi to the Select Committee with the response that I received when I raised the issue in the House—she can check *Hansard*—before Christmas. The impression given by those on the Government Benches was that there was no problem, and they dismissed my raising the issue. Subsequently, the Malawi Government had to sell the cars.

The money raised from their sale might have reached the correct coffers in the Malawi Government, but how much was lost by selling new cars on a second-hand basis? We all know that cars, especially expensive ones, depreciate rapidly, and we wonder what that episode cost British taxpayers.

On Zimbabwe, how can the Government spend millions of pounds of taxpayers' money training the police and the army in a country whose President shops at Harrods, funds a war costing $1 million a day and oppresses his own people? Aid to the Zimbabwean Government should have been stopped a long time ago. The Government's inability to take a tough line with aid recipients undermines the very confidence in development that the Bill seeks to promote.

Corruption and waste are clearly major obstacles to encouraging support for development, so we might expect the Government to take every step possible to eradicate them. As we have already heard, however, Labour has failed to introduce legislation to enforce the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development convention on bribery. In 1997, the Secretary of State said in one of her first speeches:

"While developed countries have been aiding poor countries, their representatives have also been corrupting their governments in the interests of trade. It is right that developed countries have agreed to negotiate a convention to make it a crime to bribe public officials in a foreign country and to stop bribes".

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): Why, in every year of the Conservative Government's term of office, was bribery of foreign officials tax deductible?

Mr. Streeter: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman raises an issue that has nothing to do with the point that I am making, which is that, despite their posturing, rhetoric and four years in government, Labour has not introduced legislation on the OECD convention.

This Government have done nothing to enforce the convention. No prosecution has been brought under British law in the past four years; the Government have sat on their hands while corruption has abounded. Transparency International, a well known and much respected body, has said:

"Tony Blair and Robin Cook are said to have an ethical foreign policy. It is difficult to claim this if you don't have support for the OECD convention."

This Government can find time to ban foxhunting, but cannot make time to crack down on international corruption.

Where is the anti-bribery Bill? It is not good enough for the Secretary of State to say that she wishes that another Department had introduced it. Where is the joined-up thinking? Ministers promised in April 2000 that it would be introduced as soon as possible, but the Queen's Speech came and went. Where is the Bill?

Clare Short: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Government of whom he was a member, and for whom he was collectively responsible, took the view that existing British law enforced the convention and that there was no need to legislate? His Government did not propose any legislation. We undertook a review and are committed to legislating.

Mr. Streeter: The Secretary of State misunderstands the position yet again. She has had four years to introduce

the legislation and to check the position under British law following the OECD convention. My point is that last April, a Minister in the Government of whom she is a member said that the Bill would be introduced as soon as possible. We have since had a Queen's Speech, a vehicle for the introduction of such a Bill. None was forthcoming. The Government do not give the priority to bearing down on corruption that the next Conservative Government will give it.

Mr. Browne: Will the hon. Gentleman undertake that, if and when the Bill is introduced, no Conservative Members will oppose it on the grounds that it would give courts in this country jurisdiction over offences committed abroad? In the four years that I have been a Member of this Parliament, I have listened time and again to speeches of that nature from Conservative Members whenever we seek to bring jurisdiction home. I suspect that I shall hear such speeches again in the context of the Bill on the International Criminal Court.

Mr. Streeter: What a telling intervention that was—as though any Conservative Front Bencher could guarantee anything that a Conservative Member might say inside or outside the House. We believe that Members of Parliament are elected to represent their constituents and to speak their own minds in public and in private. What a contrast that is with the Labour party. The hon. Gentleman has as good as admitted that people such as himself take the line from their Front Bench spokesmen and that that is all they will ever say. We have known that for years, and are pleased to hear it confirmed.

My second major concern is that a third of all UK aid is channelled through the European Union. We know that its programmes are completely unacceptable and ineffective. Although the Bill does not alter the status of aid to the EU, the Government's new poverty focus puts Britain and Europe on a collision course. How can a Government who want aid to be channelled to the poorest countries contribute a third of their aid budget to an agency that last year gave most of its development aid to Morocco and Egypt? Surely their objectives are incompatible.

How can a Government who are committed to the elimination of world poverty seriously compromise that fight by funding an organisation with such a track record? According to the Blak report, which was issued by the European Parliament last week, the EU has the same number of staff in Mali to preside over an aid budget of 152 million euros as it has in Barbados, which has an aid budget of next to nothing. The picture of eurocrats sunning themselves on Caribbean beaches at taxpayers' expense is a scandal.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Does my hon. Friend greet with alarm yesterday's meeting between President Mugabe of Zimbabwe and none other than the EU's Commissioner for Development, Mr. Poul Nielson, presumably with a view to requesting the EU to continue and increase aid to that tyrannical regime?

Mr. Streeter: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. President Mugabe has benefited in his country from the publicity of being received by leaders of member state countries and Commissioner Nielson. That is a disgrace and has done untold harm to the cause of democracy and freedom in Zimbabwe. It will be a scandal if his visit produces more money from the EU when he presides so oppressively over that country. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that matter.

The Government missed the chance at the Nice summit to get the EU aid programme sorted out once and for all. They refused even to put it on the agenda, despite our repeated requests. The Secretary of State deploys the right rhetoric, but once again her Government fail to act. The only target set for EU aid spending is for it to be more focused by 2006, so we face five more years of waste unless the recent reforms work.

The Conservatives are the only political party that is committed to fighting that waste. In almost every case, bilateral aid provides better value for money than EU aid programmes. When we take office, we will immediately review the effectiveness of the Commission's reforms. If we conclude that they have failed to deliver a more streamlined, more focused and less wasteful aid budget, we will fight for a treaty change to allow member states to deliver aid bilaterally. The Government should have put the mechanism for that on the table at the Nice summit, but they point-blank refused to do so.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's failure on this matter at the Nice summit is especially unfortunate given that it coincided with the report of the European Court of Auditors on 10 January 2000? That criticised EU aid programmes for their "weaknesses and shortcomings" and specifically denounced the European Commission for its cumbersome procedures and overly centralised decision making. Surely something should have been done by now.

Mr. Streeter: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point: it was a missed opportunity, and I am afraid that the poorest people in the world will pay the price of misdirected EU aid over the next few years. He is right to mention the Blak report, which makes it clear that we cannot be too optimistic about the reforms working. It suggests that we would have to dismantle the whole bureaucratic culture of the Commission to deliver an effective aid programme. How many hon. Members believe that that is likely to happen?

Clare Short: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will want to confirm that the Government of whom he was a member altered the proportion of the UK aid budget from 10 to 30 per cent., but that they made no effort whatsoever to reform or improve the European Community's development effort. There is now a major reform agenda. It was driven by UK pressure, and the publication that we made available to the House indicated the direction of those reforms. The hon. Gentleman says that if the country ever has the misfortune to have another Conservative Government, they will review the reform agenda to see whether it has been implemented and will take action if it has not. His party's record is to give more aid, and not reform the system through the EC. The Government's record is to put major reform in place. Of course, if we get a better EC effort, it will reach countries with which the UK does not have bilateral programmes, so the possible impact is greater.

Mr. Streeter: The Secretary of State knows full well that the depth of the problem with the European Union's

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aid programme became apparent in 1996 and 1997, just as her party took office. She has had four years to push for reform of the programme. Under the Maastricht treaty, the proportion of aid was, of course, increased. My point is not what happened four or five years ago, but that the Secretary of State missed a golden opportunity to set matters straight at Nice and did not even try to put the issue on the agenda. As I said, the poorest people in the world will pay a heavy price for that.

The White Paper that preceded the Bill rightly focused on the importance of globalisation, which impacts on all of us. I am pleased that the Secretary of State now supports globalisation and capitalism with the zeal of a true convert. Even *The Economist* praised her recently, saying that

"she makes a strong intellectual case for global capitalism, arguing that it should be seen as the solution to global poverty rather than the cause of it."

The Economist says that the Secretary of State has

"changed her mind about her youthful sermons".

For that, she should be commended.

Most of us would be very happy indeed with that praise from *The Economist*. Strangely, however, the Secretary of State is not.

Mr. Worthington: Should not the hon. Gentleman quote the rest of the article, in which the Secretary of State pointed out that globalisation is neither a good thing nor a bad thing overall and that action depends on political will? The Labour party's political will, unlike that of the Conservatives, is to end world poverty.

Mr. Streeter: The hon. Gentleman is not correct in thinking that his party has a monopoly on compassion for world poverty. I made that point earlier and made it clear that there is a fine Conservative tradition of bearing down on global poverty, which will continue and be consolidated under the next Conservative Government.

I shall quote more of the exchanges between the Secretary of State and *The Economist*, which made interesting reading. Most of us would be happy with the praise that the magazine gave her. Strangely, however, she was not. She was so upset by *The Economist*'s praise, that she was moved to write and complain. She claimed:

"your snide comments on my political views and the Globalisation White Paper are misinformed".

However, *The Economist* cannot be blamed for thinking that the Secretary of State has had a Damascene conversion to global capitalism. In almost every speech, she demonstrates that she has changed her mind on every important argument in the past decade. The old Labour firebrand has become new Labour through and through.

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman does not know what he is talking about. Since I joined the Labour party, I have been in the tradition of the Attlee Government, who always believed in a mixed economy, effective states and the market doing its job. Unlike the hon. Gentleman, I was never a neo-liberal, a Thatcherite or a monetarist in favour of structural adjustments. He, of course, was—he would roll back the state and let inequality rip. He supported all those policies—I did not. I did not support them when I was young, and my party did not when it was in power in 1945.

The hon. Gentleman shares the ignorance of the editor of *The Economist* and, perhaps, has a background of fundamentalism in supporting market forces ripping through and rolling back the state. That did untold harm to the world, and was driven by the Government whom he supported.

Mr. Streeter: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her second speech of the afternoon. I join the editor of *The Economist*. After the exchanges between the Secretary of State and the magazine, it published a second article about her, which is headed, "No praise, please, I'm Labour". It says:

"We unreservedly withdraw any praise we erroneously gave her for doing so without embarrassment."

I am pleased that the Secretary of State said that she is in the Attlee tradition. The White Paper embracing globalisation was written by a new Labour Secretary of State, and is a far cry from the class warrior of old who, only in 1996, said:

"we socialists are different because we believe that the economy of the world must be managed in a way that provides a decent life for every person . . . It is now the time for the democratic socialists of the world to take the world forward again".

As is so often the case with recent converts, the right hon. Lady has gone over the top. She has misunderstood what globalisation is all about. She has said that

"the old idea of national sovereignty . . . is gone. The world is one",

but that is not true. The world is not one. We will raise that fundamental issue with her in Committee. The nation state still makes the greatest impact on people's lives. For a child in Nigeria, it is the Government of Nigeria who hold the keys to her future. The United Nations Development Programme's poverty report summed up the matter in five words:

"Good governance—the missing link."

I shall set out what the Conservatives will do in office to take practical steps to bear down on global poverty. Real change in a developing country can come about only when there is political stability. That means a framework of competent and responsible government, open and accountable institutions and a strong civil society. It means the rule of law and an effective and honest legal system. Conservative international development policy will focus on that.

It is our firm belief that when developing countries make a commitment to good governance, aid money is better spent and foreign direct investment is encouraged. Foreign aid alone will never be sufficient to lift a country out of poverty. It is by encouraging the private sector and foreign investment that we will help economies to grow and living standards to rise. Conservative development policy will help to lay the key foundations of stability, on which developing nations can then build. We want to empower developing countries committed to change, so that they can govern responsibly for all their citizens. In government, we will focus on good governance. We intend to amend the Bill in Committee to reflect that.

We also believe that although Governments may be ideally placed to deal directly with other Governments, that is only part of the story. It is hard for Governments to come alongside ordinary people and provide tailored solutions to individual needs. That is primarily the role of charities, non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations, which do an excellent and priceless job all over the world, caring for those in need.

In government, we will seek to boost the role of such bodies in development. We have pledged to double the proportion of the DFID budget spent by NGOs over the course of the first Parliament. We will also support the smaller aid charities, which feel let down by the present Government. In a consultation exercise involving more than 1,000 smaller aid charities, we were told again and again that they felt rejected by the Government, and that the application process for support for life-changing work in some of the poorest parts of the world was a long and painful process. We will put that right.

The Government have no information on their website to tell people how hey can help in international development. After the recent Gujarat earthquake, for example, Australian and American websites outlined what to collect, what not to collect, which organisations are working in the region and what technical assistance might be helpful. They were helping their people, but the British Government failed to support and encourage the energy and drive of the British people so that they could play their full part in fighting global poverty.

The Government do not respect or encourage the massive impact that private individuals and charities can make. The people of Britain have consistently demonstrated that they care about development issues. We will provide more information and better co-ordination of the relief efforts of British people. We will set up an agency, aid direct. Through a sophisticated website, database and call centre, aid direct will act as a central information service for members of the public, providing up-to-date and accurate information about all areas of development.

Aid direct will be dedicated to offering advice on how best the British people can help those in developing countries. It will help to match needs in the developing world with willing helpers in the UK. Aid direct will be set up in partnership with the NGO community, with constant input from NGOs and embassies throughout the world. It will empower the British public and small aid charities to make a real difference to communities in the developing world.

Harnessing the enthusiasm of the British people will not only help developing countries, but will raise the profile of development in the UK, so in government we will focus on good governance, do more to back the excellent work of British charities and sort out the EU aid scandal.

I should like to raise three other concerns about the Government's handling of international development that the Bill appears to do nothing to address. The Government are not supporting poverty reduction and sustainable development when they recruit staff from developing countries to fill UK shortages. The Secretary of State will know that the South African Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, has severely criticised the United Kingdom for poaching the most highly trained teachers from South Africa to cover up the Government's failure to recruit and retain teachers. Minister Asmal said that such recruitment drives showed little concern for the development needs of South Africa and the money and effort put into producing good quality graduates. Surely the Secretary of State cannot believe that it is right to fill our schools and hospitals with qualified doctors, nurses and teachers who have been stolen from developing countries. How can we expect those countries to lift themselves out of poverty if we help to train their teachers, but then snatch them away when they have been fully trained? How can she preside over that modern-day press gang? Where is the joined-up government, and what will she do to stop that damaging policy?

Last week, I received from DFID a catalogue listing more than 200 publications, including reports, plans, strategies and proposals. How do those publications contribute to the relief of poverty? One of the reports deals with what is on television, but how does a report on watching television reduce global poverty? The Government must be completely out of touch if they have to commission a report to find out what is on the television. Another publication seeks to explain poverty and the environment by using colourful characters such as Socrates and Frank Zappa. How can the Secretary of State justify the spending of taxpayers' money on so many glossy brochures?

It is no wonder that people are disillusioned. That unnecessary waste has cost British taxpayers £2 million since 1997. This year alone, the Department will spend £55,000 on direct mail promotion of its publications—money that will be used only to send the glossies out. During the past four years, it has spent more than £4 million on recruitment advertising. Since Labour came to power, aid administration costs have increased by £10 million in real terms. More and more is spent on administration, publications and advertising, which hardly demonstrates poverty focus.

My final point concerns the Government's promise to increase aid as a proportion of national wealth. In 1997, the Secretary of State stated:

"As our Manifesto and the Government's White Paper on International Development makes clear, we are committed to the UN 0.7 per cent. oda/GNP target and to reversing the decline in UK aid spending".—[*Official Report*, 12 November 1997, Vol. 300, c. 592W.]

When Labour took office in May 1997, aid as a percentage of GNP stood at 0.27 per cent. Last year, after it had had three years in government, that figure had fallen to 0.23 per cent. Only in the world of new Labour can that be described as a rise. The Secretary of State claims that there is a technical flaw in the figures, but in this case the phrase "technical flaw" is new Labour speak for the Government's complete failure to meet their target and keep their promises on aid spending.

If last year was a flaw, let us consider as a whole what has happened over the current Parliament and the previous one, including DFID's projections for the next two years. On average, in the five years 1992 to 1996 inclusive, the previous Conservative Government spent 0.3 per cent. of GNP on aid. Between 1997 and 2001, the current Government will have spent an average of 0.27 per cent. of GNP on aid, according to their own figures. That difference—0.3 per cent. versus 0.27 per cent.—must be another technical flaw. Even in real terms, aid has been lower under Labour. Last year, Labour's aid budget was still lower than those in four out of the previous five years of Conservative government.

The Secretary of State must have been giving us a prophecy in 1996 when she said:

"The Government always promises more money for the poorest people tomorrow, yet tomorrow never comes".

Today, the truth can be told. It is not a technical flaw and the figures are clear. No matter how the Government spin or conceal it, they have broken their promise to the British

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people. They are spending less on aid as a percentage of GNP than the previous Conservative Government. How many ways can one say it? Labour spends less on aid than we did. The Bill is another example of fine words; time will tell whether it will make a difference to the lives of the poorest.

We will work towards a target of spending 0.7 per cent. of gross national product on aid. We have set out changes of £8 billion to Labour's public expenditure plans for 2003–04. None affects the aid budget. We shall continue to champion debt relief for the poorest countries. We will be radical, but compassionate. We recognise the reality of abject poverty and we accept the role that our country can play in helping to improve living standards for those who live in the world's poorest countries.

We will focus on good governance, give more support to charities and end the European Union aid scandal. Like the Government, we will work towards achieving the global targets on poverty, education, health and the environment. Unlike the Government, we have policies that will enable us to do that.

5.30 pm

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): If I had not been a Member of Parliament since 1982, and had not enjoyed the privilege of serving in the post that the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) currently holds, I would have found it difficult to believe that he could make such a speech. It was a mean-minded, unworthy little speech, which failed to address the Bill. Above all, it failed to acknowledge one of the Government's greatest successes: the creation of the Department for International Development, which is proudly led by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. Its success has been recognised not only in Great Britain and Europe but throughout the caring world. I am sorry that that has escaped the hon. Gentleman.

It was difficult to believe that we were being lectured at the Dispatch Box by a spokesperson for the party that was responsible for the Pergau dam and all its implications. I heard Sir Timothy Lankester's evidence to the Select Committee. He told us about the way in which the previous Government had repeatedly abused every aspect of overseas aid. I listened to Baroness Chalker and Lord Hurd, who failed to justify the combination of overseas aid and taxpayers' money with arms deals. The previous Government's attitude was repugnant and as indefensible then as it is today.

I welcome the Bill, and I am sure that most hon. Members and the majority of the British people welcome it. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State rightly seized a legislative window of opportunity. The Bill takes international development forward by several strides and I am proud to support it. The hon. Member for South-West Devon suggested both that the Government were doing too little, and that the Bill would do too much. There has been no legislation on the subject for 21 years and it is therefore right to tackle that gap.

The hon. Gentleman referred to non-governmental organisations, charities and voluntary organisations. I have spoken to representatives of several and, like other hon. Members, I have received briefings and letters. Not one expressed the view that the Bill was unworthy of support. Indeed, some would like the Bill to contain more than we can currently include. I shall deal with that point shortly. The Bill is greatly welcomed, and my right hon. Friend is right to press on with it. Through her excellent record and the White Paper, she has established that poverty reduction is a pivotal aim of UK development assistance. We accept that it is necessary to support the activities of organisations likely to promote awareness and understanding of world poverty. That is precisely what the Bill does. It is right to do so, and those organisations welcome that.

I also welcome the fact that the Bill addresses the whole of the United Kingdom. When I hear so many other mean-minded attempts to try to set parts of the United Kingdom against one another, I welcome the fact that, on the issues of development awareness and advocacy that my right hon. Friend welcomed in her speech, the Bill will embrace both the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. That is excellent in terms of involving all our people, and, in particular, young people—pupils, students—in the vital issue of development and in our perception of what the British Government in modern times have achieved and can achieve.

My right hon. Friend has confirmed in her speech and in the Bill that poverty is a global crisis, and one that is begging to be addressed in sub-Saharan Africa. That was the kind of thing that I had expected to hear from the hon. Member for South-West Devon. The number of people in poverty rose from 242 million in 1990 to 291 million in 1998, and 5,500 people die every day in Africa as a result of AIDS. More people will be concerned about dealing with those problems—which the Bill, addressing poverty as it does, can certainly do—than about whether people buy cars in Malawi or whether a statesperson of dubious standing should dominate our approach to these important issues.

I have never believed that people should suffer because of the leadership under which they happen to live at a given time. I am glad that the Bill is much more forward-looking than to suggest that, and that it sets higher horizons than that. That is quite right, too, at a time when one in five of the world's population—two thirds of them women—live in abject poverty in a world of otherwise growing prosperity.

Of all the clauses in the Bill, I most welcome clause 8. It does what we want the Government and the House to do, which is to show—not just to speak of—our support for organisations likely to promote awareness of world poverty, and to show, as part of primary legislation, that they have an important role to play. The Overseas Development and Co-operation Act 1980 failed to address that, and it is absolutely right that we should introduce legislation to address it now.

Hon. Members will no doubt speak of their own experience in these matters during the debate. I would like briefly to speak of a recent visit that I paid to Peru, and of the impact that the Bill will have on the important work going on there. I welcome the work of organisations such as the World Development Movement and the Catholic Fund for Overseas Development. Incidentally, on the subject of corruption, I believe that that aid work managed to influence the removal of Mr. Fujimori. I would welcome a comment from the hon. Member for South-West Devon on that step forward for democracy.

Those organisations did even more. Organisations such as CAFOD in Lima, by supporting the women organising the soup kitchens—very welcome for people who have not eaten for days or, in some cases, weeks—are emphasising that women have a role to play in a developing democracy. CAFOD, in addressing the problem of HIV-AIDS in Peru, and encouraging people to support one another and to demand their rights from the Peruvian public health system, is doing what the Bill will encourage many others to do in other parts of the world.

I conclude my remarks on my experiences in Peru and, in particular, the input of CAFOD and other organisations by referring to this comment:

"The bill is narrower in purpose than the 1980 Act but is wider in the powers that it gives the Secretary of State to pursue poverty reduction".

That is CAFOD's view, and it is mine as well. It is also one reason why I welcome the Bill.

Mr. Rowe: The right hon. Gentleman is skirting round a difficult question. He suggests that there is some merit in western aid agencies helping citizens to organise themselves to remove a corrupt Government, yet national Governments are extraordinarily leery about operating in such a way. Is not the extent to which such corrupt Governments should be respected, regardless of how badly they behave, a difficult issue? It is central, is it not?

Mr. Clarke: I would not disagree with the hon. Gentleman. Of course that is an extremely difficult issue, which is why it perhaps ought to be approached with more sensitivity than was displayed by the Opposition spokesman.

In presenting the Bill to the House, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is entitled to claim credit for the £195 million that she provided to civil society groups—17 per cent. more than in 1996–97. The need for poverty reduction has been well and truly established. According to the World Bank's 2000 development indicators, about 1.2 billion people were living in extreme poverty—on less than £1 a day—in 1998. That figure was about the same 11 years previously, in 1987. Surely that invites challenge.

The record of my right hon. Friend's Department exceeds the commitments set out in our election manifesto, progressive as they were. Representations have been made about tied aid, which, for reasons that I fully understand, is not dealt with by the Bill. However, it still covers such issues positively. I understand that the WDM and others welcome the Bill, but still suggest that perhaps a little more could be added to it. My response is that the Department is indeed going ahead and addressing those other issues. We hope that the Bill will be passed, but that does not mean that we are pulling back for one moment from the commitment to tackle important matters such as tied aid, especially in the light of our experience with the Pergau dam.

Clare Short: If tied aid is supplied, the goods or consultancies procured have to go back to the providing country. All the World Bank research shows that that creates gross inefficiency and aid is reduced in value by 25 per cent. The Bill, which states that poverty reduction must be the target, will make it impossible to reintroduce tied aid. As my right hon. Friend knows, we have announced that we are getting rid of it completely, so there is no need for an explicit provision about it. The Bill means that tied aid will not be permitted because it is not poverty focused.

Mr. Clarke: I very much welcome what my right hon. Friend says. I am sure that those charities and voluntary organisations that have been following our proceedings will note her remarks and welcome not only them, but what was said in "Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor".

The Bill's main thrust deals with world poverty. Of course we should aim in that direction, and my right hon. Friend can say with pride that she has introduced the measure against a backdrop of substantial improvements in international development made since she took over. Between 1997 and 2003–04, the UK aid budget will rise by 45 per cent. in real terms, and nobody can take away from her and the Government the fact that it is the largest aid budget ever.

Moreover, there have been huge debt initiatives on the part of my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Prime Minister and indeed the Secretary of State, which have made remarkable progress. Important and radical as they are, however, those initiatives cannot succeed unless we address world poverty and the need to help the poorest people in the poorest countries. I believe that the Bill seeks to do that.

Poverty reduction was not placed at the heart of the Overseas Development and Co-operation Act 1980. That is one of the Act's major defects, and one of the reasons why the Bill is necessary. The Bill accepts the challenge of eliminating poverty abroad, and I am glad that it does—but, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made clear, that does not mean that the rest of her Department's many-faceted work will not continue. Despite what she may have heard from other Ministers, the world outside recognises that my right hon. Friend has put development at the heart of this Government.

I recall the days when Question Time on Mondays ended with 10 minutes of questions on international development. A junior Minister replied for the Government; a Minister of State in another place also dealt with international development. If the hon. Member for South-West Devon needs any reminding of his Government's role in international development, compared with where we are today, I can refer him to the open letter that the then Minister, Tim Raison—on the day of his removal from office—addressed to his successor, Chris Patten. In that letter, he said that the only discussion on international development in which he had ever engaged with the then Prime Minister, Lady Thatcher, had taken place on the very day when she dismissed him. How different that approach is from today's attitudes!

I say to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State "Well done. We welcome the Bill. Get on with a great job: the country admires you, and so does the developing world."

5.47 pm

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): I shall begin by justifying the need for an International Development Bill. Some have regarded international development as a handout aimed at gaining political advantage, and at enabling the money to be used as an

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adjunct to political and diplomatic objectives. Others have regarded it as a method of getting rid of otherwise unsaleable equipment, such as the Westland helicopters that were given to India for "humanitarian purposes". Incidentally, they were recently returned to us as "junk".

The real justification, however, goes much deeper than those passing needs of Government. For me—and, I believe, for not only the Conservative party but the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties—this is a deeply moral question of human beings' responsibilities to their fellow men. It is the issue that faced the good samaritan. For a Conservative, it involves the issue of the responsibility of those with skills and wealth for those who were not born with such advantages.

Regrettably, in feudal and early Victorian times that attitude could be deeply patronising. I believe, however, that if people are able to make money and become wealthy, it is the result of God-given skills and hard work. Such wealth brings with it responsibility for using the money wisely to create employment, train others and enable people to help themselves. That should be regarded not as patronising, but as a God-given duty.

If what I have said applies to individuals, it must also apply to countries and Governments whose wealth is gained through taxing the product of the efforts of hard-working subjects of the Queen or citizens, for the public good and for equitable reasons. Often, Britain has become wealthy because of the efforts of thousands of people toiling as slaves in the sugar industry of the West Indies, the importation of bananas produced by thousands of ill-paid and ill-housed banana farmers on plantations owned by huge American companies in Central America, the harvesting of latex in Malaysia and Indonesia to make rubber, or the mining of gold from the bowels of the earth in some of the world's deepest mines in South Africa, in conditions that can only be described as close to hell.

Britain has become rich also by the mining of diamonds in Angola and in Sierra Leone, and by exploiting the skills of the tea pickers of India and the teak loggers of Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. With that wealth from overseas has come responsibility for those who live and work overseas. We have a responsibility to them.

Why do hundreds—now thousands—of people risk their lives to come to Britain and claim political asylum? Most of them come as economic migrants fleeing the intolerable conditions that they must endure in their own countries. Some of them come to avoid persecution and are seeking a safe haven. I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) confirmed in his policy speech to the Conservative party meeting in Harrogate that we should always welcome those people to our shores.

Dr. Tonge: Ha!

Mr. Wells: That is what my right hon. Friend said in Harrogate, and I am going to keep him to his word.

We cannot and must not turn a blind eye to those who come for economic reasons as well. Britain cannot accommodate them all, but we can help them to provide a better living for themselves in their own countries. We have not only a moral duty to do so, but a practical and common-sense reason for doing so. That is why Conservative Members must soften their rhetoric by recognising our duty, with others, to provide the means by which the wretchedly poor of the world can help themselves out of their misery and hopelessness. As my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) said, Conservative Members have a proud record. Nevertheless, that record is insufficient and more needs to be done. I should like to hear all parties give a commitment to do more and to grow the development budget.

The British people understand that something is going badly wrong when tens of thousands of people are crossing the entire length of the European continent, travelling through safe countries en route, suddenly to plead for asylum when they arrive in Britain. Something is going badly wrong when desperate people hide in the undercarriages of Eurostar trains or Boeing 747s. What is going wrong is our failure to offer investment, management and skills training in the countries from which those people have fled. In short, it is a matter of international development. I wholeheartedly welcome the new International Development Bill because I believe that it emphasises the duty of us all to promote that development.

My own conviction was triggered when, at 19 in Karachi, I saw the so-called houses that thousands of people had built on the sewage-covered banks of the Sind river. They were built of refuse such as Kelloggs cornflakes packets and anything else that they could scavenge from the river or that had been discarded by richer people. They had lived in that condition for eight years, since 1947, when the sudden and brutal division of India was agreed in a hurry by Lord Mountbatten on the instruction of Prime Minister Attlee, to settle the issue of Britain's relations with India.

What did India, Pakistan and the United Kingdom do to help those wretched people? They did very little indeed. Those people were put in that position by men who took political decisions without doing anything about the consequences for them. We could have helped them to rebuild their lives, but we did nothing. As poverty in this world is largely man made, it can be remedied by man. The appalling condition of those people made me resolve to try to build a better world that cared for them. That is why I believe that today's debate is overdue, and why we need to consider the Bill in much greater detail.

Clause 1 enshrines the poverty focus—which the Secretary of State wishes to be the core and main objective of her Bill—in legislation for the first time. The poverty reduction strategy is absolutely right, but nowhere in the Bill is there a definition of poverty. I have been in this place long enough to know why it has been omitted. The Bill's drafters would not have wanted to provide any opportunity for judicial review, so they did not define poverty.

The problem with that omission is that in very many cases, poverty is a comparative term. In just the past fortnight, for example, the Child Poverty Action Group published a paper stating that 25 per cent. of children in this country live in poverty. The abject poverty that we are discussing, and on which I think the Bill intends to focus, is—except in very exceptional and criminal situations—a life that no child in this country lives. The type of life lived by children who are born on rubbish heaps in Dhaka or in many other places around the world is a hideous life of great danger to which no human being should be subjected.

I therefore think that in Committee, we shall have to discuss further whether we need a definition of poverty. It is a very important issue if we truly want to find a way of constantly and continuously ensuring that future Secretaries of State for International Development really do concentrate the resources that are available to them on those who are in abject poverty—which I know the Secretary of State and many other hon. Members understand only too well.

Clause 3 is the humanitarian assistance clause and is a new type of provision. We sometimes wonder why it was thought necessary to include it in the Bill. The right hon. Lady explained that in cases where emergency assistance is necessary, she would like to be relieved of the poverty focus. I appreciate that in emergencies, the poor and the rich may be equally in need of humanitarian assistance. However, when we describe something as "humanitarian assistance", we have to know what we mean by the term.

Traditionally, we have intended that humanitarian assistance should be given to people without regard to whether they are on one side or the other of a war or any other situation. That is the basis on which the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Red Crescent and other humanitarian agencies have always operated and been welcomed by both sides. Regardless of the action that has been taken by the individuals or groups involved, those agencies have offered assistance—health assistance, medical assistance, food, shelter and warmth—to both sides, and that is how the agencies have been able to operate. We have to prevent any degradation of the term "humanitarian assistance".

I am concerned that the term has already been degraded, most recently in the Kosovo crisis. For the best of reasons, the European Union decided that it would provide winter fuel and what it called humanitarian assistance—which was funded by the European Community Humanitarian Office—to two towns in southern Serbia. The reason was that the mayors of those two towns supported democracy and opposed the continuation of Milosevic's rule in Serbia. I entirely agree with that policy, but to regard that aid as humanitarian relief is a degradation of that term. If we undertook to provide fuel, we should have provided it to all towns and to all those who were suffering from the cold and the lack of electricity as a result of the Kosovan conflict. That was not done. In my view, we risk using aid that is meant for humanitarian purposes in a political way, thereby undermining the concept of humanitarianism and destroying the capacity for emergency relief to be offered objectively and impartially.

The Bill should include a definition of humanitarian aid that puts in statute that it has to be provided impartially in order to prevent the perversion of development assistance into a politically dominated and politically motivated policy. That view is supported by the research carried out so well by Dr. Joanna Macrae, a research fellow at the Overseas Development Institute. Her arguments are compelling. She refers to:

> "Reaffirming humanitarian principles of impartiality and independence of humanitarian action, underscoring that its primary purpose is the alleviation of suffering not to resolve conflict or achieve a political objective."

We should consider that in Committee, and decide whether we need to amend the Bill.

I have some further points to make about issues raised in the Bill. The additional powers that the Secretary of State is seeking to assign, to hold shares or to offer guarantees, must relate in some way to the Commonwealth Development Corporation Act 1999. If and when shares are offered to the public under that Act, the Department for International Development will need the powers that are envisaged under clause 6.

I refer to our debate on 14 July 1999, when, as is recorded in column 529 of *Hansard*, I discussed how the CDC would change in the light of that Bill. That is now beginning to come to a head. I understand that the CDC is sacking many of the people involved in managing direct projects, and, indeed, that many direct projects, mainly in the agricultural sector, are being disposed of at less than cost. I warned the Secretary of State that such a tragedy might result from the nature of the CDC Bill, which I supported in principle. We now need the kind of provision that I suggested in that debate. A fund is necessary to bring about greenfield development, which can no longer be established through the CDC because it does not offer sufficient return, but is vital to kick-start economic development, particularly in agriculture, from which most people in the third world derive their income.

I urge the Secretary of State to consider how she can help that development to take place—not on the basis of an input from big companies or funds in this country, but to help the people concerned as we help people in depressed areas of this country when they have been put out of work, for whatever reason, and need a start, and just as we offer through the Welsh Development Agency, the Scottish Development Agency and so on, help to re-start businesses and so enable people to earn a living.

Clare Short: I know the figure—I mentioned it in my speech. We spent £190 million in 1991 on improving the incomes and livelihoods of the poorest people living in rural areas. The reorganisation of CDC was to get a sufficient rate of return to demonstrate that the private sector could afford to invest more in developing countries. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees, Africa needs to get more value out of its agriculture and to carry out more processing within the continent. That will produce a higher rate of return and attract the inward investment that the continent needs. So we have other means of providing support to rural populations on very low incomes, and we continue to use them. The CDC reform is going through and is still on track to achieve the objectives established in the Act that we debated so thoroughly.

Mr. Wells: I am grateful for the right hon. Lady's intervention on that point. We need more explanation as to how we can help the poor start up businesses and agricultural development, now that the CDC cannot offer assistance with that. I should like more detail as to how that is being done; I would be grateful if she let me know how it will be achieved.

Let me move on to clause 11, which deals with contributions to international organisations, and use it as a hook to bring two matters to the attention of the House. They are both based on the problem of accountability. The problems relating to the European Union's accountability to the House and to the institutions are extremely serious. I urge the Secretary of State on, as I know that she has been as critical as the Select Committee on International Development has been in three reports to the House about the way in which the EU conducts aid business, as regards both the European development fund and budgetary aid. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon rightly referred to that in his speech.

[Mr. Wells]

The Select Committee, in its report on the effectiveness of EC aid, said:

"The fundamental mistake has been to allocate excessive funds in the first place for predominantly political reasons."

I want to discuss that further because the Bill says that all our money is to be poverty focused, yet we are giving to an international organisation that gives aid "for predominantly political reasons". Presumably that is why President Mugabe was seeing Mr. Poul Nielson, the Commissioner in charge of these matters, yesterday.

The Select Committee report continued:

"The Communication on the Reform of the Management of External Assistance was frank in its admission of the extent of the problem: 'The average length of project/programme implementation has continuously increased over the last few years with a corresponding trend in the backlog of outstanding commitments that reached over 20 billion euro by the end of 1999'"—

that is, the backlog. The communication continued:

"'In the last five years the average delay in disbursement of committed funds has increased from 3 years to 4.5 years. For certain programmes, the backlog of outstanding commitments is equivalent to more than 8.5 years' payments.'"

That is a disgraceful record by any standard.

Only last Thursday, Commissioner Patten came to the House to give evidence to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. Among other things, he said that the amount of money given to the southern Balkans—Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia—amounted to 850 million euros. My ears pricked up at that figure, because it is the amount that the European Union gives to some of the poorest people in the world. The EU's programmes for Latin America and Asia amount to 850 million euros a year. The programmes manage to spend that money without accumulating the backlogs accrued by the programmes for the Mediterranean and the east of Europe.

The Secretary of State must work with her EU counterparts to put right the EU's aid budget and give it a poverty focus. I know that she has been trying hard to do that and that she has got the agreement of the vast majority of her counterparts in other Governments. I have never heard any of them resile from that objective, but it is not being implemented in practice. We must redouble our efforts in that regard.

Clare Short: The Select Committee on International Development has made a contribution in that respect. The statement about EU policy reform is unprecedented in its radicalism. It admits the failures of the past, and it has been agreed by the Council of Europe and the European Commission. The European Parliament also agreed to it last week, but the reform statement needs to be implemented. There is also agreement on the decentralisation programme, which will remove the layers of bureaucracy that prevent the money from being spent.

We still need to drive the reform through, but we have made a breakthrough in achieving the commitment to it. The Government, and the Select Committee, have contributed significantly in that regard. We must finish the job, but securing the admission of past failure and the commitment to deep policy change represent an unprecedented breakthrough.

Mr. Wells: I hope that I have made clear my awareness of the Secretary of State's hard work on this matter. I did not know that the European Parliament had adopted the programme, but I am delighted to hear it. We now have the basis to ensure that the reforms are pushed down to the right levels, and that power is devolved to the countries where the EU is working.

Unfortunately, such devolution has not happened yet. The Select Committee visited Vietnam and Cambodia and found that the EU representatives remained in the unhelpful mode that we have criticised for so long. Progress has been made but, as the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon have said, we must display the determination that the right hon. Lady has shown on many occasions and ensure that reforms are pushed down to the most appropriate levels.

We must ensure that the EU is accountable when it comes to adopting and delivering a poverty focus, and the same is true of the regional development banks. The present Minister of State, Scotland Office, the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes), used to be the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, a post now occupied by the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin). The present Minister knows a lot about this subject, and I enjoyed reading his book about Vietnam when I was there, but his predecessor did a huge amount of work on regional development banks and, unprecedentedly, visited them all.

The Department has issued reports on the banks, but the reports are disappointing because they are, inevitably, a little superficial. I know of some banks whose lending is seriously politically bent. Pressure is exerted to ensure that they invest where they should not. The banks agree to make investments for political reasons, and because their shareholders' representative in a particular country is often the Minister responsible for a particular project. The banks therefore get overwhelmed.

The Select Committee has seen the development bank for the Association of South-East Asian Nations in Bangladesh and Cambodia go behind the backs of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and offer its own help for projects on the basis that that help remains undeclared. That practice has to stop. The international community has to work together and implement a responsible and coherent policy that is accountable to the member states who are the shareholders of the World Bank, and to this House. We must ensure that the same poverty focus in bilateral programmes proposed in the Bill is adopted by the international community.

The Secretary of State has made huge efforts with regard to the problems that exist internationally. She hosted a high-powered seminar last Monday, attended by the presidents of the World Bank and the IMF. The president of the OECD, Mr. Johnson, also attended. The seminar dealt with the serious matter of child poverty. The problems of poverty require great vigour, and organisations that do not fulfil their obligations must be called to account.

My final point has to do with SWAPs—sector-wide approaches. In that regard, my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon mentioned the question of good governance. I agree with the Secretary of State's objectives. She told the Select Committee that if we can get the education departments in countries that receive assistance—bilateral assistance from us, and multilateral

assistance too—to agree programmes with the IMF and to implement them, we will gain leverage, when it comes to focusing our efforts and money on poverty, that we have never achieved before.

The problem is that many countries are stricken with poverty because they are so poorly governed. Their Governments are corrupt, lazy and made up of elites interested only in feathering the nests of their members and friends. That makes it extremely difficult to get into the ideal position implied by the SWAPs policy.

When the Secretary of State gave evidence to the Select Committee last Tuesday, she said that SWAPs must be implemented at a lower level if they cannot be implemented at a higher level. She gave the example of Ghana, where co-operation and leverage were being achieved at regional or provincial level. That shows a welcome flexibility of approach, but such co-operation will not be possible in some countries.

We must learn to work to a time scale of more than three years. I could not agree more with the right hon. Lady that three-year projects merely pick at problems and do not address what is important—reducing rates of poverty and child mortality, raising the number of children attending primary school, improving the health of mothers, and so on.

More thinking must be done. In the meantime, we and the other donor countries must offer longer programmes that are better organised and designed. When faced with Governments whom we cannot trust, we must implement such programmes as far as we can.

Flexibility is essential. In Cambodia and Vietnam, the Committee encountered DFID people who said that they had worked on projects for 10 years, but were now being told that projects were out and SWAPs were in. The officials said that the Department in Victoria street did not want to hear anything about projects. However, the officials considered that projects represented the best way to address poverty, as they could be set in train before people were in a position to implement SWAPs. I hope that the Department is not going overboard in its enthusiasm for SWAPs as a method of getting a poverty focus into all our programmes.

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again, because this is so important. We all agree that there cannot be sector-wide or budgetary support unless a country has a reforming Government. However, reforming Governments with reforming intent often have very weak capacity. If, by working through those Governments, we can strengthen their entire public management systems, we achieve sustainability and scale.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees that when that is possible, it is the best way. When it is not possible, one has to find second-best instruments; but when there is a better way of working in other countries, we may leverage the reform effort in countries that perform less well by showing what can be achieved. Working in that way achieves scale and sustainability. Working through the systems of a Government means reaching everybody and engendering sustainable reform that will continue indefinitely.

Mr. Wells: I could not agree more. If we can reach that position, it would be ideal. We should continue to try and do so and make certain that the countries that offer poverty reduction programmes mean what they say. I got the definite impression in Cambodia that its Government would say what we—including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—wanted them to say. The proposals might look beautiful, but I got the impression that nothing of substance would happen. Either the Government did not know how to do it, or they did not have the people to do it, or they did not want to do it—I do not know what the exact combination of factors was. I know that the idea is ownership, but because such countries are so desperate for money, we have to ensure that they are not simply saying what we want them to say without actually doing anything. We must try to achieve the position that the right hon. Lady describes, without ignoring other opportunities that may present themselves.

I believe that the aid direct scheme proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon could be one of the most explosively good ideas that we could offer Britain. We could twin people in Britain who care about overseas development—and there are a lot of them—in the same way as Jersey does. The island of Jersey has a very small programme. In one of its projects, it contacted a village in Nigeria, near Ibadan, which did not have a potable, reliable water supply. The Jersey Estates put up some money but then asked the people of Jersey whether a team would like to go to the village in Nigeria, assess its needs, come back and order the necessary pumps, pipes and equipment, go back to Nigeria and, with the help of the villagers, build that pump and train the people there to maintain it. Jersey offered the villagers a maintenance service and provided spare parts, where necessary, over a long period.

If we could get a lot of such projects going, with a little assistance from the Department for International Development, people would be able to help others in a practical and sensible way. It would also transform people's attitude to aid. This is all about introducing people, showing them how to do things and helping them do those things over a long period. That could have an explosive effect on producing a culture in this country of wanting to help at the grass roots. It cannot be done in isolation; it must be done together with the bigger projects such as SWAPs, but it contains the kernel of a very important idea.

This is a moral issue which we cannot ignore. All parties in the House now have, through the Bill and other means, a focus on development which I believe will be at the centre of the problems of the 21st century. The real problem of the 21st century will be human migration. Unless we can find a means by which these developing countries can offer a decent life to their people, they will migrate, which will result in friction. The task before us is urgent and needs to be undertaken now.

6.25 pm

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), the Chairman of the Select Committee on International Development. I do not know whether this is his last chance to speak in a debate in the House on this subject, but, even if it is not, it would be appropriate to pay tribute to his chairmanship of the Committee. I have been privileged to serve on the Committee and have greatly enjoyed doing so.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about migration. He and I agree, and we discussed it recently, that this has been a neglected area as far as international development is

[Mr. Tony Worthington]

concerned. We say that we are giving priority to education or health in certain countries and put a lot of development money into those areas, yet we then take those countries' trained doctors and nurses. I find that difficult to take.

We must look at migration and at reducing poverty through that focus. The Department for International Development is conducting some research on the issue, and I hope that it will continue to do so in the next Parliament. It will need to be considered not only in a development context but across Departments.

I am very pleased to be here for an international development debate—I thought that my career might end before we had one. I do not think that anyone in the Chamber can remember the last one. That shows how much attention the House has devoted to the subject over the years.

The Secretary of State has introduced a Bill that will reduce her powers. My right hon. Friend has almost unlimited powers to use the money voted to her in whatever way is thought appropriate at the time. However, the Government are saying that is not good enough because it has led to some pretty crummy projects, and to corruption and perversions of British aid, such as the Pergau dam affair.

I pay tribute—

Mr. Rowe *rose—*

Mr. Worthington: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman who is about to intervene on me.

Mr. Rowe: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I call him my hon. Friend because we have served together on the International Development Committee with great pleasure. My point is that what he said is not altogether surprising because, after all, one of the Secretary of State's priorities is good governance.

Mr. Worthington: I will return to that point later. It is a fundamental misunderstanding for the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) to say that the Bill reduces the focus on good governance—quite the reverse.

I pay tribute to the Secretary of State with regard to the setting up of DFID and the work that it has done. It was epitomised, for me, by the conference that took place a week last Monday. Those attending included the president of the World Bank, the new head of IMF, the head of the United Nations Development Programme, the head of the United Nations Children's Fund—UNICEF—the Prime Minister of Italy, who is the current chair of the G8, the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, the head of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the head of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. They were there because the Department for International Development wanted a conference on how to reduce child poverty worldwide. The conference was attended not by substitutes, but by top people who recognised the Government's leadership in world development. Wherever one goes in the world, DFID is recognised and respected.

Person after person also commented on the remarkable fact that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer had attended a development conference. Yet without Treasury Ministers, Trade Ministers and those from the centre of Government, development will remain, as the Secretary of State said, in the aid box. One of the biggest achievements of the Secretary of State and the Government has been the amount of cross-departmental activity.

One always worries whether a new policy might go wrong. I was afraid that DFID—a small Department—might be marginalised and that its impact would be reduced when it was cut away from the Foreign Office. Quite the reverse has happened. Wherever I have seen it operate, DFID has a status of its own. The Foreign Office has piled in alongside it, or behind it according to circumstances. The Select Committee recently saw wonderful team work in Vietnam and Cambodia. There was no question that the impact was greater.

Ms Oona King: I, too, serve on the Select Committee, and I agree with my hon. Friend. Does he recall that Nelson Mandela also attended last week's conference, joining us by live satellite link? Nelson Mandela has joined the Labour party because, he says, Labour has consistently focused on international development, both as a Government and in many years in opposition.

Mr. Worthington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I had intended to say that Nelson Mandela was there, but thought that some smart Alec would say that he was not since he appeared on video. I forgot to mention that we had enjoyed his words and inspiration.

Ms King: Not by video, but live.

Mr. Worthington: He attended the conference live.

I must ask whether the reduction of poverty is the same as the increase of wealth. Should we include a clause committing the Secretary of State to concentrating on the poorest people in the poorest countries? I know that in some circumstances, it will be important to direct resources towards poor people in medium-level countries, but the Bill gives great latitude. Should we include a test of whether DFID has concentrated on the deepest poverty in the most difficult places? It may be too difficult to do so.

Clare Short: If we did that, we would be prevented from making reforms in Government systems that are needed to help whole economies to grow to include everyone and facilitate social reform. If we could spend only on the poorest people in the poorest countries, we could not spend on better financial systems, better revenue systems, better regulation of banks and so on. We share my hon. Friend's objective, but such a clause would narrow our powers in such a way as to prevent us from supporting reforms needed for the systematic reduction of poverty.

Mr. Worthington: I fully support what my right hon. Friend is doing about governance and helping to create civil services, police forces and the engines of state. I have no quibble with that. My question is whether we need to ensure that we concentrate on the countries in the deepest poverty—but I have no doubt that we are doing so now.

The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford asked about how DFID, as a development body, interfaces with other organisations. Poverty is the centre of our focus,

but if we are working with bodies such as the European Union or some banks, are we open to question about our success in influencing how they use our money? I agree that our success so far in changing our policy and altering other people's behaviour must be continued if we are to make our policy work. Our activities cannot be only bilateral.

Sometimes, DFID runs programmes that I do not see as absolutely central to overseas development aid. For example, money has been spent in central and eastern Europe—not all under DFID control—following the collapse of the iron curtain, as page 146 of the annual report notes. I wonder whether that money is subject to the same poverty focus as the development budget.

Why do clauses 9 and 10, on devolved powers, make no reference to Northern Ireland, when Scotland and Wales are covered? The powers devolved to Northern Ireland are equivalent to those devolved to Scotland. The bodies listed in the schedules to the Bill include tourist authorities and health boards and trusts. Northern Ireland has health boards, even if the tourism body is an all-Ireland body. Why is there no reference to Northern Ireland?

The Select Committee has recently discussed whether it might be handy if the Bill referred to how DFID should be accountable to the House. I have always been puzzled about why we have Wales debates, such as the one held yesterday, or debates on defence and on each of the armed services, when there is no requirement for an international development debate. I am fortunate to be on the Select Committee on International Development, but some less fortunate hon. Members present are not. I can see one Member—the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge)—who is in mourning because she is no longer on the Committee. Westminster Hall has been a good step for debates on international development, but there should be a requirement for a debate on the Floor of the House. That is a modest demand.

We must build our democratic links with DFID, but above all, with the EU to ensure that our views get across there. I am pleased that the World Bank has recently involved parliamentarians much more than it used to. The IMF should also consider such links. That issue is significant. The House does not deal well with on-going matters; we can deal with them if there is a Bill, but, as we have heard, it is 21 years since a measure such as this was introduced. It is important to increase accountability.

The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford referred to humanitarian principles. We have received extremely good lobbying material on that subject, which stresses the importance of even-handedness. That is the difference between life and death for many people. In the aid world, if one is seen as part of the enemy, lives are lost. The Red Cross has built its reputation on never being part of the enemy—one receives assistance regardless of ethnicity and so on. I support that. Humanitarian aid must be seen to be given dispassionately on grounds of need.

There is, however, another side. During our visit to Albania and Macedonia, we were struck by the fact that the armed forces put up the camps with incredible efficiency, as no other body could have done. That had to be done; otherwise, the consequences for those poor people who were fleeing would have been horrific. However, people in the aid agencies pointed out to me that it was a dangerous precedent for combat troops to put up such camps, and that we had to get the army out of that situation.

That is not the only example. One of the purposes of the proposed European defence force—of which I approve—is to give humanitarian assistance. In the past, I have been critical when world or NATO resources were available—especially for heavy lift—but people starved and did not receive aid because we were unable to get aid workers to them. I recognise the importance of humanitarian principles, but I do not want to draw their definition so tightly as to rule out the use of military forces to get aid to people.

The most recent case was in Mozambique, where our performance was superb, but why could not our military helicopters get there as quickly as possible? Such issues are at the boundaries of that humanitarian debate, and sometimes we have to use military resources—perhaps we should use them more often.

Mr. Wells: Does the hon. Gentleman remember meeting General Reith in Albania? He was the first NATO general to be given humanitarian responsibilities—when NATO was the belligerent force against Serbia over Kosovo. Surely, in that situation, the use of the word "humanitarian" by the military is a contradiction in terms. Humanitarian assistance from armed forces is most welcome, but those forces must be subordinate to impartial, aid-giving humanitarian organisations.

Mr. Worthington: The hon. Gentleman illustrates the point that we both make: the issue is not simple. For example, in Sierra Leone, there was no state and no army; it is impossible to reduce poverty without police forces and armies—without state institutions. By and large, the aid we give in that country is not humanitarian, but help with the construction of an army. I have seen that work, and I believe that it is right, because it is crucial to the recovery of that country and the ending of poverty there. The boundary between humanitarian and other issues seems simple, but it is not.

My final point might be for the Standing Committee rather than this debate, but the Under-Secretary might want to address it when he sums up. I am delighted to see him in his new position—his career plan is intriguing.

We are committed to the reduction of poverty, but I have some concerns about people who are involved with drugs. It is right for us to try to stop the supply of illegitimate drugs and involvement with them. Such projects are not likely to reduce poverty in the first instance. For example, I visited Bangladesh with other hon. Members to examine AIDS issues. There is no doubt that girls in the brothels are better off than if they had remained in their villages—that is why they had left the villages. It is right that we should try to return them to an orthodox life, but it might be difficult to claim that what we were doing was poverty reduction.

Dr. Tonge: I suspect that the girls in the brothel were better off as regards catching AIDS than the girls in the village, but that otherwise they would have preferred to be in the village.

Mr. Worthington: They might have preferred to be in the village, but they were financially better off by moving—that is why they did so. However, I raise the matter as an example of the focus on poverty.

Clare Short: Ill health makes people poor; they cannot work but they have to pay for drugs and treatments.

[Clare Short]

HIV-AIDS causes a big growth of poverty; there is lower life expectancy and loss of work, and many people to care for. Interventions to reduce the spread of that disease prevent poverty. That is permitted and encouraged under this measure—there is no question about that.

Mr. Worthington: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that point. We need to test all the points. Perhaps the drugs example is a better one. Our motive in trying to stop involvement in drugs in one country might be because of the poverty of people elsewhere. However, anti-drugs initiatives in a country should not be seen as impermissible just because they did not directly attack poverty there. We should test such points in Committee.

Clare Short: I shall try to stop intervening from now on.

In order to stop the growing of drugs in Afghanistan, a UN drugs agency paid people not to grow them, so even more growing took place in the surrounding area. Such interventions would not be permitted under the Bill. However, an intervention to help people who grow drugs because they are so poor that they have access neither to legitimate crops nor to a better legitimate life would be permitted—to enable them to have access to crops, so that their children could receive schooling and health care. Surely, that is where we should draw the dividing line. We could throw large amounts of the development budget at anti-drugs initiatives that were not well thought through and brought no help to poor people. That would not be permitted under the Bill. That is where we are trying to draw the line.

Mr. Worthington: Once again, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that intervention. That shows that we are bringing ideology into development by focusing on poverty. It is very important to test our development programme against a set of principles. Countries that fail to have respectable principles in their development programmes do not run good ones. We must have a simple clarion call for poverty reduction. That is what the Bill represents, which is why I support it so enthusiastically.

6.50 pm

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I, too, warmly welcome the Bill, as I have welcomed the two White Papers on international development that have been published in the past four years. The House should congratulate the Government and the Secretary of State on a very proud record. As has been said, it is more than 20 years since a Bill on international development was introduced. This is an almost unprecedented happening.

I agree with the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) that it is very sad that we have not had any lengthy debate on development issues, but, as spokesperson for the alternative Opposition, that is almost all on which I agree with him. In an hour-long speech, he spent at least 15 minutes discussing the fact that he did not have enough time for debate. Such comments always seem to be a total waste of time, but Conservative Members will, no doubt, spend another three quarters of an hour later this evening discussing why they do not have enough time for debate.

So devoid of ideas is the Conservative party that the hon. Gentleman could manage to spend only 10 minutes on Tory policy. He simply spent the rest of the time in a slanging match which had nothing whatever to do with the Bill. It was a pretty poor performance, and I am delighted that he is now back in his place to hear me say that.

I understand that this is a procedural Bill, and, in that sense, it is a bit grey. I was excited when I heard that it had been published because I thought that it would deal with matters such as bribery, as the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) suggested, and with tied aid and AIDS. I thought that it would be colourful, but, as I said, it is a bit grey and procedural. Nevertheless, it is still very interesting, and with the indulgence of the House, I should like to address the issues that it raises. I shall spend 10 minutes or so going through it, picking up some of the points about which I feel strongly and getting a few things off my chest.

The Secretary of State said that the Bill was necessary to ensure that aid would not be given at the whim of a future Secretary of State. The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) said that that was the case and that the Secretary of State was devolving responsibility. We have heard about the awful things that have happened when Secretaries of State have taken too wide a brief on aid in the past, and there have been disasters such as the Pergau dam, but why then does clause 1(3) state:

"'sustainable development' includes any development that is, in the opinion of the Secretary of State, prudent"?

The first amendment tabled must deal with that phrase. If we are to free ourselves from the Secretary of State's whims, we must not allow the phrase,

"in the opinion of the Secretary of State"

to be used, and I should like that matter to be clarified, but perhaps we can explore it in Committee. The inclusion of that phrase is dangerous because—although I suspect that it will be a long time before there is a change of flavour—how can we stop future Secretaries of State doing all sorts of terrible things in the name of development if it remains on the statute book?

I immediately spotted the fact that the declaration on the front of the Bill states that all its provisions are compatible with the European convention on human rights. Therefore, I have a difficulty with clause 2 on aid for overseas territories. First, on a side issue, if the overseas territories are part of the United Kingdom, I cannot understand why the aid that they need from this country has to come from the Department for International Development. If they have opted to stay part of this country, surely the aid should come from the education or health budgets, or wherever, not from DFID. However, if the Department is to give them aid and they call themselves overseas territories, we must insist that, as a condition of that aid, they uphold the international agreements that we uphold, such as the European convention on human rights.

There has been an enormous spat in the press and other media during the past few months about the refusal of some overseas territories to accept homosexual rights, with which I have been very much involved. Those territories simply must understand that they cannot have it both ways—either they are part of this country and comply with our international agreements, and we will help them, or they become independent. We should make that clear, and the Bill should do so, too.

On the thorny subject of humanitarian assistance, the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford called for a definition of such assistance. We must consider the need for humanitarian aid, but I should prefer to consider who causes the need for such aid. We should separate natural disasters from those that are caused, with whatever justification, by the Ministry of Defence or NATO. Should the Department for International Development pick up those bills either in full or in part? If humanitarian aid is needed as a result of military action to which this country has partly or wholly contributed, and if we are to stick to the poverty focus, the humanitarian aid should come from and be paid for by a Department other than DFID. I emphasise that the poverty focus is all-important.

A difficult issue is raised in clause 5, which I believe is intended to deal with what could be termed "tied aid". Clarification is needed because clause 5(1) refers to

"assistance in any form or of any nature, including . . . financial or technical assistance".

If that is linked with know-how, such as personal training or the provision of the results of research and so on, is that not tied aid?

Clare Short: No.

Dr. Tonge: It is not. Well, I need clarification on the issue, and I am sure that the Under-Secretary will provide it.

I want to refer to indirect offset schemes—mysterious things that I heard of only a few weeks ago at a meeting in Portcullis House. The Secretary of State kindly wrote to me on the subject, but I still do not understand under which category they come. I should like an assurance that the Government would never become involved with such schemes, because they tie the supplying country to the requesting country in an odd way. We need clarification on that issue.

I shall move on, under my agenda, to clause 13. I welcome the support for commonwealth scholarships—a wonderful scheme. About 95 per cent. of the participants in those scholarships return to their country of origin to work. They are currently nominated only by their Governments, however, so people who are part of significant dissident opposition in their country have a serious problem. For example, how will people who oppose the Zimbabwean Government ever have access to Commonwealth scholarships? When I was in southern Sudan, I was repeatedly told that people wanted Commonwealth scholarships, but could not obtain them because the Government of Sudan would not nominate them. Can we have an assurance that that will change?

Clare Short: Because the hon. Lady has asked parliamentary questions, she will know that we asked the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission to carry out a review so that the focus on development and poverty was central to its efforts. Members of elites often apply for scholarships, but they can obtain other forms of education if they are not nominated for one of those scholarships. The commission has done an extremely good job and we are in the process of implementing many of its recommendations. For the very reason that the hon. Lady has given, it recommended that nomination through Governments should not be the only means of gaining such scholarships. I intend to implement that recommendation.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the Secretary of State for clarifying that point. I know that it is important to many members of the Select Committee.

I will not go into detail on the subject of our contribution to European Union aid. We have heard a lot about that and the Liberal Democrats agree with what has been said. I shall never forget the day when I sat down with a glass of wine and looked at the Court of Auditors report on the delivery of aid. I expected to go to sleep very rapidly, but I got through half a bottle of wine and got more and more angry. I could not sleep because the report outlined the appalling delays that had occurred in the delivery of European Union aid. I am delighted by the changes that have taken place. However, as members of the Select Committee have said, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating, this time next year. Will the Commissioners have taken the recommendations on board and implemented the changes? I hope that they do, because it is important that we maintain the poverty focus.

I appreciate that there are very poor people in middle-income countries, and we want to help them. That is only right and proper. However, we must not use aid for political purposes as the European Union has done.

Co-ordination between Departments is very close to my heart. I remember early in this Parliament when I was a new Member asking the Secretary of State whether the aims of her wonderful White Paper on development were supported by other Departments. I received a blistering response. It would have reduced me to jelly if I were not such a tough old bird. The reply was as good as anything that the hon. Member for South-West Devon gets.

I have wondered over the past four years, however, just how much Departments support the aims of other Departments' White Papers. For example, if, as is stated in the White Paper, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office supports poverty reduction and conflict prevention, why have we had no arms control Bill or a register of—or control over—arms brokers? They contribute so much to poverty in this world.

If the Department of Trade and Industry wants poverty reduction, which it supported in the White Paper on development, why is it still considering export credit guarantees for the Ilisu dam, which will throw 78,000 people into poverty?

Mr. Wells: The hon. Lady may recall that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said that he was minded to approve the issue of export credit guarantees to Balfour Beatty, which will be one of the contractors in the building of the Ilisu dam. The Select Committee has asked to see the advice of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the Department of Trade and Industry that gave rise to that extraordinary statement, but the Foreign Office is refusing to show that advice to the Committee. Does the hon. Lady think that it has something to hide and that its advice on humanitarian matters is overridden by political considerations?

Dr. Tonge: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, who is the Chairman of the Select Committee. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office must have something to hide.

[Dr. Tonge]

Why do Departments have to face in two directions? They support the glorious and virtuous aims of the White Papers on development and globalisation, but they cannot implement such measures in their own Departments.

In a sense, the hon. Gentleman interrupted my flow, but he will be glad to hear that I have even more questions beginning with the word "why". The Home Office cannot cope with asylum seekers and we know that it is not coping. We also know that people migrate because they are unhappy, poor and want better lives, or are being persecuted, so why are we not putting more resources into aid and development to stop the flow of asylum seekers? Why do we not receive the Home Office's support for that?

If the Prime Minister wants poverty reduction and conflict prevention, why does he not express his total disapproval of Plan Colombia, which is being perpetrated on that tortured country by the United States of America? Why does he not protest at the United States' withdrawal of funds from non-governmental organisations that support abortion in some of their programmes? Why does he support the USA by staying silent on these issues? Why, why, why?

To end on a rather depressing note, I sometimes get the feeling that the Department for International Development takes one big step forward and then the other Departments take two steps back. That is a difficult situation in which to work. Where is the joined-up government about which we have heard so often?

7.7 pm

Mr. John McFall (Dumbarton): I am delighted to participate in this debate. Like almost all the Members who have spoken, I welcome the Bill. I congratulate my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for International Development and the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the emphasis that they have put on international development since 1997.

One result has been the focus in my constituency on these issues. More than 2,000 people are in contact with me and write to me about international development. Many churches and voluntary organisations in Dumbarton, Helensburgh, Alexandria and Balloch communicate with me as a direct result of the Government's White Paper. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Scotland Office, when he was a Minister at the Department for International Development, attended a meeting in my constituency a year ago that more than 200 people attended. I congratulate the Government on their approach, and organisations such as Jubilee 2000 on their good work in bringing the issue to the fore at civic level. That gives the lie to the notion that people are disengaging from politics; it is gratifying that people are engaged.

If I have one message for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, it is that at the next election, the Government should commit themselves on a phased basis to the 0.7 per cent. target that the United Nations has set. However, if we aspire to more, that will be very popular throughout the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) has already mentioned the conference on international action against child poverty that took place more than a week ago, which Nelson Mandela and his wife, Graca Machel, attended. I commend my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Chancellor on the practical steps that they have taken and on their sheer concern for the many millions of the world's children whose existence is on a knife edge. The conference dealt with those issues and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was asked why the focus was now on children.

Children are obviously an integral part of any Government's strategy. We can all support the development targets of providing universal primary education and reducing infant mortality by two thirds by 2015, when it is estimated that half the people in the world will live in poverty. When we look at the statistics, we see how important it is to reduce infant mortality. Some 30,000 children die needlessly every day, 7 million die before their first birthday and 10 million die before their fifth birthday, all for the lack of access to clean water, proper sanitation and basic medicines. Malaria and tuberculosis are thought to kill 8 million children a year. It is vital to reduce infant mortality by the target rate of two thirds.

I also welcome as a core component of the Bill the establishment of poverty reduction strategies. I commend the Government for the way in which the Bill has been formulated. There is a simplicity to it, which means that there is more that they can do to focus on those strategies. However, trade with poor countries is the key. Oxfam recently described access to the markets as being a matter of life and death for such countries. Trade barriers cost poor countries nearly £500 billion a year, which is 14 times what they receive in overseas development assistance. It is important to focus on that. Justin Forsyth of Oxfam said:

> "Rich countries continue to stuff subsidies worth around £200 million a year into their agricultural export industries, then ignore the crisis they cause by dumping cheap food into poor markets."

That practice is very much alive in our country and Europe—foot and mouth is an example of its results—and it affects poor countries.

The World Trade Organisation connects developing markets with the global network. However, there is not always equal access to it. For example, the United States has 250 permanent delegates, but the 35 poorest countries have none. We must address that inequality. We should tell the WTO—as I am sure my right hon. Friend has done—that the poverty reduction strategy should also be one of its main aims.

Many countries have been mentioned. My right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) referred to Peru, which I have visited four or five times in the past decade or so. Some hon. Members suggested that money should be channelled to Governments and not to organisations on the ground. We knew when Fujimori came to office that his Government would be corrupt. If money had not been given to the voluntary organisations and NGOs, no progress would have been made in the barrios because there was a complete disengagement of Government and communities. Organisations such as the Columban Fathers, a missionary group, and its sisters helped to implement the poverty reduction strategy in the barrios. The Bill's measures dealing with that matter are important.

My right hon. Friend mentioned countries with alternative strategies for eliminating drugs. A couple of weeks ago, I attended an international drugs conference in Bolivia. I was taken to the Chapare region to see what the Government described as the total elimination of drugs in that area. We went to a military base, which we were not allowed to leave because 30,000 campesinos were outside protesting against us. The Government stated that they had eliminated the coca crop, but there was nothing for those people to work on. Development strategies, such as banana crops, are lauded as alternatives, but there is only one banana crop a year. The coca crop is harvested four times a year and the country does not have suitable access for selling bananas abroad.

We need to understand the complexity of alternative development strategies, which need to encompass health, education and economic issues. We will get nowhere if all we do is engage in rhetoric and produce hot air. We need to ensure that we implement better policies for the people of such regions. That is one message for my right hon. Friend, and I am delighted to hear her say that such a strategy is envisaged.

I have also visited Zimbabwe in the past few years, before the unrest and the problems with Mugabe. I saw for myself what effect the World Bank's policies and structural adjustment programmes were having. There was the economic cream at the top and a void at the bottom. Work in such areas is extremely important. I saw the good work that was being carried out by organisations such as Oxfam. It was putting what it called "Blair toilets" into the countryside and, at a stroke, ensuring proper sanitation for those communities. Although the initiative was developed by Oxfam, it was supported at a local level by many people in different areas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie asked about strategies in central and eastern European countries. I was in Romania just after the revolution and recall the great dawning of a new age. People thought that democracy would improve matters and that there would be economic stability. Sadly, that has not happened. It is necessary to focus poverty reduction strategies on those areas. Flexibility is important, especially if we want them to join the wider body of the EU. We need to help them to develop.

The final objective of the international development target was to provide universal primary education. The best anti-poverty strategy is education, which is a precondition of progress in both personal and national terms. We must remember that 130 million children—two thirds of whom are girls—do not attend primary school. Nearly half of all African children and a quarter of children in south and west Asia have been denied that fundamental right. Some 900 million children over the age of 15 are illiterate—that is one sixth of the world population.

I taught for many years in what some people might disparagingly call a bog-standard comprehensive school. [HON. MEMBERS: "Who?"] I shall not name them, but they know who they are. In that school, we had a gifted music teacher. Instead of the kids throwing stones at each other before school, we looked across the wasteland and saw young children with violin and trombone cases and drum kits coming to school. That lifted their aspirations and the spirit of the community. It energised the young children and the community, and they felt part of society. Of the children whom I knew, I am pleased to say that one is a world-famous opera singer and another is in a national orchestra in London. That is what hope and ambition did for that area, and it reflects what education means all over the world.

The latter part of my wife's educational professional life was spent as a special needs teacher, largely dealing with children who had been written off. When she eventually got through the programme with them, she saw a transformation in them and in their parents. There was a light in their eye and a spring in their step. She has "thank you" letters from parents for bringing their children on. That progress has been accompanied by a transformation in the children's attitude and behaviour. They are no longer excluded from school or society. We should have those same aspirations for the many millions of young children in the world to whom we can bring hope.

I welcome the recent Government proposals and I particularly welcome the new tax incentives which would accelerate research on AIDS, TB and malaria, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced only a couple of weeks ago. I also welcome the purchase fund, which provides a credible commitment to create a market for current and future treatments in developing countries through strong incentives to develop and deliver affordable treatments. When we remember the current case in Pretoria of the pharmaceutical companies against the South African Government, it becomes obvious that it is important that we develop such strategies.

Africa must be a focus for us. Nelson Mandela and Graca Machel said that Africa was a problem, but will now be part of the solution. In Africa, 25 per cent. of pregnant women die from AIDS; in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Botswana, 25 per cent. of the population have AIDS; 24 million Africans have AIDS and 50 per cent. of children are expected to die by the age of 15. When we consider that, we realise the need for urgent action in that continent.

The Secretary of State has two challenges. I agree with the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) that the first is to change the culture of Government to ensure that if poverty reduction strategies are to be achieved, poverty reduction must be at the heart of every Department. We need a whole-Government approach. I have previously mentioned agriculture; poverty reduction needs to be at the heart of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if we are to get away from the obsession with cheap food. I have mentioned drugs; poverty reduction needs to be at the heart of the Cabinet Office and, in relation to crime, at the Home Office, if it is to be achieved. Not least, it must be at the heart of the Department of Health, if we are to tackle AIDS and the other infectious diseases which bedevil much of the world. That culture is there for the Secretary of State to change. I commend her for her work in the past, but she still has an awful lot to do.

The second issue is the challenge to the rest of the world. Today, I read in a magazine sent to me by a development group a comment by the former President of Chile, Patricio Aylwin, who came to office immediately after the Pinochet regime. I, for one, think that he did a tremendous job in healing the country and establishing a civic Government again. What he wrote about the market relates to what I said earlier. The article says:

[Mr. John McFall]

> "By its very nature the market tends to be unequal. In order for it to be a just system all those who take part within the system—employers, workers, transnational corporations and small and medium sized businesses—would have to participate on conditions of equality."

We do not have that equality today, which is why we have gone backwards since the 1995 Copenhagen social summit. At least 80 countries have been shown to have a lower per capita income today than in 1995. We have gone backwards—the number of people in poverty in Latin America has grown has grown from 200 million to 224 million in those five short years. Those challenges face us in future. However, I am certainly hopeful about the actions of the Government and the achievements of the conference on international action against child poverty.

To conclude, Graca Machel said:

> Africa is the biggest challenge. But now Africa is offering solutions through the Millennium Africa plan.

Graca Machel said that Africa had the resources, knowledge and capacity to solve the problems. She said:

> We Africans were the problem, but we are now part of the solution.

We have to work with Africans and others to be part of that solution and to achieve a more decent and humanitarian society in the 21st century.

7.24 pm

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): This is likely to be my last debate, but perhaps I will be allowed to take part in the Adjournment debate prior to dissolution, or something of that kind. Given the record, this is certainly my last opportunity to debate international development on the Floor of the House. Having sat through our debate, I have found it extraordinarily constructive. There has not been a speech that has not added something to our knowledge and challenged us. It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall),

May I take hon. Members on a journey to a foreign land—the United Kingdom at the end of the next Government's four years in office? Let us look for a moment at Dartmoor, which, as a consequence of our extraordinary pursuit of food at prices which mean that virtually no producer can make a profit, may well end up with every single wild animal on it slaughtered—if we can achieve the skill to do that with or without hounds. Fortunately, however, all will be well, because an alternative use for Dartmoor will be found. Whichever party wins the election, as part of the obscene competition between those on the Front Benches to lock up as many citizens or non-citizens of this country as possible—whether increasing numbers of young people or refugees from overseas—it will be able to turn all of Dartmoor into a form of prison camp.

In our debate, it has been said that the number of refugees is bound to continue growing. As the disparity in wealth between the rich world and the poor continues to increase, so will the number of refugees seeking a better life. Indeed, as the number of conflicts increases, so too will the number of people seeking life itself. We must have a much better strategy for dealing with that than we have at the moment. There is an extraordinary paradox: we devote enormous resources and tremendous effort to preventing large numbers of people coming here from overseas, while at the same time encouraging private agencies to rush around overseas finding foreigners to come and work here. We have not got that right at all; the only possible solution, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) said in his excellent speech, is to create the conditions in the countries from which people come here to make them want to stay. There are not many people who would want to leave their home, relatives and the country with which they are familiar if the conditions there were improved.

The thrust of international development is therefore essential. May I suggest to the Under-Secretary of State for International Development a simple little strategy? It might be worth challenging all British citizens to consider what 0.7 per cent. of their annual income buys. To most people, that is just a figure. If they sat down and looked at their annual budget and saw what 0.7 per cent. bought, there might be a slight change in the public's general attitude to this important issue.

It is hugely important to realise that we cannot achieve any of the targets that we have set ourselves alone. I very much welcome the emphasis that the Department is placing on the development of partnerships. As every part of the globe assembles into larger groupings, whether it be the Association of South-East Asian Nations, the emerging groupings in southern Africa—which appear to overlap quite a lot—the North American Free Trade Agreement, or the European Union, it is essential that we make those partnerships work and use our leverage to obtain much better productivity from them. It is obscene that the EU aid programme works so badly; defending it is one of the biggest single difficulties for those of us who approve of our EU membership. There is no reason whatever why that extraordinary bureaucracy should be allowed to get away with it.

Another great issue is demography. The youthfulness of the world's population is extraordinary. An extreme example is Cambodia, where 46 per cent. of the population is under 15. It may be an awful comment on Pol Pot to say that just 2 per cent. of the population is over 65, but Cambodia is by no means alone. The danger for such countries is that there is about to be an explosion in the numbers of young people at their most sexually active, with no foreseeable income and no livelihood to earn.

If that is not a recipe for instability, I do not know what is, but it is also a tremendous opportunity. The world is rent with conflicts which have their roots in earlier generations. If we can provide those young people with education and some kind of opportunity, their generation may be able to shed the age-old hostilities and make something of their countries.

It is enormously important to give young people a voice. That is not the easiest thing to do. It has taken me four or five years to assist the United Kingdom Youth Parliament for people under 18 to come into being. It has been an uphill struggle to get anyone interested in it at all. We speak all the time about listening to the voices of young people, but that is only just beginning to happen, and it is happening mostly through organisations that like to speak for them. We need to do a great deal more in all countries to assist young people's voices to be

constructively heard. I commend the work that the Save the Children Fund is doing in Zimbabwe, for example, where it is collecting and publishing children's views. Beyond that, however, the project is not organised, which is hardly surprising.

We need to recall the horror of children being used not only as soldiers, but as torturers. One of the most awful moments in our recent visit to Cambodia was going to the genocide museum and hearing that, as a matter of policy, Pol Pot had used eight to 15-year-olds to carry out the torture of adults. What is so terrible is that those 35-year-olds, or whatever age they are now, are out there in the villages, having exercised the most obscene cruelty for four or five of their most impressionable years, never having had a chance to talk through the experience with anyone, and not having the faintest idea of how to handle the trauma, which must be huge. I understand that the level of violence in the villages is very high. Such misuse of children is appalling.

One of the groups that I want to bring to the Minister's attention—as if he needed me to—are orphans. There are said to be 23 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa. In Zimbabwe, which I visited last October because my wife was working there, out of a population of 13 million, 1 million are orphans. Orphans are, by definition, the least regarded, poorest and most likely to be exploited group of children on earth. There will be exceptions, of course, and in Africa particularly there has been great hope that the long-established family structure would absorb orphans, but in most sub-Saharan African countries the capacity of the family network to absorb any more orphans has been exhausted. Orphans as a group need to be more visible and to be treated with respect. They need opportunity and a voice.

By and large, the priorities of the Department for International Development are fine. It is right that the Department should seek to influence and exert leverage on Governments, but there is a danger that resources will be wasted on corrupt or semi-corrupt Governments. If we are not careful, we shall return to the bad old days when such Governments exercised great ingenuity in mis-spending the resources that we provided. I know that the Secretary of State is aware of the danger.

A further danger, especially in the sector-wide approach, is the danger of cutting off innovative pioneering projects. Although there is a huge advantage in using our relatively small aid budget to achieve maximum leverage, it is important that we do not inhibit the emergence of innovative projects.

We should take a serious look at some of our longest-term customers, so to speak. Nepal, for example, has had a remarkable amount of aid per head poured into it. It is a country with enormous difficulties, starting with its topography. I remember going there and meeting a Member of Parliament. I asked how long it took him to get to his constituency, and he replied that it took 48 hours, followed by a four-day walk after the road ran out.

Nepal is not an easy country, but my understanding is that, if anything, it is going backwards, despite all our aid, partly because, as the hon. Member for Dumbarton pointed out, the Maoists are an ever-growing menace—a problem originating primarily from a well intentioned effort to stop people growing drugs without providing them with alternative sources of income. The Department needs to consider how we should handle long-term aid recipient countries that show no improvement. That is a real challenge.

We have heard about the difficulty of defining and reaching the poorest of the poor. As my colleagues on the Select Committee know only too well, I believe that the disabled are among the poorest of the poor worldwide, and it is extraordinarily difficult to create large programmes for them, because they are, by definition, scattered across the population. I am pleased that the Department has published a strategy paper for reaching the disabled, and I hope that more work will be done for them, especially preventive work.

There is clear evidence that early intervention can prevent the development of deafness, blindness and other disabilities very cheaply. We must consider the provision of professionals such as audiologists and optometrists, who are relatively cheap to train, but who are in such short supply that large numbers of children are not recognised as being in danger of going deaf or blind.

Cambodia was a worrying and depressing country to visit, although it is a lovely country, and much good work is being done. We started out by meeting aid workers who described the projects and the work being done for people who had very small holdings, or holdings that were on such poor land that they could not sustain a family; then we went to the villages, spoke to the people there and discovered that 40 per cent. of them had no land at all. In a sense, our projects were aimed at a level above the poorest. That was disturbing.

We must stop robbing the poor of their key resource: people. I raised the matter with the Secretary of State for Health on the Floor of the House, and he pointed out that the national health service has good guidelines about not recruiting people from overseas, but every trust in the country, in extremis, draws on the people provided by agencies, and the agencies are in no way inhibited by such guidance.

I am always worried by the fact that students from the poorest countries have to pay the full whack of overseas student rates. That is nonsense; it cannot be right. Even if we cannot rebate students' fees before they arrive, could not we do so if they return to their own countries? That seems a perfectly sensible approach.

It is the poor who hate corruption most and suffer from it most. It is dreadful to hear representatives of large British companies telling the International Development Committee that if the culture of the country demands it, the payment of small sums to accelerate business is not corrupt. That is nonsense and we must ensure that our behaviour improves. Wherever we go, it is the poor who tell us that they want to get corruption out of the system. For example, as far as I can see, the land distribution system in Cambodia is wholly corrupt. Nominally, all land belongs to the Government, but it is given away to anyone who chooses to pay for it and the poorest people have nothing. In one village, we discovered that the headman was taking a cut and letting the poorest people there go down the Swannee.

We must also take seriously the corruption of the election process in developed countries. There is something obscene about the fact that it costs $25 million to become an American Senator. There is, too, something utterly obscene about the way in which even this country's systems are in danger of being distorted by big

[Mr. Andrew Rowe]

givers. It is a real disease. In some countries, the tradition of Members of Parliament distributing largesse to their constituents is taken for granted, but it is wrong of us to point a finger when they then try to recoup the huge costs of becoming elected.

I am a great admirer of non-governmental organisations, which have made a wonderful, remarkable and indispensable contribution to worldwide development. However, I initiated a Westminster Hall debate on their accountability, which must be addressed. Of course, some of the better NGOs are starting to deal with that issue themselves, but it is worrying that the developing world is full of expensive four-wheel drive vehicles that take one to places where the health workers cannot afford a bicycle. I am anxious that many NGOs are accountable only to their founders, to self-perpetuating committees or to an ethos or motive that may or may not be wholly respectable. We must encourage the NGO movement to make itself thoroughly accountable.

I hope that, as a part of international co-operation, we can persuade other countries, including some of the biggest donor countries in the world, to reconsider and follow more closely what Britain is trying to do. In other words, they should consider how to reduce the proportion of their aid budgets that flows back to them in salaries paid to white northern professionals, rather than to the southern professionals who need such assistance so much.

7.44 pm

Barbara Follett (Stevenage): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important and long-overdue debate. I am also glad to follow the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe). I am sorry that he will not continue to serve on the International Development Committee; he has made an invaluable contribution, his understanding of the issues is huge, and he will be much missed.

Having been a member of the International Development Committee since 1997, I have had the privilege of scrutinising the workings of the first Department for International Development to be introduced by the United Kingdom since its inception. I am glad that time has been found for the Bill in the last month of this Parliament, as it entrenches the Department's poverty-focused approach and ensures that the UK's international aid contributions go to those who need them most—the poor. In combination with the ground-breaking work on debt relief done by my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for International Development and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, that approach puts Britain at the forefront of the fight to reduce global inequality.

The Bill is based on another first: Britain's first-ever White Paper on international development, which was produced by the Department within months of its creation. The White Paper committed the Government to introducing new legislation, as the provisions of the Overseas Development and Co-operation Act 1980 were not sufficiently poverty focused. As someone who has spent much of her life working among the poor of Africa, I welcome that focus unreservedly. However, it is interesting to note that the Bill, whose explicit focus is poverty, does not provide a definition of that concept.

I remember people arguing about that definition when I worked in South Africa in the 1960s. In Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, Professor Peter Townsend contributed hugely to that debate. I realise that the lack of such a definition gives my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State greater discretion and flexibility, but I am concerned that it could allow a less committed Secretary of State to dilute the Department's poverty focus. I would not like that to happen. Will my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary consider carefully in Committee how that might be remedied?

Like the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), I am concerned that, while 25 or 30 per cent. of the United Kingdom's aid budget is being channelled through the European Union, the House does not have the ability to ensure that that money is being spent on poverty-focused projects. Even more important, we do not have the ability to ensure that it is being spent at all, as the hon. Gentleman made clear. Obviously, that arrangement could undermine the UK's poverty-focused programmes and I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to redouble her already formidable efforts to reform the European Community's development assistance programme, which has the capacity to do great good. I know that she will do all she can to ensure that it also has the necessary ability and the will.

Another definition that is absent from the Bill is that of humanitarian aid, as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford pointed out. Like him, I feel that that lack should be remedied and should have been influenced by a report published by the Overseas Development Institute. The report compares humanitarian aid agencies to the ambulance men of the world. As it graphically illustrates, we do not expect ambulance men to decide which victims, if any, were involved in a car crash or who was responsible for it; we want them to help anyone who was injured. The job of deciding who was responsible is for the police and the law. In international terms, responsibility lies with the UN and other international bodies and agencies, such as jurists and courts. I believe that a definition would help them to do their job.

The poverty focus of the Bill and of the Department should reassure those who are especially concerned about the welfare of women and children. They will benefit from poverty-focused aid, as they make up 70 per cent. of the world's 1.3 billion poorest people. Women also account for two thirds of the world's 1 billion adults who cannot read or write, and girls account for 200 million of the world's children who will never get the chance to go to school. A poverty-focused Department with poverty-focused programmes cannot but help them. They are the poorest of the poor—the people whom we aim to help.

Despite my right hon. Friend's warning about her resistance to special pleading, I, like my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall), will tempt fate by ending with some special pleading for Africa, especially for the 24.5 million men, women and children on that continent who suffer from HIV-AIDS. Most of those people are desperately poor, as are most of the towns and countries in which they live. Surely such a special case merits special measures. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, HIV-AIDS is a factor in increasing poverty.

In South Africa, 1,500 people are infected with HIV-AIDS every day and 4 million people already have the disease. The United Nations estimates that the disease will take 17 per cent. off the country's GDP by 2010.

In Malawi, more than a third of the teachers are infected with HIV-AIDS. The country's future and that of its children do not bear thinking about. Education is the way out of poverty, but what will people do without teachers? Malawi is not a solitary case; a similar percentage of teachers are infected in Zambia.

I welcome the Bill, just as I welcomed the creation of the Department for International Development in 1997. I look forward to welcoming more aid for Africa and its millions of HIV-AIDS sufferers. As Graca Machel said, Africa is the biggest challenge. I know that we are up to it.

7.52 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): The hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett) was right to speak about Africa, where it is difficult to see any bright spots. It is in serious danger of becoming a lost continent.

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate, not least because I am vice-chairman of the all-party group on overseas development. I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) for his comments about my role as a junior Minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office when it was responsible for the then Overseas Development Administration. I worked there with my right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Chalker of Wallasey.

At the beginning of the 21st century, one of our greatest challenges is the enormous number of people who live in extreme, grinding, unremitting poverty. The World Bank estimates that more than 1 billion of our fellow citizens live on less than $1 a day. No genuine progress has been made in reducing that number in the past 10 years.

Television brings us flashes of the worst humanitarian disasters, such as flooding in Mozambique, hurricanes in central America, genocide in the Balkans, starvation in the horn of Africa, the impact of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, and earthquakes in India. However, it does not adequately describe or reflect the desperate daily drudgery of so many of our fellow citizens. Poverty, poor health and desperation make up the lives of many people.

The Bill is unobjectionable. The Library briefing on it states:

"The Bill does not substantially alter the basis for giving assistance."

The White Paper that was published in November 1997 states:

"All of the actions proposed in the White Paper can be put in place under the existing Overseas Development and Co-operation Act 1980."

All the Government's objectives could therefore be achieved under that measure, which was steered through the House by my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Banbury, Sir Neil Marten. I hope that I am not being uncharacteristically churlish if I say that the Bill is unnecessary and that perhaps it constitutes pre-election window dressing, which tries to give the impression that more has been achieved than is genuinely the case.

No reasonable person would quarrel with the objectives in the more recent White Paper, "Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor". They include: working with others to reduce poverty systematically; promoting effective Governments and efficient markets; investing in people; sharing skills and knowledge; harnessing private finance; ensuring that gains from trade are made for developing countries; tackling global environmental problems; using development assistance more effectively; and strengthening a more open and accountable international system in which poor people and countries have a more effective voice. It would be surprising if any person of good will did not fully support those objectives. However, we do not need the Bill to achieve them. I shall make some comments about the way in which we can make progress on them.

How much money does the Treasury make available to the Department for International Development? How large is the United Kingdom aid budget? Let us consider the figures for 1999, the last year for which they are available. In that year, the UK was the fifth largest cash donor country in the world after Japan, the United States, France and Germany. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines overseas development assistance as a percentage of gross national product. Sadly, when ranked in those terms, the UK is towards the bottom of the list. Current UK spending on overseas aid is approximately a quarter of 1 per cent. of our GNP. As my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) said in his excellent contribution, that is a tiny amount.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Chris Mullin): The figure was a quarter of 1 per cent. when the Conservative party left office; it is now approximately 0.29 per cent. and rising. I do not suggest that that is acceptable, but the figure was decreasing and is now increasing under this Government.

Mr. Baldry: I shall not quibble, but the Library briefing for the debate shows a reasonably flat line between 1979 and today. My point is addressed as much to those on the Conservative Front Bench as to the Government. The figure is pathetic by any standards.

The Government say that they hope to increase spending on development aid to approximately a third of 1 per cent. of GNP by 2004, which is well into the second half of the next Parliament. Although the Government have said that they will continue to work towards the target of 0.7 per cent. set by the United Nations, there is no time scale for what has been and continues to be nothing more than an aspiration. In the run-up to the general election, pressure needs to be maintained on the Labour and Conservative parties to give clear commitments as to when they will reach the modest UN target for development aid to poorer countries, because without funds, all talk of helping to eliminate poverty and promote sustainable development is simply a somewhat pious aspiration.

International development is an area in which I hope the shadow Chancellor will make it clear that a future Conservative Government would not just match the present Government's spending, but do considerably better. Apart from sound humanitarian reasons for assisting developing countries, there are also good commercial reasons to assist world development. Britain is a trading nation; we export more per head of population than any other country in the world except Japan, and—

[Mr. Baldry]

quite apart from any other consideration—it is in Britain's interest that as much of the world as possible should develop and prosper.

A number of hon. Members have made it clear that if more and more parts of the world move towards ever more desperate poverty, it will not be surprising if there are an ever-increasing number of economic refugees, many of whom will wish to come to the United Kingdom. My first point, therefore, is that there must be pressure from all political parties for an increase in the 'aid budget—let us at least try to reach the UN target of 0.7 per cent. as quickly as possible.

My second point is that at least a quarter of the money that DFID receives is spent by the European Community. This year, the European Union will take £728 million of DFID's money—a quarter of its budget. Now, I have no hesitation in declaring myself pro-European. I am happy to be described on Eurosceptic websites as a Europhile. I fervently believe that it is in Britain's best long-term interest to work with our partners in Europe, and that Britain's voice will be heard more clearly throughout the world as a consequence. I hope that my wholehearted support for Britain's membership of the European Union means that criticism of EU institutions by me and others who think in a similar way will be taken all the more seriously.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I know that my hon. Friend was merely trying to goad hon. Members by saying that. I do not feel goaded, but I wonder what evidence he has that our voice has been heard more seriously around the world during our membership of the European Union. I know that he will simply say what a tremendous success the European Union has made of its aid programme, because he and I agree about a lot of things.

Mr. Baldry: If my hon. Friend had been listening, he would have known that I was going to say I am unimpressed by the EU development programme. I was laying the ground for saying that I hope it will carry greater credence for someone with my credentials to say that they are unimpressed by the EU development aid programme than if such a statement came from the mouth of someone who was known for criticising everything in the European Union and for being a classic Eurosceptic. However, we live in a somewhat bizarre world if a Conservative who says that he is a pro-European is challenged by his parliamentary colleagues for having goaded them. I look forward to sitting on these Benches and to being goaded for many a year yet, and I hope that the argument will regain a better mainstream balance in due course.

I was making the point that I am unimpressed by the EU development aid programme, and I am not alone in that. The Select Committee on International Development examined the effectiveness of EU development assistance in its report published in the previous Session. It is important to remember that the Committee, like all the Select Committees, has a large Labour majority. Nevertheless, it unanimously concluded:

"EC external assistance policies are clearly determined more by political priorities than poverty alleviation . . . The aims of the Statement on Development Policy are unlikely to be achieved in the absence of a dedicated development budget which would enable outcomes to be audited against developmental objectives. At present, development funds are drawn from a budget which also covers expenditure on external action. All too often"—

funds—

"initially envisaged as a source of finance for community development programmes, are 'raided' by the Council of Ministers to fund political initiatives that they do not wish to fund bilaterally, amounting to what Clare Short described as 'political gestures'. Any failure in poverty focus can simply be explained away as 'external action' rather than 'development' . . . Whilst we welcome the rationalisation of the Commission, the present geographical division cannot make for good development policy. The fact that responsibility for Asia—which contains half of the world's poor—remains outside DG Development is inexplicable . . . To have three focuses is, simply, to be unfocused . . . at best useless and at worst dangerous. The Statement"—

on EU development—

"should not be endorsed until its commitment to poverty eradication is unequivocal . . . The level of existing backlogs is untenable. It cannot make for good practice to have an average of four and a half years between commitments and disbursement. It damages the reputation of the Community and will have severe implications for implementing partners."

The Select Committee further noted:

"the problems that NGOs are having with the EC in getting paid on time."

It went on:

"It has become very clear—both during Committee inquiries and from evaluations of ECHO"—

that is the humanitarian relief organisation of the European Union—

"that ECHO suffers from exactly the same problems of poor administration, delayed disbursement and staffing as other parts of the Commission. During our recent visit to Brussels and when examining ECHO's own website we have been unable to discern any clear and transparent information on how and where ECHO is spending its money. This is clearly unacceptable. We recommend that DFID request details of amounts committed and disbursed by ECHO, with all relevant dates, in: Mozambique after the recent floods; Central America in the wake of Hurricane Mitch; Kosovo; and Ethiopia during the recent emergency . . . We also recommend that ECHO, as a matter of urgency, reform its procedures so as to provide prompt, clear and comprehensive information on its activities."

The Committee concluded:

"None of the issues raised in the report are new. We are exasperated with the failure of the Commission to reform its development activity effectively. We have no doubt that were the development reforms we outline implemented, the EC could make a real difference to the elimination of poverty. The EC is living on borrowed time—the Commission should give up its addiction to half-measures and have the courage to reform for the benefit of the world's poor."

My second point is, therefore, quite simple. There is an urgent need for reform of European development activity. The Secretary of State may well say that a start has been made, but at least a quarter of the UK aid budget is going to the European Union. We are entitled to expect the Government to ensure that there is a process in place that can bring about effective reform as speedily as possible.

Indeed, I would go further. Clause 4 provides for the Secretary of State to support organisations or funds that wholly or partly exist for the relevant purposes set out in clause 1. That provision empowers her to give money to the European Union. Clearly, some of the money that the European Union uses cannot demonstrably be proven simply to be used for poverty reduction; hence the need for clause 4.

I suggest that clause 4 should not be implemented until the Government can convince the House that, in the words of the International Development Committee, the European Commission has had

"the courage to reform for the benefit of the world's poor."

Until we can detect demonstrable change in the Commission and its handling of development aid, the Government must seriously consider whether they should implement clause 4 and simply give the Commission money—a quarter of our aid budget—year on year in a fashion that does not encourage it to reform. That is a matter of serious concern.

An International Development Committee report in the previous Session noted that EU policies are clearly determined more by political priorities than by poverty alleviation. Our European colleagues often have political priorities of their own. To echo comments made earlier, the shameful feting of President Mugabe of Zimbabwe by the Belgian Prime Minister yesterday is a classic example of that. Of course Belgium has historic links to the Congo and doubtless thinks that it among the international community is obliged to take a lead in the Great Lakes area. Belgium may have a part to play, but that does not mean that the red carpet has to be laid out for Mugabe, almost to the strains of "Hail the Conquering Hero".

If one were writing a case history of bad governance, corruption and despotism, it would be difficult to find a worse example than Zimbabwe. If the Harare declaration is to have any credibility whatever, Zimbabwe should be suspended from the Commonwealth forthwith. An assurance that no further development aid will go to Zimbabwe until some semblance of good governance is restored would be extremely welcome. Clearly there is a tension between poverty reduction and good governance, and although I have no quarrel with the need to focus on poverty reduction, we cannot ignore the need to achieve good governance.

Following on from the size of the aid budget and reform of the EU development budget, my next point about what can be done to help the world's poor concerns debt. The Jubilee 2000 campaign has achieved an enormous amount. Debt is not felt by politicians whose policies incur that debt; it is borne by the poorest people, through what they are denied. I congratulate the Government: it is good news that they have renounced the right to receive any benefit from historic debt owed to us by all the 41 most indebted countries. It is also good news that they have cancelled all aid debt for heavily indebted poor countries.

When the Heads of Government of the world's wealthiest nation's get together at the G8 summit this summer, it is to be hoped that they will focus on further measures for debt relief for poor countries as well as ways in which industrial countries can open up their markets to exports from poorer countries. It is obviously good news that the EU, only a matter of days ago, made it clear that it will provide duty and quota-free access to EU markets for the least developed countries, ending all import tariffs. Developing countries must reciprocate. They have a part to play, where appropriate, in helping to put an end to civil wars and external conflicts, because it is pointless to provide debt relief if the money simply goes on further arms expenditure. It is also good news that debt relief has gathered momentum, and I hope that that momentum can increase.

The Bill is unobjectionable. Perhaps it was not needed, but it presents us with a welcome opportunity to debate international development. I hope that Members on both sides of the House and people throughout the whole country will exert pressure on Front Benchers from both main political parties to ensure that international development features in the general election campaign, whenever it comes, and that there is a clear commitment to increase spending on development aid. We must maintain the momentum on debt relief and on reforming the EU development budget. The task ahead of us is enormous and at times seems almost overwhelming, but we have a great duty of care to get it right for future generations. If we do not, the consequences for the world will be serious.

8.15 pm

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry). I do not know whether he remembers as well as I do a visit that he paid in the mid-1980s as a new Member of Parliament to a project that I ran for young offenders in Salford. I welcome his remarks about increasing the aid budget, which will be supported by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), who made what he described as possibly his last speech to the House—certainly the last on international development. I found his speech interesting and it certainly displayed great understanding of and commitment to international development issues. It stood in stark contrast to the contribution made from the Conservative Front Bench by the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter). My right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) described it as mean-minded, and it was.

The hon. Gentleman asserted that people are disillusioned with Government policy on development, but my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall) scotched that one and I agree with him. The policies on international development and debt have been extremely popular and have impressed and encouraged many of my constituents. I look forward to the election, when we can compare our record with his little blue book, but I shall present my party's argument without recourse to the personal abuse with which, sadly, his speech was laced.

Throughout my lifetime, in and out of politics, considerable debate has been provoked by the saying, "Charity begins at home." Some argue that the United Kingdom, which over the last quarter of the 20th century became one of the most economically and socially divided countries in the industrialised world, should put the needs of its poorest people first. Others remind us that, despite those deep divisions, ours is still a rich country, so we should begin with the needs of those in Asia and Africa whose lives are a daily and often unsuccessful struggle to survive. My view is that the moral mandate to prioritise the needs of people in poverty does not make the question one of either/or. We must deal with both.

My belief, which, I am proud to say, is shared by Ministers in this Administration, is that a Government pledged to tackle social exclusion at home are all the more likely to fight poverty abroad. A Government who are determined to reduce the health inequalities facing

[Mr. Paul Goggins]

children in Manchester will also strive to improve the life chances of babies born in Mozambique. Tomorrow, we shall no doubt hear more good news from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Throughout this Parliament, his sound economic policies, which have increased employment and moved more than 1 million children out of poverty, have also enabled the Government to increase development assistance by 45 per cent. in real terms and move, at long last, towards the United Nations target of 0.7 per cent. of gross national product.

I warmly welcome the Bill, which moves us on from the broader requirements of the Overseas Development and Co-operation Act 1980 to a more focused responsibility for providing development assistance that, as clause 1 makes clear, is

"likely to contribute to a reduction in poverty."

Too often, development assistance has been tied to post-colonial and cold war interests. Too often, it has enhanced the interests of the donor rather than the recipient. It has relied too heavily on the actions of fragile and frequently corrupt regimes, whose interest in conflict or personal wealth has prevented help from reaching the very poorest. Too often, assistance has been a bandage on wounds inflicted by the systems of international finance and trade.

Again, the values that connect domestic and international policy are clear. Just as this Government believe that the answer to the problem of poverty in the United Kingdom is the opportunity for an individual to earn, and not simply for the Government to hand out more generous welfare benefits, it seems that international development must be sustainable rather than being merely a handout from the rich man's table. That means encouraging significant private sector investment in poor countries; it also means the introduction of grass-roots initiatives such as micro-credit, which enable people in poor areas to fund and develop their own solutions. Clause 6 empowers the Secretary of State to give guarantees and acquire securities, as well as to dispense grants and loans. I believe that that power will add much-needed strength to the Government's approach.

I want to make four specific points. First, I warmly welcome the provision in clause 4 for the Secretary of State to promote awareness of global poverty and of the means of reducing such poverty. Development education is extremely important. I pay tribute to the development education project based at Manchester Metropolitan university, which is part of the United Kingdom Development Education Association. By means of initiatives such as "global express" it has been able to provide resources and training for teachers, helping them to engage their students in practical projects linking opportunities to learn about subjects such as history and geography with the exploration of issues of citizenship and sustainable development—and, crucially, with values, moral principles and an informed view of the world. The campaigning and advocacy of international development agencies such as CAFOD also play a vital role in the raising of public awareness of the short-term and long-term needs of people in poverty.

As the Secretary of State said, sustaining a global consensus that poverty must be ended will require the informed support of citizens throughout the developed world. The additional funds for development education that the Government have already given are therefore extremely welcome, underpinned as they will be by the Bill.

My second point relates to the Government's clearly stated commitment to ending tied aid from April. As the Secretary of State made clear in the globalisation White Paper and repeated in her speech today, the tying of aid is inefficient and provides poor value for money. It frequently puts the interests of the donor above those of the recipient in ways that are inconsistent with a focus on poverty reduction. In short, this was a policy that did not and never could work in the interests of the poor, and we are well rid of it.

Some have asked why we should not include such a provision in the Bill. My right hon. Friend responded helpfully by explaining that the poverty focus in the Bill made the practice impossible, given that the value of aid was reduced by about 25 per cent. when it was tied in that way.

My third point concerns debt. I am pleased that a number of Members have raised that issue, although the Bill contains no specific debt provisions. The Government—I refer to my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Chancellor in particular—have given a strong and inspiring international lead on debt reduction: they argued for the reform of the heavily indebted poor countries initiative, pressed for 100 per cent. bilateral write-offs and placed poverty reduction strategies at the centre of the arrangements for each country.

While it may not be practical or necessary to include debt provisions in the Bill, it is important for us, in this debate, to emphasise the vital role that debt reduction must continue to play if we are to achieve our goal of halving world poverty by 2015. Ensuring that 22 countries reached the HIPC decision point by the end of 2000 was a huge achievement, but that progress must be maintained. Every effort should also be made to ensure that those who, as a result of conflict, have not yet been able to benefit from HIPC are eventually able to do so.

It is true that debt reduction on its own is not enough. It is also true that many poor people in areas such as south Asia do not benefit from the HIPC programme, because their countries have not the same level of crippling debt. Nevertheless, debt reduction must remain a central feature of the overall strategy to reduce global poverty.

There is also the question of what steps the international community is willing to take to ensure that the debt crisis facing so many poor countries does not occur again. My right hon. Friend has made a remarkable contribution, but even she would admit that she will not be Secretary of State for ever. It is essential to ensure that international development and financial institutions devise transparent and durable systems to protect the world's poorest people from irresponsible borrowing and lending; unsustainable debt is in no one's interest.

I want to say something about another important link between domestic and international policy—the need for people in poverty, wherever they live, to be genuinely involved in the regeneration of their own communities. In this context, I am probably echoing some of the remarks of the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent. For years, we in the United Kingdom thought that all it took to improve the prospects of poor and disadvantaged areas

was to make the place look better: central Government would allocate the money, and local government would decide how to spend it. But top-down solutions meant that the people were left behind, and before long the buildings were usually as bad as ever.

I believe that this Government more than any before have emphasised the need to work alongside people and empower them. Partnership is the key. So it is in international development. It can no longer be a question of what the rich can do for the poor; it must be a question of how, by working together, we can eradicate poverty for ever.

I was interested to hear recently about a project run jointly by Church Action on Poverty and Christian Aid, linking local people from Thornaby on Teesside with a similar group from Manila in the Philippines. Over three years, 40 people—a mixed group including benefit claimants and disabled people as well as a local teacher and a general practitioner—went on exchange visits to each other's communities. They discussed their problems and their ideas for solutions. Working with the wider community, they shared their experience of local projects and considered how community groups could organise their own responses to the poverty that they faced. Their overall conclusion was that the biggest gulf was not one of geography, but the gulf between the powerful and powerless, the rich and the poor, wherever they may be.

I believe that the challenge of the new millennium is to foster the kind of solidarity that that project developed, but to link it with a new understanding among the rich of the world that if we do not make that world a fairer place in which to live we will, in the end, all suffer the consequences. The Bill will help us to achieve that aim.

8.28 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): I, too, welcome this debate. It is customary when speaking in our debates to say that there have been some interesting speeches. I do not wish to be patronising, but I really do think that we have heard some very interesting and useful speeches.

I approach the issue of international development with a sense of the moral obligation that the rich have towards the poor. It is not only a Christian obligation, but—as my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) said—a moral obligation that we all have towards the poor of the world.

I also agree with some other hon. Members in questioning the need for this legislation. The Secretary of State and the Department for International Development seem to have been doing perfectly well in the past four years, and we have commended much of what they have done. I therefore do not entirely share their determination to pass this Bill. Nevertheless, I do not entirely object to a new Bill or to the establishment of a new set of parameters.

I have been on the Select Committee on International Development for almost four years. It has been fascinating and extremely educational. Like the Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford, I believe that the Committee has done useful work. However, I have also found it frustrating because, as much as I should like to bash the Government, we have often found that that is rather difficult to do. We have had to adopt a rather non-partisan approach. It is not that all the Department's actions have been good but that, as we all agree that poverty is a bad thing, any action taken around the world to defeat poverty, although one may not be entirely uncritical of it, is generally to be applauded.

I am therefore sorry that there has been so much partisan discussion in this debate, about which I take issue with the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins). The partisan discussion started with the Secretary of State—I am sorry that she has left the Chamber—who kept saying how dreadful the previous Administration had been. However, those comments contrasted with her previous comments. I realise that, in an attempt to be somewhat conciliatory, the Overseas Development Administration did not get everything right; generally, however, it got most things right.

The Department for International Development does not get everything right either; generally, however, it does most things pretty well. As I said, all hon. Members in the Chamber wish to see the Department flourish. I think that we all support its aims, even if we might disagree on various specific issues. Perhaps I should add that the Secretary of State commended the Trinidad terms. This Government's action on debt has, similarly, been mostly pretty good.

I should like to address four issues in my speech: governance, HIV-AIDS, de-mining and European aid. As has already been mentioned, the Committee is examining corruption. We have had some mind-boggling evidence from business people about the need for "facilitating payments". When I asked whether that meant small bribes rather than big bribes, I was told that that is exactly what it means. Last week, we took evidence from the Secretary of State. I do not think that there is much difference between Opposition Committee members and her on the governance issue. Indeed, I thought that her evidence was extremely illuminating and useful.

The Committee also heard that corruption is the biggest deterrent to investment for any international company. Although some international companies may make facilitating payments, they would prefer not to have to do so. They want to operate in countries where the rule of law runs and they know that, although they have certain obligations, they can make money—their profits—without having to pay bribes. Those of us who believe, as I think the Government do, that investment and economic growth are imperative in alleviating poverty, regard corruption as the biggest deterrent to inward investment.

As we all agree, and as my hon. Friends the Members for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) and for Hertford and Stortford said, the poor suffer most from corruption. If one has a lot of money and loses a few dollars, it does not matter very much. However, those who have to live on less than $1 a day and then have to pay extra for their children's schooling suffer greatly from the loss of such sums. Similarly, people who cannot afford to pay extra for health care suffer most.

I particularly applaud the Department's policies to support public service reform. I believe, however, that we have to be tough in promoting it. The old saying is that one has to be cruel to be kind. Although I do not think that that applies fully in this situation, I still believe that we have to be tough. When corruption in any form is discovered, but particularly grand corruption, it cannot be tolerated.

Hon. Members have mentioned Zimbabwe. I do not think that we can tolerate the corruption that has led to the deployment of large numbers of troops in the Democratic

[Mr. Andrew Robathan]

Republic of Congo and to war there. We are aware of the influence of diamonds in that case and in Sierra Leone. We must make a stand against corruption wherever it may be, and we have to be tough. I think that the Government are generally tough when dealing with it, but sometimes we could be a little tougher. The United Kingdom is perhaps adopting a firmer view on corruption than it had during the cold war. I think that that is true of the world community generally. Since he took up his position at the World Bank in 1996, Jim Wolfensohn has demonstrated how we can move forward on the issue, as we really must.

The hon. Member for Stevenage (Barbara Follett), among other hon. Members, has already mentioned the issue of HIV-AIDS. In sub-Saharan Africa, HIV-AIDS is undoubtedly the biggest threat of all to the poor. Again, as schools are being left without teachers, hospitals without doctors and untold numbers of children without parents, it is the poor who are suffering most. It is reducing life expectancy in a way that should make us all want to weep, as it is destroying the achievements of development. The disease is torpedoing development. When I referred to it as the black death that was stalking Africa, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) picked me up as though that was a racist comment. It was intended only as an analogy with the way in which the black death stalked Europe. This morning I heard Glenys Kinnock on the "Today" programme referring to it as the black death, so although I might be accused of many things, few people would wish to accuse Glenys Kinnock of being racist—particularly if they were in the same room as her.

I commend DFID for the work that is being done, but the issue needs to maintain its high profile. The majority of people on the streets of Blaby, or London, are not aware of the devastating effect that HIV-AIDS is having on the poorest countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. We need to continue to press the issue so that people understand its impact.

The Select Committee is about to produce a report on HIV-AIDS. I have not seen it so I cannot leak it, but we must realise that the disease not only destroys development but increases poverty and creates instability and conflict. I know that on this issue, the Secretary of State and the Department are very much on side, but it needs to be stressed time and again.

I now turn to de-mining. I should say first that I am an unpaid trustee of the HALO Trust, which is the largest de-mining agency in the world. We receive excellent support from the Department. De-mining is a large element of DFID's bilateral funding to the HALO Trust and other organisations such as the Mines Advisory Group. I intend to discuss the issue with the Secretary of State next week.

Less than three weeks ago, members of the Select Committee went to a de-mining site in Cambodia. The lack of knowledge about the impact of anti-personnel mines is also quite grave. People know about the Ottawa treaty and what a bad thing land mines are, but they do not know quite what is meant by de-mining. We are not talking about minefields staked out with a nice wire fence and signs depicting skulls and crossbones and "Achtung Minen" signs. We are talking about a mined site that may be in a village, sometimes under people's houses because that is where the Khmer Rouge or the Government forces were slugging it out some 10 years ago. People are literally living on top of land mines and that can have a devastating impact on their lives. Generally, land mines are planted not in out-of-the-way places but in populated areas and on agricultural land as that is where people were fighting.

I have a CIET report on the social costs of land mines in Cambodia. Admittedly, it is about five years old. It found that in Cambodia, which is a country of grinding poverty, there could be a 135 per cent. increase in agricultural produce if all the anti-personnel mines were cleared. One can imagine the impact on people's lives of having land mines around. Every child knows to stick to a path through a particular village because if it wanders from the path it might get blown up. If a breadwinner is killed or has a foot blown off, the impact on the family is devastating.

The same report found that in Cambodia 61 per cent. of families with a mine victim went into debt to pay for medical treatment. Debt is a serious matter that many of us have encountered, but in Cambodia we heard from people who were selling their children into prostitution to pay off their debts. They were losing their land and becoming bonded slaves. It is an issue of such importance that to say blandly that 61 per cent. of affected families go into debt is understating the case.

I am not, as a trustee of a land mine clearance agency, indulging in special pleading about land mine clearance. I am trying to increase the general knowledge of the problems to do with land mines. Those of us who went to Cambodia found the visit very illuminating.

Like other countries, Cambodia has a mines action committee, CMAC. It has had a bad few years. A 1999 audit of the committee's funds for the two previous years by the accountants, KPMG, found that a lot of money had disappeared, and that the group's administration was poor, to put it mildly. However, the worst finding was that the committee was working to clear land not for poor people, but for fat cats—people with Government connections, or senior military officers, for example. The whole purpose of the clearance was being negated, to a large extent. The Select Committee met King Sihanouk, who saw fit to raise with us CMAC's appalling record. I think that that was rather illuminating.

Mine clearance is a slow and mind-numbing task. Each person can clear about 35 sq m a day. In Cambodia, mine clearers get $150 a month, which compares with the $22 a month that a headmaster gets. The job may be tedious and take a long time, but it is essential for poor communities. The Committee saw a school that had been built on de-mined land. Who would build a school on land that had not been de-mined? That is the question that we must ask.

Finally, it is often estimated that there are between 100 million and 110 million land mines and anti-personnel mines scattered around the world. The House should treat such estimates with a large pinch of salt. It takes an enormous effort to plant mines and carry heavy munitions. Leaving aside the Russians in Afghanistan, most of the armies that planted the mines were made up of irregular soldiers who moved on foot. They did not plant mines in the enormous numbers that are spoken of.

That fact is important, because 110 million mines seems an insuperable clearance target. The real total is much lower: throughout the world, there are probably

about 6 million mines. That total puts the problem in a different perspective. Some organisations have an interest in overstating the case. However, that is not to say that one anti-personnel mine that takes the leg off a child is not one mine too many.

The Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that the Secretary of State described the European Union as the worst agency in the world. At last, reform of the aid programme is on the agenda. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury, I might be described as a little bit of a Euro-pragmatist, but we can all agree that the recent history of the EU aid programme has been a scandal and a disgrace.

I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State applauding the proposed reforms, but we should judge them on results. It is no good throwing good money after bad. Money has been wasted in an appalling manner. The culture in EU offices is too cosy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford described. People have been in the business a long time and have made a decent living out of it. I am sure that they have done some good, but they have been sitting around on their backsides for too long.

Neil Kinnock is trying to change the leopard's spots among EU employees, and he is having a lot of trouble. There must be a change in culture before we contemplate putting more money into EU programmes, and I applaud my party's view that we should spend more money bilaterally. I think that we all agree that the money is not generally well spent. Although in general I applaud DFID's determination to work with others, we should not lower our standards of aid delivery or lose sight of our objectives just to keep in with partners, be they the EU or others.

I wish to make two further quick points. We recently visited Cambodia, a grindingly poor but very beautiful country. The small amount of aid that we spend there has a disproportionate impact in terms of what it can achieve. Some aid is a drop in the ocean in a large country, but the aid that we spend in Cambodia has a disproportionate impact. I urge the Minister to consider spending more money in Cambodia rather than less. It is not Conservative policy to spend more money, so I hope that I will not be picked up for saying that. Nevertheless, I think that the money spent there achieved a great deal.

Along with the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) and other right hon. and hon. Members, I would like an annual debate on development, perhaps focused on the Department's annual report. Such a debate would be useful—it would raise the profile of the Department, the work that it does and the need for that work to be done. Again, most people in the Chamber would not disagree with that.

I do not disagree with the Bill; it is mostly quite sound. I have generally agreed with DFID's actions and policies over the past three or four years. I have some reservations about the Bill but, despite those, I wish it well and hope that DFID, under whatever Government is in power after the election, continues its good work.

8.46 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I am delighted to have the opportunity of contributing to what has been described as an historic debate. Other hon. Members have pointed out that this is the first such debate for 20 years. *[Interruption.]* They have pointed out that this is the first such debate on an international development Bill for 20 years.

Mr. Wells: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Browne: I have hardly started, but I will.

Mr. Wells: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. May I explain the circumstances surrounding the Bill 20 years ago? It was late at night when the Bill was introduced by the Solicitor-General, who said that it was something to do with the consolidation of many Bills and that the House might like to consider it with alacrity. The House did just that—the proceedings were over in three minutes.

Mr. Browne: I do not know whether I am grateful to the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) for his intervention because, to some degree, he has stolen my thunder. I was intending to point out that my research has revealed that the debate on the last Bill, which was a consolidation measure, took up one column in the *Official Report* of the House of Commons and half a column in the *Official Report* of the other place.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan). The four years that I have been in the House have not been peppered with much common ground between us, but I found some tonight. It is appropriate to put on record my admiration for the work of the Halo Trust and my commendation of the hon. Gentleman and his fellow trustees for their contribution to that great work. I share his belief that there is a moral basis to development, but I also share the view of other right hon. and hon. Members that self-interest comes into it in that we want a peaceful future for the world and for our children.

It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend—in all senses—the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins). We travelled together to Colombia as part of a delegation of European parliamentarians in 1999. As my hon. Friend drafted and redrafted the final statement, I was exposed to his considerable skills in language and diplomacy. I have heard him speak on many occasions since, and tonight he lived up to his own high standards. I agreed with almost every word that he said.

On Sunday night in Kilmarnock, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State addressed a meeting of more than 500 people of all ages. It was the biggest public meeting in Kilmarnock for many years, and was bigger even than a full meeting of the parliamentary Labour party, which is quite difficult to achieve these days. The meeting was supported by Oxfam, Christian Aid, Fair Trade and the only Scottish-based international development organisation, the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund. It was organised, with help from Unison and the GMB, through the office that I share with my colleague, the Member of the Scottish Parliament for Kilmarnock and Loudoun. It provided my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State with an excellent opportunity to see the extent of support in my constituency for her Department's policies.

I must encourage more of the people who attended that meeting to visit the Department's website to answer the poll questions on that website. Their numbers alone would

[Mr. Browne]

help to dispel the myth of disillusion peddled by the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) from the Opposition Front Bench.

Mr. Douglas Alexander (Paisley, South): Does my hon. Friend agree that one virtue of such meetings lies in their making clear the link between international debt reduction of the kind that Jubilee 2000 has campaigned for and the poverty eradication strategy essential to the Bill before us?

Mr. Browne: I am obliged to my hon. Friend for that good point. He was anxious to contribute to tonight's debate, but his responsibilities elsewhere have precluded him from doing so. I know of his support for international development, and that he has marshalled informed support in his constituency, which mirrors the support in my own. As an aside, I may add that his constituency is served by Bishop John Mone, who leads SCIAF and who is a powerful advocate for the rights of the poor throughout the world. The bishop is known throughout Scotland for his contribution to international development objectives.

The meeting gave my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State an opportunity to explain the policies that underpin the objectives set out in both the White Papers published by her Department since the general election and in her speech today. It was more than a meeting; it was an event. My right hon. Friend's inspiring speech was set alongside performances by the Stewarton academy senior wind ensemble, the Kilmarnock concert brass and the Aeolian male voice choir, all of which are fine examples of the phenomenon referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall). There were additional contributions, including personal accounts of the challenges and opportunities faced by some of the world's poorest people, which were read by Ailsa Henderson, who works extensively for Christian Aid in Ayrshire, and by Paul Chitnis, the director of SCIAF.

The importance of the meeting lay in the fact that all who participated left the hall recommitted to the work of development. Messages, cards and e-mails from people who attended are coming thick and fast to my office in Kilmarnock. All express thanks for the event, but they also ask what more can be done. If there is any need for evidence that our Government's change in development policy—moving it from, as my right hon. Friend put it, a policy subordinate to commercial and short-term political interests, to one based on the reduction of poverty and a national and international commitment to meet the 2015 international development targets—is a proper one, the turnout and response at that meeting was enough evidence for me.

There is growing public awareness of our objectives, and approval and support is, to my knowledge, 100 per cent. among non-governmental organisations. From the number of different departmental publications circulated by my office alone, I know that the information contained in them has contributed greatly to the understanding that permeates my community. All the schools in my constituency have received teaching aids from the same source. An understanding of development is a component of good citizenship, so I am grateful for that contribution. I encourage the Department to continue to produce such valuable materials—they are much appreciated.

It is therefore opportune that we should be debating a Bill that establishes poverty reduction as the central aim of UK development assistance. Some people ask why we should have the Bill. I welcome it. I do not have the experience or expertise of many of my hon. Friends or of other hon. Members. This debate and the fact that it has exposed me to that expertise is a good argument in support of those hon. Members who have spoken so eloquently of the need for more such debates—or at least for regular and compulsory debates on the matter. When the proper policy targets are established and agreed across the House—as they are in this matter—they should be set out in an appropriate legislative framework. If the Bill did no more than that, it would merit introduction.

Although I accept that, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, poverty is a complex phenomenon, its complexity lies principally in the fact that the poor of the world live in vastly different ecological zones from the rich. The poor face different health conditions and limitations in their agriculture; they have fewer economic opportunities. That fundamental cause of their persisting poverty is often further complicated by the fact many of them live in corrupt or conflict-ridden societies.

However, that does not detract from the importance of recognising that different ecologies are the fundamental cause of poverty. The 30 countries with the highest incomes lie overwhelmingly in the world's temperate zones. By contrast, of the 42 HIPCs, 39 are tropical or desert societies. Although the climate of the remaining three—Laos, Malawi and Zambia—is substantially temperate, those countries are landlocked and isolated; they face unique challenges.

One of the world's most important challenges is to mobilise science and technology to address the key differences, and the fact that opportunities are afforded to the rich but denied to the poor. The necessity of using science and technology to improve health, to increase agricultural productivity and to combat environmental degradation is one of the factors that lies at the heart of the Government's second White Paper.

Important though that is, however, it is a compelling irony that as science and technology create new wealth and well-being in the richer countries, the conditions in many of the poorest are growing significantly worse. It is not only life but death that differs in those countries. We in the north enjoy a life expectancy of 70 years or more. Although we complain about them, we can largely thank our winters for that. In the HIPCs, average life expectancy is about 50—in some of those countries, it is falling. That is caused by the burden of diseases such as malaria, hookworm and sleeping sickness, which overlays poverty. That combination creates a vicious circle. Short life expectancy can be a result of poverty, but it is also a cause of poverty.

All the rich countries research on rich country ailments such as cardiovascular disease and cancer will not solve the problems of malaria; nor will biotechnology advances for temperate-zone crops easily transfer to the conditions of tropical agriculture. To address the special conditions of HIPCs, we must first understand their unique problems.

The inequalities of income across the world are exceeded by the inequalities of scientific output and technological innovation. Despite the fact that many of the scientific and technological breakthroughs are being

made by poor-country scientists, they are being made in rich countries. Global science is directed by rich countries for rich countries, even to the extent of harnessing much of the scientific potential of poor countries. Indian and Chinese experts are numerous in silicon valley. The result is a profound imbalance in the global production of knowledge—probably the most powerful engine of divergence in global well-being between the rich and the poor.

Malaria kills more than 1 million people a year—perhaps as many as 2·5 million—but because it is concentrated in the poorest tropical countries, no one even bothers to keep an accurate count of clinical cases or deaths. Recent advances in biotechnology, including the mapping of the genome of the malaria parasite, suggest that a malaria vaccine is possible, but that is not high on the agenda of the international community and the pharmaceutical firms. The Wellcome Trust estimates that only $80 million a year is spent on malaria research; the big firms see no profit in it.

The AIDS epidemic, to which hon. Members have already referred, is an even more stark example. Two thirds of all HIV-positive people live in sub-Saharan Africa, but, yet again, science stops at that ecological divide. Rich countries control the epidemic through new drug treatments, which are much too expensive for the poorest countries, but vaccine research, which may be more cost-effective, is poorly funded. The same is true of tuberculosis, which still takes the lives of more than 2 million poor people each year and would probably be treatable with a vaccine, but little or no research is carried out; there is no market for it or profit in it.

A proper poverty focus will compel us to work together with our poor neighbours to mobilise science and technology for the poorest countries. World institutions must fund research directed at the needs of those countries, not at the best return from the market. We must build on policies, such as the research and development tax credits announced last Monday by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and spread them throughout the world. At the same time, we must reconsider intellectual property.

It has been suggested that the current struggle over AIDS medicines in South Africa is an early warning shot in a much larger struggle over access to the fruits of human knowledge. Global decisions will be needed to resolve that struggle and, as a lawyer, I say that we cannot afford to leave it to lawyers and courts. Politicians must take responsibility for resolving those issues internationally.

Fergus Henderson of Stewarton—one of my constituents who attended the meeting on Sunday night—has written to me, posing questions that he did not have the opportunity to ask. Some of them have been answered by the very basis on which the Bill is set—the elimination of poverty. However—this is relevant to the comments that I have just made, especially to the South African case—he asks whether the Government will work to change World Trade Organisation rules to ensure that new medicines are available to those who need them, at a price that they can afford, as soon as is practicable. That issue goes to the root of the problem, and perhaps my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will address it in summing up.

In response to an intervention, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred to my visit to Burundi and Rwanda, as a guest of Christian Aid, in late July and August last year. I was in the company of my hon. Friends the Members for Tottenham (Mr. Lammy) and for Gloucester (Ms Kingham). We had originally intended to visit the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, but for reasons that I am sure all hon. Members who are present will understand, we were unable to do so—certainly, no sensible person would have done so at the time. However, Christian Aid's partners came to us. They bravely travelled across the border into Rwanda, where they told us the most harrowing stories of a people brutalised by all the many protagonists in the bloody conflict that rages throughout that country.

I mention that experience in the context of this debate not as part of a travelogue, but to illustrate my view. Armed with the evidence of the reality for those people, I was persuaded that we would have no difficulty in persuading any court—I hope that this reassures those on the Opposition Front Bench—that any aid that we could give to those people for the benefit of conflict resolution, human rights or good governance could easily be categorised as meeting the objectives of poverty reduction.

The Bill raises issues that are specific to Scotland. Development is a reserved matter, and the Scottish people are content that it remains so—certainly, so long as the primary policy is one of poverty reduction and the attaintment of the 2015 international development targets. The strength of the Jubilee 2000 campaign in the United Kingdom was the shared common purpose of the people of Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland to deliver speedy and substantial debt relief to the poorest countries to reduce debt burdens to sustainable levels.

The Scots are as proud as other United Kingdom citizens that their Government took the lead in that process. They are acutely aware that what has been achieved has been dependent on our Government having a seat at the top table of the institutions that needed reform to improve their transparency, efficiency and accountability. They do not want to give up that role.

Scots have an admirable reputation for contributing to government and intergovernmental organisations and to NGOs involved in the delivery of humanitarian assistance and development aid. They will welcome the opportunity provided by clause 9 for their statutory bodies to enter into and carry out agreements for those purposes.

Clauses 9 and 10 contain a proper recognition of devolution. For the first time, there is also an interesting statutory attempt to define a Scottish body. It is appropriate that powers exercised by the Scottish bodies that have responsibility for devolved matters should be subject to an order made by a Scottish Minister. However, will my hon. Friend the Minister advise me whether legislation in Scotland will be required to enable a Scottish Minister to make such an order? If so, when does he expect that legislation to be introduced?

Clause 9(6)(b) envisages

"the Secretary of State acting with the consent of Scottish Ministers"

in certain circumstances. Will my hon. Friend the Minister tell us what the mechanism for obtaining that consent will be and reassure us that it will not create any delay in allowing the sort of agreements that we all want between our health care bodies and partners in developing countries?

[Mr. Browne]

For my final point, I return to the objective of poverty reduction. I draw on the reference that my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) made to drug eradication and on one of the "whys" asked by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge). Will my hon. Friend the Minister assure the House that, when enacted, the Bill will preclude any contribution to Plan Colombia? That plan has been focused improperly on a military plan involving the Colombian Government and the United States. Will he assure us that, until it is refocused as a development plan, the objectives at the core of the Bill will preclude us from spending one penny of our aid budget on it?

9.6 pm

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): I welcome the Bill as a useful summary of the Government's position on international development. I declare a slight disinterest: I am not a member of the Select Committee on International Development, I never have been a member and I am never likely to be a member. On behalf of Plaid Cymru, I also welcome the way in which the Government have worked on this issue. As we always say, not enough money has been devoted to development, but the Government's aims and intentions are welcome.

The hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) mentioned the large public meeting that was held in his constituency. I regret that when the Secretary of State came to Wales yesterday, she was greeted by a custard pie. Although we can throw many brickbats and even custard pies at some Ministers and members of the Government, we should not treat the right hon. Lady in such a way. She has done sterling work in government to try to raise the level of debate on international development. She has also done excellent work throughout the United Kingdom to enable us to debate the issues.

Although we do not have frequent opportunities to debate these matters in the House, I join other Members in saying how widely popular such measures are in our constituencies. In that regard, I pay particular tribute to Jubilee 2000, which has organised one of the most successful campaigns that I have seen. The Prime Minister described it as one of the most successful grass-roots campaigns, and many Members will still have in their offices little sacks and plastic bags full of red "drop the debt chain" postcards.

We know how successful the campaign has been, because 22 of the most heavily indebted countries have received the debt relief that was promised to them. Others will receive debt relief as they introduce their poverty reduction programmes. Although I am sure that the Government would have worked to a certain extent for debt relief, Jubilee 2000 clearly shows how NGOs in this country, with their strong links abroad, can work to persuade the Government to act as quickly as possible. I pay tribute to those organisations.

The question has been raised whether the Bill is necessary because the powers already seem to exist. The Secretary of State gave a cogent and clear argument about why she wanted to entrench measures for poverty reduction in a Bill. After 21 years, it is time to debate the future of international development and this country's role in supporting developing countries.

However, for me, one watchdog has not barked. I am concerned about the definition of sustainable development. For the first time in legislation on international development, there is a clear reference to the need for international assistance to be provided to further sustainable development. That is an important advance. It is only the second time that sustainable development has been cited in a Bill. It was first mentioned in the Government of Wales Act 1998, which obliges the National Assembly for Wales to have regard to sustainable development.

The Secretary of State was asked about the definition of poverty. However, does the Bill contain an adequate definition of sustainable development? It states:

"'sustainable development' includes any development that is, in the opinion of the Secretary of State, prudent"—

no doubt we will hear more of that tomorrow—

"having regard to the likelihood of its generating lasting benefits for the population of the country or countries in relation to which it is provided."

That sweet definition sounds acceptable, but I do not trust future Secretaries of State to have the right view of sustainable development. It is too open-ended. We are getting rid of tied aid and it must not return by the back door, but the definition might allow that to happen. The likelihood of generating lasting benefits means that a future Secretary of State could argue that the tie-up with aid is for the benefit of the country in question and will support its sustainable development strategy. The Government and the Committee should consider including a phrase similar to the Brundtland declaration on sustainable development, which refers to the need not to compromise the requirements of future generations. That would be a huge advance.

The Secretary of State has the most able lieutenant. The Minister, whom I welcome to his new job, knows about sustainable development from his previous role. He has huge experience of responding to no end of debates on the environment in Westminster Hall, at all times of the morning and afternoon. He will help to produce a firmer definition of sustainable development. We need that because global warming and climate change are perhaps second only to warfare in the effects that they will have on developing countries in the next 50 years. Those countries are suffering most from climate change. Some 96 per cent. of deaths from natural disasters occur in developing countries, which are less able to deal with such catastrophes, as we know from events in Mozambique.

A quarter of people live in the developed world and devour three quarters of natural resources. We are also responsible for most environmental damage. The poor and deprived in the developing world suffer from the ill effects of that. We have heard much about our moral duty to support developing countries financially, but we also have a moral duty to consider how we run our economies and environment. According to one estimate, 10,000 people have been killed in the past two years by the effects of climate change. The vast majority of those were, of course, in poor countries.

A recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has doubled the worst-case scenario. It mentions the loss of food crops, the disappearance of fisheries, the melting of glaciers—which provide millions of people with a summer water supply—and a rise in sea levels, which will cause massive economic disruption and

migration. There is no doubt that Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, will be hit hardest by climate change in the next 25 to 50 years. People will be forced off their land in ever greater numbers because of the way in which the developed world has run its economy in the past 50 years. They will see this country, and Europe in general, as the promised land.

We have to be careful in discussions on the Kyoto targets—which, I hope will resume between Europe and the new United States Government—that we do not transfer the burden of dealing with climate change and emissions to the developing countries themselves. The Kyoto targets are global, and we must ensure that we in the developed countries take due responsibility. I therefore hope that the Government will continue to press for domestic measures to achieve those targets, rather than engage in backdoor deals, emission trading, a clean development mechanism and all the other things that have been suggested as a way out of the present impasse between north America and Europe on the Kyoto targets. Clearly, developing countries should not pick up the tab for our aims on the clear Kyoto targets. We should not and cannot transfer the burden to them.

Another issue of concern covered by the Bill is the negotiations on the General Agreement on Trade in Services and the World Trade Organisation, which have continued since last February and are expected to conclude in the next year or so. Reading the White Paper, "Eliminating World Poverty", I got the impression that the Government feel that globalisation and institutions such as the WTO can help to eliminate world poverty by investing in developing countries and creating decent jobs. However, those developing countries need a greater voice in that investment and should not simply be exploited by multinationals. Sustainable development, the protection of workers rights and the creation of a more equal world should be central duties for the WTO, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund; indeed, they should be part of the remit of the reformed United Nations.

We must accept that at the moment, the WTO dances to the tune of corporate America, not developing countries. We must get that issue across in the current GATS negotiations. The poorest 20 per cent. get just 1.1 per cent. of global income, but the richest 20 per cent. get 86 per cent. There is therefore a differential of more than 80 per cent., which cannot continue. No matter what is set out on paper in agreements, that income differential will always mean that developed countries and multinationals and companies within those countries will put the squeeze on developing countries. That will always be the case, so we need to use agreements such as GATS, and the WTO, to protect developing countries.

The Government have not recognised that argument, and still believe that those institutions can be used to eradicate poverty. I do not think that they are misguided, but we need a much more severe examination of what trade liberalisation means for developing countries. Although world trade has increased 17-fold in the past 50 years, Latin America's share of it has shrunk from 11 per cent. to 5 per cent. and Africa's from 8 per cent. to 2 per cent. The current goal of promoting economic growth by orienting economies to boosting exports and attracting direct foreign investment is an economic model that has not yet been proven to deliver to developing countries. In the past few years, trade developments in sub-Saharan Africa have resulted in a decline of almost 30 per cent. in gross domestic product, and we must take account of that in debates on GATS and the WTO.

GATS involves difficulties, and the potential impacts, both positive and negative, are enormous. So far, however, it has received only superficial scrutiny in the House. One reason is that we do not often have these debates—which is an excellent reason for having them more often. Another reason is that GATS is intensely complicated and difficult for us to take on board. In passing, I support the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun on events in South Africa and the need that they underline. Almost half South Africa's health spending is on drugs; the current challenge against it by the international drug companies in the courts will have a huge impact on the way in which it deals with AIDS and other health issues. International trade agreements and international drug companies may have the law on their side, but surely we must recognise that morally they have very little case indeed. It would be useful if the Government would help to negotiate with the drug companies based in the United Kingdom.

After a long debate, it seems that we are running out of time. I conclude by reiterating my party's policies. We support an increase to 0.7 per cent. of GDP to be spent on international aid. We would support any party which set that as its objective. We want to see a switch from military expenditure, which unfortunately is to rise by £4 billion in the comprehensive settlement, to international development. We would argue the virtues of a Tobin tax on international currency exchanges, with the proceeds of that tax diverted directly to international development.

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to take part in the debate.

9.20 pm

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Like all my colleagues, I sincerely welcome the Bill. Anyone who feels a moral compunction to lessen poverty, as we all do on both sides of the House, will congratulate the Government on the Bill.

Happily, morality is not the only winner. Yes, there is a moral compunction to eradicate poverty, educate children, reduce infant mortality, stem the flow of arms, reduce conflict, prevent environmental degradation, provide debt relief, promote the rule of law and safeguard human rights, but even among those who do not have a single moral bone in their bodies there is a growing recognition that we cannot afford not to deal with those issues.

The best way to deal with all those issues of life and death, prosperity and deprivation, is to safeguard a poverty-focused approach. That is what the Bill will enshrine in law. It represents a profound shift in international development policy, first introduced by the Government's White Paper in 1997. That approach is entirely different from the policy of the previous Government. We have refocused our entire development effort on the reduction of extreme poverty and we have untied all UK aid. That is an extremely important step.

What reduces poverty most? It is trade, coupled with the equitable redistribution of its benefits. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said many times, in the past 50 years we have lifted more people out of poverty than in the past 500 years. Most people have been

[Ms Oona King]

pulled out of poverty not because they have been handed official development assistance, but because they or their families have been given access to an economy that permits them to earn a living wage and provides social sector investment in schools, hospitals, clinics and so on.

I refer anyone who has an interest in the matter to the Select Committee's 10th report on the WTO, entitled "After Seattle—the World Trade Organisation and Developing Countries", as well as DFID's own White Paper, "Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor."

Issues associated with trade and globalisation are central to the Bill's poverty-focused approach. We must generate pro-poor growth. Unfortunately, there is no consensus about what constitutes pro-poor growth. I eagerly await DFID's research into that. I welcome the range of financial instruments that the Bill makes available to DFID so that it can influence reform in the private sector. There is no point in influencing only the public sector, when many of the poorest people are never reached by the public sector. The recognition of that fact has infused Government thinking.

Without economic growth and access to markets, poor countries are condemned to an unbreakable cycle of poverty, so one anti-poverty strategy must be tariff-free access to developed countries' markets. At present, all the aid that the richer countries give the poorer countries still amounts to only 5.6 per cent. of what the poorer countries generate from trade.

Imagine if the terms of trade were fair. Imagine if the EU and the USA were not among the biggest protectionist culprits on the planet. Imagine if we could find it in our hearts to increase the miserable share of world trade that is apportioned to the poorest countries—to raise it from its current microscopic level of 0.4 per cent. Imagine if the international system was not riddled with double standards and the poorest of the poor were at the top of our agenda. They are at the top of the DFID agenda, but how do we make that dream world a reality that spreads across other organisations and institutions?

We should start with the development targets, which are otherwise known as Development Assistance Committee targets. They include halving the proportion of the world's population who are living in extreme poverty, getting all children into primary school, progressing gender equality, reducing infant mortality rates by two thirds and reducing maternal mortality by three quarters. The aim is to achieve all that by 2015. Those targets are the biggest challenge facing the world; they are the planet's "to do" list.

A woman in sub-Saharan Africa has a one in 12 chance of dying from pregnancy-related causes. In the developed world, she has a chance of one in 4,000. On current trends, 100 million children will be out of school in 2015. Developing countries carry the burden of 90 per cent. of the world's disease, but they receive less than 10 per cent. of its health resources. AIDS single-handedly threatens to roll back hard-won development gains. For example, it has knocked a staggering 22 years off average life expectancy in Zimbabwe. In Zambia, 42 per cent. of hospital beds are filled with AIDS victims, but despite all that, drug companies still want their pound of flesh. Given those appalling statistics, we need accelerated progress towards the DAC targets and not just more of the same. That is why the British Government's poverty-focused approach, which the Bill entrenches in legislation, is so critical if we are to reach the targets that I have mentioned.

I shall discard many parts of my speech because of lack of time, but I want to mention the change in approach by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. That is another example of the British Government using their influence to change the global institutions that affect policy on these matters. The World Bank and the IMF have followed the example set by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and made poverty reduction a part of their working ethos.

I used to be one of those who stood outside with placards and banners shouting and demonstrating against the IMF and the World Bank. I can hardly believe my ears when I hear the leaders of the those organisations, Jim Wolfensohn and Horst Köhler, exhorting member states to redouble their efforts to reduce poverty. Others working on the ground with those institutions might say that seeing is believing, but there is no getting away from the fact that the new World Bank and IMF approach, which is enshrined in the poverty reduction strategy papers—or PRSPs—contributes to helping the poorest people.

Equally importantly, PRSPs give ownership to developing countries. Interestingly, although they emerged from the process of debt relief, they are now being used as a tool in other areas. That highlights the importance of the cross-fertilisation of ideas in development—another area in which the British Government have taken the lead. We have also unilaterally provided 100 per cent. debt relief for any developing country that is committed to using the proceeds to benefit the poor. For example, we have moved heaven and earth to help the poorest people in Rwanda. Again, we have done so through debt relief, good governance and building a modern and effective state. The Government have led by example and put their money where their mouth is. Surely, politicians could never ask for more.

Between 1997-98 and 2003-04, our aid budget will have increased by 45 per cent. in real terms. It will total £3.6 billion in the final year, which is the largest UK aid budget ever. The Bill ensures that poverty eradication remains the focus of every penny of that money. For that reason, I welcome it unreservedly.

9.29 pm

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): Perhaps I am getting old, or perhaps I am mellowing, but I agreed with many hon. Members' comments. I therefore begin by congratulating everyone who has spoken. The Secretary of State may have to pick herself up off the floor when I join other hon. Members in welcoming the Bill.

The range of topics that hon. Members have raised shows how keenly the House has missed debating international development under this Government. We have covered drugs, AIDS, mine clearance, child labour, plague and pestilence, war and peacekeeping, the European Union, other institutions, the Commonwealth Development Corporation, climate change and even devolution. A common theme permeated the debate: we

all want poverty to be reduced throughout the world, and we are unstinting in our praise for the NGOs and others who try to bring help and succour to the world's poorest people.

I congratulate the Secretary of State on producing the Bill like a rabbit out of a hat. I am sure that she was amazed when the usual channels gave her a slot for the measure. She did not have as much success in securing debates, but her Bill has reached Second Reading.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), who gave praise where it was due, and was unstinting in his comments on the Department's achievements. However, many hon. Members were sufficiently mean-minded to snipe at him, whether he was present or not. Those criticisms were hurtful and a little unfair.

I shall not go through every hon. Member's contribution in detail. The right hon. Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke), the hon. Members for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington), for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge), for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall), for Stevenage (Barbara Follett), for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas), and for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King), and my hon. Friends the Members for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), and for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) all made speeches, while my hon. Friends the Members for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), and for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), and the hon. Member for Paisley, South (Mr. Alexander) intervened. Every contribution had merit; every hon. Member spoke with authority.

I want to reserve most of my comments for two hon. Members, albeit Conservative Members, who will retire at the next election. I hope that all hon. Members will join me in congratulating my hon. Friends the Members for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) and for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells) on their contributions today. My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent showed his abiding concern for children and economic migrants. I pay tribute to the Youth Parliament that he promoted throughout the United Kingdom for the millennium. It was a magnificent project and a fitting tribute to his time in the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford is sitting right behind me. He has enjoyed a long and distinguished career in the House. Since 1981, his stint on foreign affairs and development matters has been broken only briefly by a foray into the Whips Office. He soon returned to international development as a member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and, since 1997, as Chairman of the Select Committee on International Development. He has made a genuine contribution. Before becoming a Member of Parliament, he gave up 12 years of his life to the Commonwealth Development Corporation. He is now treasurer of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. He does not stint on his work load.

I have a list of the papers and reports that the International Development Committee has published. It is too long to read out in full. It includes reports on Montserrat, Sudan, and women and development—I found that report especially important. My hon. Friend has not shirked difficult issues such as the Ilisu dam and Mozambique. Three reports are currently under consideration. They cover HIV-AIDS, corruption and the globalisation White Paper. I trust that the Secretary of State will ensure that the election is not called before my hon. Friend has an opportunity to complete them, because the next Conservative Government will rely on their outcome. We can all agree that my hon. Friend's wisdom, knowledge, dedication and commitment are a credit to the House and to international development. He will be sadly missed.

The Bill seeks to anchor the goals of the Department within the framework of the reduction of poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon said, we do not oppose the main theme of this legislation. We share a common goal, and we recognise the commitment of the Department, the Secretary of State and her Ministers. I miss my exchanges with the hon. Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes), who is now the Minister of State, Scotland Office, but I look forward to my exchanges in Committee with the new Under-Secretary.

We wish to explore the areas between the lines of the Bill and highlight issues that might be helpful to the Government and could contribute to our shared goal of reducing the pain and suffering of the poorest people throughout the world. Our methods may differ from those of the Government from time to time, but our ultimate aims do not.

The central plank of the Bill is poverty reduction, and we need to explore with the Secretary of State how that new emphasis will affect the Department and our development work. Let us take the example of good governance that has been mentioned again and again in the debate. The Government have not made governance a priority in the Bill. However, to lift a country and its people out of poverty, it is indisputable that one needs a framework of competent and responsible Government, open and accountable institutions and the rule of law. When good governance goes out of the window, poverty quickly rushes in through the door.

One has only to look at Zimbabwe, which was mentioned by several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent. In Zimbabwe last week I saw productive farms that had been reduced, in less than a year, to little more than patches of dirt, producing so little that they can hardly support the squatters' families who have prevented the legal owners from planting and producing food. A farm that only last year could produce an income to support the many now struggles to provide sustenance for just a few. The destruction and the absence of good governance are an open invitation to famine and destruction.

In the light of the Bill, we need to ensure that democracy building, good governance and the activities that ensure the development or maintenance of legal systems can definitely continue. Indeed, I hope for reassurances on activities such as Customs and Excise operations, which are essential in relation to drugs, and I hope that the Under-Secretary will bring to the Standing Committee an assurance that such activities will continue. We need to know what activities are acceptable, and what activities will fall within the parameters of the Bill.

Commendable though the poverty focus may be, nowhere in the Bill do we find a definition of poverty. That issue was raised by several hon. Members, including

[Mrs. Cheryl Gillan]

my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford, who spotted it first. In the absence of such a definition, we need to know, for example, how there can be any clarity concerning the parameters to be set by the Secretary of State, and how we can discover which countries and which peoples would qualify for, or be denied, aid under the Secretary of State's new formula. The hon. Members for Stevenage and for Clydebank and Milngavie raised that point earlier, and we shall need to explore the issue in more detail in Committee.

We shall also need to know how the new focus affects our international relationships. Many hon. Members raised the issue of how the Secretary of State will deal with the European Union aid budget. My hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon pointed out that the bias in expenditure is towards the relatively rich countries of the Mediterranean and eastern Europe, rather than towards Asia and Africa, where most of the world's poorest people live. As 30 per cent. of the Department's budget goes directly to the EU aid programme, how will that expenditure be justified when the legislation sets out different aims and objectives and, certainly, a different set of priorities for the UK aid spend?

The reform of the EU institutions may well be on its way. We wish it good speed, but progress has been painfully slow and I am not holding my breath waiting for it. This legislation will be in place before the reforms are anywhere near completion. We know that the Secretary of State cannot reduce the amount of money delivered through the European Union; she will therefore be on a collision course with it. I hope that the Minister will tell us in Committee how the Secretary of State will deal with that anomaly.

I want to touch on two matters of particular concern to me: the British Council and the overseas territories. Both are in need of guidance from the Department as to their future status. The relationship between the Department and the British Council has fundamentally changed since the Department was split off from the Foreign Office. Indeed, the value of contracts between the Department and the British Council has fallen dramatically, from £62 million in 1996–97 to £23.3 million in the last financial year, and we need to examine how the Department's actions have affected and will affect the British Council's activities.

Back in 1997, the Secretary of State referred to the British Council in the White Paper as

"a key partner in developing and implementing programmes",

but unfortunately the rhetoric does not necessarily match the reality these days.

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, because she keeps returning to the issue of the British Council. There is a muddle over its role. The British Council, which is a fine body, is the cultural arm of British diplomacy. It was funded by the two Departments, but we transferred our funding to the Foreign Office because it is inefficient to have accountability to two organisations, as I assume she knows.

The British Council also manages a lot of activity for us. That activity varies and does not relate to its core budget. It depends on the effectiveness of the management of a particular project. There has been no diminution of the British Council. The hon. Lady is obsessed with the issue, but she does not seem to understand that the British Council is not a development agency. It is the cultural arm of British foreign policy and it performs that function extremely well.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): It is an aid organisation.

Clare Short: No, it is not.

Mrs. Gillan: I wish the Secretary of State would let me develop my point, because British Council operations are being slashed—in Namibia by 37 per cent., in Zambia by 33 per cent. and in Malawi by 45 per cent. The country directorates in Belarus, Ecuador, Lesotho and Swaziland are closing. Three offices in Nigeria will shut and £18.6 million is being spent on redundancy and ancillary payments to make redundant 800 locally appointed staff and 100 staff in the UK.

All that is happening to a "key partner", but what is happening to the Department in some of those locations? Is it scaling down its operations? Is it redirecting aid elsewhere? No. British Council operations face reduction, but the Department is increasing its presence. It appears that the Department is trying to ensure that it replaces the British Council and substitutes for it in certain areas. Indeed, under the Secretary of State's stewardship, the Department has grown by 323 staff since 1996–97, which is a considerable increase. The administrative budget will have grown by £9 million, to £74 million—a sum greater than the aid given to any country in 1999–2000 apart from the top three recipients of bilateral aid, and greater than the money given to Bangladesh, Mozambique, Sierra Leone or even South Africa.

I asked the Minister a question about the British Council and he had the decency to write to me after he had inadvertently misled the House in an answer. Perhaps he will take time to examine the British Council's case carefully and give the reassurance that we seek that the Department is not empire-building at the council's expense.

I must refer briefly to the overseas territories, and in particular, to the implications of the poverty focus for aid to some of the islands. Although many overseas territories are economically self-sustaining, certain issues still concern them. I hope that the Minister will clarify the Department's attitudes to the overseas territories and give us the reassurances that we seek. Despite the wording of the White Paper, they do not know where they stand in terms of priority for aid from the Government; and their fears were epitomised by the reaction in the early days to the volcanic eruptions in Montserrat. Questions still remain over long-term development aid and there is particular concern over the lack of such aid for housing. Perhaps we can consider that in Committee.

St. Helena is another example. For many years, it has been agreed that further economic development will be difficult to achieve unless access is dramatically improved either by an airfield or by a wharf development project. That contention has been supported by every business plan undertaken for the island. Considerable funding would be involved in such a project, but it would provide for the significant economic development that would allow St. Helena to become economically independent.

I hope that the Minister will say in Committee whether such a project would stand or fall under clause 1. Will help be forthcoming to the island, and when can the islanders expect a decision?

I hope that the Minister will still confirm that there will be no cuts in the Department's overall budget. I hope—especially on a day when the Prime Minister is making such a fuss about his environmental credentials—that there is no truth in the rumour that cuts may be made in the global environment facility fund for the overseas territories, because that fund makes available money for environmental conservation. Given that Britain's overseas territories protect some of the most important wildlife sites in the world, any reduction or elimination of that fund would be nothing short of a disaster. I hope the Minister will confirm that there will be no change, and indeed that the possibility of supporting wildlife and environmental projects will remain after the passage of the Bill.

It is almost the end of term, and we are now writing the Department's report. There have been many plaudits for the Secretary of State and her Ministers, and rightly so but it is a little sad that, despite all their good intentions, there have been so many failures. There has been the failure to be tough on corruption, and to introduce the promised legislation; there has been the failure to tackle waste and mismanagement in the European Union. The Government's own debt-relief targets have not been reached. Members have referred to the absorption of teachers and nurses from developing countries, and to the fall in the percentage of gross national product that is spent on aid.

It seems remarkable that, three years after the publication of the White Paper, there is finally a Bill before us. It is hardly a magnum opus, but I believe that it could make a difference to many people's lives, and it surely deserves better than being sneaked into the parliamentary schedule in the dying days of a Labour Government.

We will not vote against Second Reading; we will not seek to oppose the Bill. We will, however, seek to improve it in Committee.

9.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Chris Mullin): We have had a good debate. The hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) started well. Like others, he paid tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and that of the Department, and I am grateful for that. He said that we had a common goal, and that we were singing from the same hymn sheet. I am grateful for that as well, although I confess that the longer he went on, the more I began to wonder. He gave an undertaking that a future Conservative Government would not re-link aid and trade. I am grateful for that too, especially in the light of the last Government's shocking record in that regard, of which the Pergau dam affair is only the most glaring example. From that point onwards, however, the hon. Gentleman's performance became increasingly shameless.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) observed, the hon. Gentleman's critique of Government policy came ill from one who had supported a Government who abused just about every aspect of overseas aid, and took so little interest in the subject over nearly 20 years that they published no White Paper on it. I am sure we all welcome the rather slim document recently published by his party that the hon. Gentleman brandished, but I put it to him that it is just about all that that party has had to offer by way of strategic thinking on development during the past 20 years. At least he had the good grace to blush when, as he was telling us off for not presenting a statement as well as a White Paper, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) asked him how many White Papers had been published during 18 years of Conservative government.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of points. I shall deal with the main ones; others may have to wait until the Committee stage. Like others, he asked why we needed the Bill. The short answer is that the Overseas Development and Co-operation Act 1980 is outdated and open to misinterpretation; it provides for the use of only a limited range of financial instruments; and, most importantly, it no longer reflects the Government's focus on the elimination of poverty. Above all, the Bill will prevent future Governments from misusing aid budgets, as has sometimes happened.

The hon. Member for South-West Devon stressed the Conservative party's commitment to promoting good governance. I welcome that. However, when one sees senior members of his party—Lady Thatcher and Lord Lamont come to mind, cheered on by *The Daily Telegraph*—fawning over the odious General Pinochet, there is bound to be some scepticism about how deep that commitment to good governance actually is among everyone in his party. I do not question his motives or those of most Opposition Members who referred to the issue—*[Interruption.]* However, there is bound to be that scepticism. *[Interruption.]* They do not like it, do they? Have you noticed that, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Robathan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Mullin: Not for the moment, because several minutes of my time were taken up by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan).

The hon. Member for South-West Devon very reasonably raised the issue of the scandalously inefficient European Community development programme. However, his protestation that Conservative Members can be relied upon to sort out those problems have to be matched against the inconvenient fact that it was a Conservative Government who, at the Edinburgh summit, agreed that the EC's share of our development budget should rise massively to 30 per cent.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development—who is not backward about coming forward—has been in the forefront of trying to reform the EC's development programme. I am glad to report that some progress has been made, although there is still a considerable way to go. *[Interruption.]* I do not think that we disagree about that, despite the heckling from those on the Opposition Front Bench. I can assure the House that we shall not relax our vigilance.

Meanwhile, the hon. Gentleman and other Conservative Members may take comfort from the fact that one of those charged with reforming the EC is their former right hon. Friend Chris Patten, who I know is much admired on the Opposition Benches.

[Mr. Mullin]

I have one other point on the hon. Gentleman's speech. He raised, unwisely one might think, the current percentage of gross national product that is spent on aid. As we have already announced, we expect the figure for the calendar year 2000 to be about 0.29 per cent. We are on target to achieve our aim of 0.33 per cent. in the financial year 2003–04.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): It says here.

Mr. Mullin: It says that here because I wrote it.

Let me be the first to admit that that is a long way from the United Nations target of 0.7 per cent., but the essential fact is that we inherited a budget that was declining year on year, but it is now increasing year on year. If we are re-elected, it will continue to increase year on year. I thought that it was just a little cheeky of the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham to demand a guarantee from us that there will be no cuts. She represents a party that is committed to £16 billion worth of cuts. Goodness knows where they will come from, but it would not surprise me if one or two of them came from the aid budget.

Mrs. Gillan: No.

Mr. Mullin: We shall see—or perhaps we will not.

I regret that it is not possible for me to respond to all the points that have been made in the debate—although I suspect that many of us are destined to meet again in Committee, where we shall have a chance to explore some of the more detailed points.

The contribution of the hon. Member for South-West Devon aside, we had a number of very thoughtful speeches. I join the tributes that have been paid to the speech by the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr. Wells), who I know has taken a long and consistent interest in development matters. He will be missed when he leaves the House. He asked whether the Bill should define humanitarian assistance. I think that the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) made a similar point.

We believe that to embed any definition of humanitarian assistance in the Bill would unnecessarily constrain our ability to react quickly, to learn from existing programmes and to reflect those lessons in future ones. By doing so we would run the risk of making unlawful certain interventions that would contribute to reducing suffering. For the same reason, we think that it would be wrong to try to define poverty—but these matters can be discussed in more detail later. All we would be doing is attempting to make absolute concepts that are relative, as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford recognised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington)—[*Interruption.*]—I am sorry that I mispronounced his constituency; it is the place where they have civic balls. My hon. Friend asked whether assistance should be limited to the poorest people in the poorest countries. The effect of that would be to constrain our ability to support good governance or the strengthening of financial systems, which are often among the most useful assistance that we can offer the Government of a poor country. We also recognise that pockets of severe poverty exist in the so-called middle-income and transitional countries.

My hon. Friend also asked whether DFID expenditure in eastern Europe would be subject to the same tests as other expenditure. I can assure him that it will. He asked why Northern Ireland is not mentioned in the Bill. I should clarify that the Bill does extend to Northern Ireland, although the Northern Ireland Administration recognise that they have no competence in international development matters. No statutory bodies for which the Northern Ireland Administration is accountable are currently listed in schedule 2 to the Bill. However, we recognise that such bodies could be added to the schedule in future. The Northern Ireland Assembly has asked that any consultation with the Secretary of State which might arise from the addition of such statutory bodies to schedule 2 and their subsequent activities should be handled under the memorandum of understanding in respect of devolved Administrations rather than requiring consultation under the Bill. The Bill reflects that position.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park was concerned about why clause 1(3) allows the Secretary of State to decide whether development is sustainable in her opinion. The hon. Lady missed out the qualification that follows immediately afterwards:

"having regard to the likelihood of its generating lasting benefits for the population of the country or countries in relation to which it is provided."

That opinion must be reasonably held. If it is not, it may be challenged. If the Bill did not provide for the Secretary of State to exercise her judgment, the matter would have to be settled solely in the courts. I should add that the Secretary of State is answerable not only to the courts but, of course, to the House.

The hon. Lady also asked about the defence offset schemes. They could not be financed under the Bill as their prime purpose is to sell military hardware, and not to reduce poverty. She asked whether clause 5 paved the way for tied aid. It does not; its purpose is simply to set down the forms of assistance that can be provided. There is no requirement or implication that such assistance must be sourced from the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham asked about assistance to overseas territories. The Bill explicitly recognises the special relationship that Britain has with the overseas territories. It will allow the Secretary of State to continue to provide all types of support—including budgetary support—for the overseas territories. The Bill does not require any reduction in the level of resources available to the overseas territories and I hope that the hon. Lady will not stir up any mischief on that point.

In conclusion, we have a good story to tell. Under my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, the British development assistance programme has been transformed. We inherited a budget that was declining year by year; it is now increasing year by year. Our development programme is no longer a tool of foreign policy, still less a tool of trade policy. DFID is an independent Government Department with its own seat in the Cabinet. Our assistance is now firmly targeted at the poorest people in the poorest countries, and the Bill will ensure that it remains that way.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

International Development Bill (Programme)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the following provisions shall apply to the International Development Bill:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 15th March.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Six o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords amendments and further messages from the Lords

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any Lords amendments, or on any further messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.—[*Mr. Mullin.*]

10 pm

Mr. Streeter: I am staggered and disappointed that the Minister should have moved this important programme motion formally. It is an affront to democracy. The Bill has been presented under Standing Order No. 50. If we are to debate the motion properly, I hope that the Minister will explain how Standing Order No. 50 interacts with the programme motion. Will he say what the implications are of that for the programme motion? I should be happy to give way to him. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) is speaking.

Mr. Streeter: Does not it beggar belief that a Bill can be presented under Standing Order No. 50 without the Minister explaining its import, and its impact on the programme motion? Is not that another example of the contempt with which the Government treat the House of Commons?

The Government's action is an affront to democracy because the Bill is about international development and supporting democracy around the world. This country invented democracy, and exported it around the world. Over many years, we have taken steps to underpin democracy throughout the rest of the world. The House has been discussing all day ways in which to support democracy elsewhere in the world. Is not it ironic that democracy is coming under threat in this country? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is entitled to a hearing.

Mr. Streeter: Shouting down Members in the House of Commons is another affront to democracy. In the two years that I have been in my post, I have visited some central and eastern European countries that used to be crushed by communism. I have visited many African states where there has been no history of democracy. People in those countries know that their new-found democracy is a fragile, precious creature. Many of those countries hold their democracy very lightly and very preciously, because they know that it is easy for it to be snatched away.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Does not my hon. Friend agree that the subject under discussion this evening is too important for us to restrict the debate? Why do Labour Members not want to discuss something about which the House in general agrees? Should we not spend more time, rather than less, on such an important subject?

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): Give him a beefburger.

Mr. Gummer: Moreover, does not my hon. Friend think that some hon. Members, who rarely make sensible contributions to debates, should remain quiet in their seated positions?

Mr. Streeter: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. It is interesting to note that when Labour Members do not want to hear important arguments from Opposition Members, they simply talk among themselves and do not pay attention. They really are an unholy rabble.

Mr. Rogers: The hon. Gentleman wonders why there is some noise from Labour Members. Some of us remember when the previous Government guillotined Bills and rammed them through the House time after time. When Conservative Members complain about this Government, it does more than smack of hypocrisy: it smells of it.

Mr. Streeter: I am rather sorry that I gave way to the hon. Gentleman. He does not seem to understand that we are talking about an entirely new procedure. We are talking about the programme motions imposed by the Government on the House of Commons, against its better judgment.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Has my hon. Friend noted that a new precedent has been set in the House tonight? Like me, he will remember when gagging motions such as this were introduced by the Leader of the House. That changed, and such motions were proposed by the Secretary of State of the relevant Department. Even the Under-Secretary disdains the House so much that he did not explain the reasons for this gagging motion.

Mr. Streeter: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a powerful point. The Secretary of State, who is the head

[Mr. Streeter]

of the Department, as my right hon. and learned Friend says, has left the debate, so unimportant is this to the Government.

All around the world people are cherishing their new-found democracy. Is it not ironic that here, in the mother of all Parliaments, the Government are placing our democracy under threat by treating the House of Commons with contempt?

How could the Government decide, even before Second Reading, how long we should spend considering the Bill in Committee? Who will speak in Committee? What arguments will be put? The Government have no idea how long will be necessary for us to scrutinise this important Bill.

Mr. Gummer: Did my hon. Friend hear the Minister say from a seated position that we agreed with the Bill? Is that not an opportunity for us to discuss it properly and not to hold it up, but to be useful? Are the Government frightened that somehow they cannot give vent to normal discussions, as the House has always done down the years of history?

Mr. Streeter: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful case. Many constructive contributions from Conservative Members have been made in this debate and many constructive contributions from Conservative Members will be made in Committee—if there is enough time. Yet the programme motion says—it is almost beyond belief—that the Bill must have finished its Committee proceedings by Thursday 15 March.

Next Monday is 12 March. The Bill was first printed on 15 February. It was presented to the House of Commons out of the blue. No one was expecting it. This morning I met the non-governmental organisations and charities that are expert in this field, and they were not expecting such a Bill. The Government gave no signals that it was coming. It has been introduced for party political pre-election purposes, and has come out of the blue.

The Bill was printed on 15 February and c..ne before the House today. We are asked to finish its consideration in Committee by Thursday 15 March.

Mr. Mullin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Streeter: In a second. Amendments must be tabled by Friday lunchtime if they are to be considered by the start of Committee proceedings next Tuesday. Tomorrow is Budget day; Second Reading has taken place today. We have precious little time in which to seek expert opinion on some important matters, which I shall cover shortly. What a shocking example of a Government railroading legislation through Parliament and not giving the Opposition an opportunity to scrutinise and improve it. I will now give way to the Minister and I hope that he will explain what Standing Order No. 50 is all about.

Mr. Mullin: I wonder whether I could insert a little killer fact into this discussion. I understand that the timetable was agreed through the usual channels, so if the hon. Gentleman has any complaints, perhaps he should discuss the matter with his Whip.

Mr. Streeter: I am sorry to say that, not for the first time today, the Minister is misinformed. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I still feel that the hon. Gentleman is not getting the hearing to which he is entitled. The House must calm down.

Mr. Streeter: For at least the second time today, the Minister is misinformed. We oppose these programme motions on a point of principle as well as practicality. In no way has the programme motion been agreed through the usual channels.

What are we to take from this motion? A Bill that has had its Second Reading today starts its Committee proceedings next Tuesday and must be finished by next Thursday. There is no time to take expert advice or to consider matters properly, yet important issues have been raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House in today's debate.

The Bill intends to place at the heart of international development policy-making procedures a focus on poverty reduction. We have asked many probing questions about what poverty reduction entails. Does it preclude the Government from supporting democracy-building measures, or from focusing on good governance? Does it preclude the Government from supporting action against human trafficking? We need to know what poverty reduction means, and we shall need plenty of time in Committee to study that question in depth.

We have discussed the collision course on which the Bill will place the Government as regards European Union aid. The Bill says that international development must all be about poverty reduction, but 30 per cent. of DFID funding goes through the EU. From recent experience, we know that the EU is doing anything but focusing funding on poverty reduction. How will the Government square that circle? How will they reconcile their focus on poverty reduction with their treaty obligation to put 30 per cent. of DFID's budget through the EU? We shall need plenty of time to consider that point in detail. I should like to take legal advice, but it seems that there will be no time.

We want to explore the money spent by DFID on publications—£2 million over the past four years on glossy brochures. How will that come into the focus on poverty reduction?

We oppose the programme motion on principle, but also for reasons of practicality. It does not give us enough time to do a proper job. I have no doubt that the Government will approach us in a few weeks' time once the Bill has passed through this House; it is unlikely to complete its passage through the other place in time for the almost-certain election on 3 May. They will ask us whether the Bill can be fast-tracked with our support before the House is dissolved for the general election. I want to put down a substantial marker today.

Mr. Tom Clarke: Before the hon. Gentleman says anything rash, will he reflect on two points made on Second Reading? First, the Overseas Development and Co-operation Act 1980, which the Bill seeks to bring up

to date, was passed in exactly three minutes. Secondly, the main thrust of the hon. Gentleman's speech was that the Bill is not necessary. If that is so, why is he so excited about the programme motion?

Mr. Streeter: The right hon. Gentleman makes my point for me. The Bill contains many complex issues and we have asked many complicated questions and legal questions that the Government have failed to answer. I asked the Secretary of State—when she was still here—what difference the Bill will make to the way in which she conducts international development, but I had no answer. That is exactly the kind of point that we need to get to the bottom of in Committee.

Mr. Forth: Will my hon. Friend bear it in mind that if a premature election meant that the Bill failed to be properly considered or to reach the statute book, it would be the Government's fault for calling an election at a time that truncated the Bill's progress? I hope that my hon. Friend will feel under no pressure or obligation to fall in with an artificial timetable imposed by the Government.

Mr. Streeter: My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. No doubt the Government will tiptoe up to us towards the end of March to ask for help in getting the Bill on to the statute book before the election, which, as my right hon. Friend said, is about to be called 12 months before it is necessary. I must put down a marker for the Minister. Unless the Bill is amended in Committee to place at centre stage our strong belief that we must get behind developing countries on good governance, which must be the main focus of our assistance, and a crackdown on corruption, we shall not support fast-tracking of the Bill. Unless we are satisfied in Committee that the Government have thought matters through and have dealt with the inevitable conflict between EU aid provision of 30 per cent. and the poverty focus that the Bill is intended to introduce, there is no way in which we shall be able to support the Bill on a fast-track procedure. I hope the Minister is listening. That is one of the reasons why the Government are so mistaken in trying to railroad the Bill through the House.

I have said that we oppose the Bill on a point of principle—

Mr. Mullin: The hon. Gentleman said that he did not oppose the Bill.

Mr. Streeter: We oppose the programme motion—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] I am sure that is what I said—*[Interruption.]* I am sure that *Hansard* will confirm that is what I said—[HON. MEMBERS: "No, it will not."] It will when I pop upstairs in a moment.

We oppose the programme motion on a point of principle because it does not give us adequate time to do our job properly—to scrutinise the measure, to improve it, to take expert advice and to move sensible amendments in the Standing Committee next week. The Government have made a terrible mistake. They have taken us for granted, they have taken the House for granted and they have taken our constituents for granted. They have shown once again their utter contempt for the House of Commons—it will not do.

10.16 pm

Mr. Rogers: I do not normally speak on programme motions. Obviously, I fully support the motion. I agree with the generosity of my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench in giving as much time as possible to Opposition Members so that they can voice their objections to the motion. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for International Development on moving the motion formally.

I do not understand why the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter), the Opposition spokesman, wants to hold up the Bill, when the Opposition—apparently—support every part of it. He has a point when it comes to European aid, but I am sure that the Minister will be able to resolve the matter in Committee.

I have sat through many debates on programme motions recently and the Opposition's only saving grace lies in the sometimes brilliant tactics employed by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), whom I admire greatly. When I presided over the European Parliament, I dealt with Members such as Marco Pannela; but the right hon. Gentleman is far better than the Italian anarchists—[HON. MEMBERS: "Machiavelli."] The right hon. Gentleman is a man of superb ability.

However, that skill is all that I can admire about the Opposition. The hypocrisy of their stance on the measure flabbergasts me. I sat on the Opposition Benches with a bad grace for a long time, while the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) arrogantly scoffed as his Government pushed through Bills—

Mr. Hogg: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rogers: The right hon. and learned Gentleman can have his chance later.

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Rogers: Very well, I give way.

Mr. Hogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He and I have been Members of the House for a long time. He will be good enough to remind the House that the general practice when the Conservatives were in office was not to timetable a Bill until it had been in Committee for approximately 100 hours. What is different at present is that the Government are timetabling a Bill in advance of consideration and before there is any reason to suppose that its discussion will be artificially extended.

Mr. Rogers: When the right hon. and learned Gentleman was in government, he shoved legislation through the House on many occasions—

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): No, no.

Mr. Rogers: The hon. Gentleman bleats away, but he was not in the House then, so he does not know about it. The Government were ramming things through—

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rogers: I have given way once—

Mr. Gummer: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rogers: I will give way when I have answered the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg).

Measures were pushed through—gas privatisation, transport privatisation, privatisation of the coal mines. The measure on the atomic weapons establishment was pushed through. All those Bills were pushed through and whenever there was any difficulty, they were guillotined. That was why the issue of the modernisation of the House arose. Those guillotines were nothing to do with modernisation; the Conservatives wanted to ram their business through the House.

Mr. Gummer *rose—*

Mr. Rogers: I give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who has done enough ramming in his time.

Mr. Gummer: The hon. Gentleman has the honour to be the Member of Parliament for Rhondda, and I ask him whether he can think of a single one of his predecessors who would have accepted a timetable motion that was introduced before there had been at least 100 hours of debate. I challenge him to mention a single occasion on which I introduced any programme motion on a Bill that had not already been the subject of at least 100 hours of debate. I have been entirely supportive of the Secretary of State for International Development, but will he explain why we must have a timetable motion on the Bill—about which we are agreed, but on which we might be able to help the Government—given that we could have debated it in this Parliament without such a timetable being inflicted?

Mr. Rogers: I should have thought that it would be pretty obvious, even to the right hon. Gentleman, that the timetable motion has been moved because there will be an election. Although we shall be returned, we obviously want to get the Bill on to the statute book in this Parliament, given its significance for the underdeveloped world. It is a good Bill and it contains—

Mr. Hogg: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. We are being told that we should hurry our consideration of the Bill because there is to be an election. Would you be good enough to confirm that the fact that we may be facing an election on 3 May relieves us of the obligation to scrutinise legislation properly?

Mr. Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman inadvertently seeks to draw me into the debate. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) has put his case, and it can be rebutted by any Back Bencher who catches my eye.

Mr. Rogers: I am amazed that the right hon. and learned Gentleman, with his considerable legal background and knowledge of the constitution and make-up of the House, should make such a spurious point of order.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rogers: The hon. Gentleman is obviously in pain, so I shall give way.

Mr. Bercow: I am certainly not in pain; I am richly enjoying the hon. Gentleman's oration. Is not it extraordinary that he insists with such alacrity that two days' consideration in Committee will suffice, given that he cannot possibly know—assuming that he is not psychic—how many new clauses and amendments will be tabled?

Mr. Rogers: I am amazed that the hon. Gentleman should assume that I am not psychic. We Welsh have many attributes, and I shall be disappointed if I cannot create a small Celtic aura.

Mr. Forth: Get on with it.

Mr. Rogers: The right hon. Gentleman asks me to move along, but he wants me to do so to create a bit of space for himself. He has spent considerable time honing his special skills, and I shall not go on for too long because I like to listen to his speeches. I hope that you will find it in your heart, Mr. Speaker, to call him so that we can enjoy his speech a little later.

The Bill contains much that is good, and it needs to be passed quickly.

The hon. Member for South-West Devon raised the important issue of the diversion of our aid through the European Union. With the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, I spent five years in the European Parliament and I saw the way in which the European Community's aid budget was blatantly used for certain national interests. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Minister realise, when they negotiate in the European Union, that certain countries have used the aid budget to further their own interests and not necessarily the interests of those who deserve the aid most.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): The hon. Gentleman has great experience and knowledge of European affairs, so will he explain to us how he expects a Committee of the House of Commons to introduce measures to ensure that European aid is spent on relieving poverty? We know that a huge amount of money goes on graft and corruption, so how is a Committee, with its pathetic limited powers, expected to do anything on the subject in two days?

Mr. Speaker: Order. We are now discussing the Bill's substance and not the programme motion. I ask the hon. Member for Rhondda not to reply to that intervention.

Mr. Rogers: I shall certainly do whatever you say, Mr. Speaker. However, the hon. Member for South-West Devon cited the issue of European aid as a fundamental point in his contribution on the programme motion. I am amazed that the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) should ask that question, because his Government put through the Maastricht treaty. Baroness Thatcher came back to the House and said what a wonderful—

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I cannot see any relevance

whatever either to the Bill or to the programme motion—which is the subject of this debate—in the hon. Gentleman's remarks.

Mr. Speaker: That is the first proper point of order that I have heard for some time. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman. We should not be talking about the Maastricht treaty in this debate on a programme motion.

Mr. Rogers: I accept what you say, Mr. Speaker. I would never want to dispute your ruling. Of course it was a proper point of order, but its substance was wrong.

As I understand it, as a result of the Bill, an obligation will be placed on the British Government to channel some aid through Europe. The obligation has arisen out of various treaties that the British Government signed with the Europeans. One was the Maastricht treaty, which was shoved through the House. All we are doing is fulfilling our treaty obligations. I am sure of one thing: my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development will not sell us down the river as Secretaries of State in the Conservative Government did on issues such as the common agricultural policy in all the years that they were in power. My right hon. Friend will defend our interests.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must talk about the programme motion.

Mr. Rogers: The hon. Member for South-West Devon gave such examples to support the Conservative party's opposition to the programme motion. However, because you, Mr. Speaker, have ruled that I am out of order by repeating his points, I shall not proceed any further.

10.29 pm

Mr. Gummer: A real issue is at stake, and I hope that the Secretary of State for International Development will accept that I am being serious about it. This is an important Bill and I support almost every part of it. The right hon. Lady has had an exemplary period as Secretary of State and I want to help her on a couple of issues.

Conservative Members support much of what the right hon. Lady has done and we want to help her with other matters. However, there is little discussion in this country about the issues with which she is concerned. *[Interruption.]* The Minister of State, Scotland Office, has commented from a sedentary position throughout this short debate. He must accept that overseas development and its relationship with the environment and so on have occupied my mind for a long time. They should be discussed more widely.

The right hon. Lady should think about whether it would have been better to give us longer to discuss those issues. The Opposition would not try to stop the Bill, because much of it is good, but this country needs to have a more serious debate about the nature of overseas aid and the way in which we redevelop and recreate the economies of countries that are in great poverty.

I agree with the need to concentrate on the eradication of poverty. Anyone who lives in a rich country must be worried about that fundamental issue. It is important to engage the Government and the Opposition on those issues on which we can work together, such as the environment. Overseas aid is another part of what should be a common agenda among rich countries that deal with those for whom justice cries out to be done.

Some of us had hoped that the right hon. Lady would tell her Government that we do not need a timetable motion on the Bill because the whole House can genuinely engage on it. The issue is important. Some of my hon. Friends go on about the European Union, but I believe that with proper leadership from this country, we can much improve EU aid. A great deal of what we are able to do through that organisation we could not do individually. However, I am not happy with the procedure. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend, East (Sir T. Taylor) has made a criticism, but we do not have time to discuss the issue that concerns him. I suspect that the right hon. Lady and I might agree on that aspect of the Bill, but it is difficult to understand why our time for debate needs to be restricted.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The Opposition did not vote against this Bill or the Criminal Justice and Police Bill on Second Reading. However, I have just come from the Committee on that Bill, and 24 clauses, one new clause, two schedules and 44 amendments received no attention at all.

Mr. Gummer: I share my hon. Friend's concern, but this Bill involves a stronger issue, which I hope the right hon. Lady will take seriously. It is important to discuss such issues even if we agree with the principles, because they are not widely discussed in this nation. If I go banging on doors in my constituency and elsewhere, overseas aid is not often raised in a friendly and proper way. Unattractive comments are sometimes made, and the subject is not usually discussed in the way in which we in the House would want to debate it. I do not know whether the right hon. Lady finds that.

Clare Short: I find that traditional political meetings are crumbling across the country and that development meetings are growing and flourishing and are widely attended. I respect the right hon. Gentleman's interest in the environment, but he was not present for the Second Reading debate. However, he is always here to oppose programme motions. I do not think that it is development that concerns him tonight.

Mr. Gummer: I know that the right hon. Lady is present in Chamber a great deal. I am not always present to oppose timetable motions, although I disagree with them in principle. On no occasion have I discussed a Bill in the terms in which I am discussing this one, and I do so because the Department for International Development is crucial and says something about this country's moral attitude to the rest of the world. If I have a criticism of the Governments in which I served—and I say this clearly—it concerns their behaviour towards the rest of the world. I have a similar criticism of this Government. However, this is an issue on which we ought to try to engage the whole House.

If I may say so, the right hon. Lady is a woman of great strength and is perfectly able to stand her corner. I want to take this opportunity to tell her that this could have been an occasion on which she told the rest of the Government, "I can manage without a timetable motion.

[Mr. Gummer]

I can have the debate and, what is more, I know that we will get this through in time and we will have engaged the whole House of Commons."

I shall conclude by referring to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers). I have close connections with Wales.

Mr. Rogers: The right hon. Gentleman used to call himself John Selwyn Gummer.

Mr. Gummer: Exactly. May I tell the hon. Gentleman that Members from Wales have always been entirely in favour of free speech and the involvement of the whole House? Frankly, although some Members laughed at his speech, I was saddened by it because, to be direct, he betrayed his predecessors, none of whom would have spoken in that way about free speech in the House. I can think of several of my relations who would turn in their graves if they heard his words on that subject in the House. Together, those two things are not worthy of him, and I am sorry that he spoke like that.

10.37 pm

Mr. Wells: It makes me sad to take part in this debate on the programme motion, because I am sure that the Government and Opposition could easily have agreed how much time we needed in Committee.

The issues that we must discuss in Committee are of great importance and need proper exploration. Clause 1, which is the essence of the Bill, enshrines the principle of applying all international development aid to the reduction of poverty. The definition of the reduction of poverty needs exploration through the normal means of amendment and discussion, so that we are entirely clear what it means and what the Secretary of State's intention is.

That definition is not easy, and it is not intended to be, because the Secretary of State needs flexibility to administer her budget, which cannot be examined in a court of law. We accept that. On the other hand, does poverty reduction mean that, for example, we concentrate only on the poorest of the poor? Or do we mean to look at comparative poverty within certain countries? What is the upper limit of that kind of flexibility? That kind of thing should be discussed and needs to be discussed, which may take some time.

Mr. Hogg: My hon. Friend clearly makes an important point. Would he care to remind the House that in Committee, there will be only a small number of Opposition Members? The Report stage is the only occasion on which the House as a whole has an opportunity to address those important questions. Consequently, is it not extremely undesirable that debate should be truncated in the way the Government propose?

Mr. Wells: The motion is entirely unnecessary, and it is detrimental to the reputation of the House that we should push it through. I shall not go through all the clauses, as that would be wasting time, but in the debate I raised the question of whether humanitarian aid should be closely defined, so that it will be clear that such aid will not be used for spurious political purposes. There needs to be a debate on that, and an amendment. The matter requires thorough exploration. That would not be wasting time; it is what we should do.

We must examine how a poverty-focused Bill will work in relation to the overseas territories. As I understand it, the Bill exempts the overseas territories from the poverty reduction focus, but why should the overseas territories be in that position? They have traditionally had first call on the overseas development budget, but that is not reflected in the wording of the Bill.

Clare Short: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. It is possible, as was said earlier, that this might be the last exchange that he and I have on the Floor of the House about international development. On behalf of everyone on the Government side, and probably the whole House, may I say that the hon. Gentleman's contribution to the subject has been enormous?

This is a small Bill and we want to get it right. Is it not striking that there are far more hon. Members present for the timetable motion debate than were present for the Second Reading debate? When I was in opposition, I liked to use time to hold the Government to account, but on the Bill there is not an issue. We have enough time to scrutinise the Bill properly and get it through the House. I ask the hon. Gentleman not to make time the last issue on which he speaks, in relation to a subject that has honoured the whole of his political career and to which he has made such a great contribution.

Mr. Wells: I thank for the Secretary of State for the generosity of her remarks, which I deeply appreciate. However, I am not speaking to waste time. I am genuinely concerned that we should have enough time to debate the issues, which I am sure she wants to explain. No doubt she wants to listen to other points of view and possibly accept them.

I am not trying to waste time, and I shall not go on much longer. I appeal to the right hon. Lady, in return, to give us an undertaking that, should we need more time, she will persuade the Government to give the Committee more time to explore all the issues properly, without endangering the Bill by holding it up.

10.41 pm

Mr. Hogg: With two minutes left, I shall necessarily be brief. It was with great sadness that I heard the Under-Secretary proposing the motion formally. He used to be a custodian of the liberty of the House, yet he moved a motion of some importance formally, did not try to defend it, and has now gone.

When I first came to the House, as I reminded hon. Members in an intervention—*[Interruption.]* I am glad to see that the Under-Secretary is back. He has betrayed his own reputation. He used to be a guardian of liberty, yet he moved a gagging motion without even troubling to tell the House the justification for it.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers) made a bizarre speech, probably the last that he will make in the House. That is probably no bad thing. He accused the Government of which I was member of ramrodding legislation through. We never, ever timetabled in advance. We never timetabled Committee stages until a Committee had sat for about 100 hours. We never timetabled unless

there was evidence of an attempt artificially to prolong discussion, but the present Government do so as a matter of course.

I know that you are about to tell me, Mr. Speaker, that we are running out of time. Suffice it to say that I regard the motion as shameful. We will consistently and continually oppose these gagging measures, as they are simply wrong in principle.

10.44 pm

Mr. Forth: Apart from anything else, the Bill contains several provisions that will require extremely close consideration and perhaps rather lengthy scrutiny.

Mr. Bercow: *Will my right hon. Friend give way?*

Mr. Forth: Yes, of course—

It being forty-five minutes after the commencement of proceedings on the motion, MR. SPEAKER *put the Question, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].*

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 303, Noes 138.

Division No. 141] **[10.45 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Anger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie

Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Kevin Hughes.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Cran, James
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Viggers, Peter
Walter, Robert
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willis, Phil
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the following provisions shall apply to the International Development Bill:

Standing Committee

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Standing Committee.

2. The Standing Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

3. Proceedings in the Standing Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 15th March.

Consideration and Third Reading

4. Proceedings on consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Nine o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Six o'clock on that day.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at Ten o'clock on the day on which those proceedings are commenced or, if that day is a Thursday, at Seven o'clock on that day.

6. Sessional Order B (Programming Committees) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on consideration and Third Reading.

Lords amendments and further messages from the Lords

7. Paragraphs (6) and (7) of Sessional Order A (varying and supplementing programme motions) made by the House on 7th November 2000 shall not apply to proceedings on any motion

to vary or supplement this order for the purpose of allocating time to proceedings on consideration of any Lords amendments, or on any further messages from the Lords, and the question on any such motion shall be put forthwith.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT BILL
[*MONEY*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills),

That for the purpose of any Act resulting from the International Development Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of

(a) any expenses incurred by the Secretary of State by virtue of this Act;

(b) any sums required by him for fulfilling any guarantee given under this Act;

(c) any increase attributable to this Act in the sums payable out of money so provided by virtue of any other Act; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Speaker: I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 312, Noes 65.

Division No. 142] **[10.59 pm**

AYES

Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grogan, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McCabe, Steve
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen

Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Shaw, Jonathan
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Tyler, Paul
Tynan, Bill
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woodward, Shaun
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mr. David Jamieson.

NOES

Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Beggs, Roy
Bercow, John
Brazier, Julian
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Cran, James
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Gill, Christopher
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
May, Mrs Theresa
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Prior, David
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Whittingdale, John
Wilkinson, John
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. James Gray and
Mr. John Randall.

Question accordingly agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standing Committees).

FINANCES

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 13572/00, Protecting the Communities' Financial Interests—the fight against fraud: Commission's Annual Report 1999; and the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum dated 20th December 2000 submitted by HM Treasury relating to the Court of Auditors' annual report for 1999; and supports the Government's continuing efforts to promote and support measures to improve financial management and fight fraud against the EU budget.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Pig Industry Development Scheme 2000 (Confirmation) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 7th February, be approved.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation).

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FINANCE

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 74) on Threshold Payments (HC 209), which was laid before this House on 12th February, be approved.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [28 February],

That the Motions in the name of Mr. Secretary Straw relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if they related to instruments subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) in respect of which notice has been given that the instruments be approved.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(c) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Road Safety (Somerset)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

11.15 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise an important issue for my constituency—road safety in the county of Somerset. I intend to refer to a few specific problems that have been experienced in my constituency. I accept straight away that many of the roads concerned will be in the direct control of Somerset county council rather than of the Minister, but I hope to persuade him that Somerset county council is taking a proper view of its responsibilities in terms of road safety and to encourage his support.

I should also mention one major road scheme which is the direct responsibility of Ministers via the Highways Agency—the A303, particularly the stretch between Sparkford and Ilchester. It is an especially dangerous stretch of road that has caused a number of accidents over recent years and desperately needs attention.

The county of Somerset has a great number of roads. Indeed, it has some 6,641 km of road—a long distance per head of population. It works out as 13.5 km per 1,000 people which is twice the national average and poses specific problems for the county council, which has to maintain a large number of principally minor, unclassified roads. When one adds to that the geography and topography of the county and the settlement pattern—it has a dispersed, relatively rural population scattered across the county with a lot of very small communities traversed by roads which are often inadequate for the vehicles that use them—it is clear that there is a serious problem.

Somerset also has a higher percentage of heavy goods vehicle traffic than the roads are capable of taking or we would like. That comprises partly vehicles associated with local industries such as the quarrying industry in my constituency, and partly vehicles seeking access to the further south-west peninsula, or following north-south routes. As a result, there are unfortunately 40 to 50 fatal accidents every year. That has been a fairly consistent figure over the past 10 to 15 years.

As I said earlier, the county council is adopting a responsible attitude to the problem. It is keen to secure a substantial reduction in the number of fatal accidents by means of the local transport programme. The principal feature of that programme is the need to tackle speed, which is very often the principal contributory factor in accidents. The council also wants to tackle road safety for all road users, not just for motorists. Road safety measures should apply to all pedestrians, cyclists and local residents, especially those who live in smaller communities and use country lanes without pavements. That is a priority. Finally, the council also wants to develop a hierarchy of routes appropriate to their uses. That is a significant factor.

The A303 is the county's major trunk route, bringing people from London to the south-west, and vice versa. It is an extremely busy road, used by a huge number of people each year, especially in the summer months. I raise this matter with some trepidation because when I put a question to the Minister's former departmental colleague, the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate

[Mr. David Heath]

(Ms Jackson), her reply was about Stonehenge. The monument is about 50 miles from my constituency, so I fear that she had been inadequately briefed. I am sure that that will not be the case with the Minister tonight.

The stretch of road between Sparkford and the Podimore roundabout at Ilchester is dangerous for several reasons. It is a single carriageway stretch between stretches of dual carriageways. That poses problems in terms of traffic movements. It carries a large volume of traffic, especially when there is summer holiday traffic. There is even more traffic when the Yeovilton air show is on, but that is not happening this year.

The distance of the single carriageway stretch from London is also a factor. People drive from central London, through the suburbs and along the M3 and the A303 corridor, and the section about which I am speaking is the point at which tiredness begins to take its toll. Lack of concentration in that area also plays a part.

For many years, demands have been made for safety improvements along a stretch of road that is about 3.5 miles long. The proposal is that the road should be turned into a dual carriageway in order to separate the traffic streams.

I am aware of the concerns about other parts of the A303. Improvements have been suggested for parts of the road that lie in constituencies other than mine. Proper environmental considerations for those proposals must be taken into account, but the scheme for the stretch that I am describing has not occasioned significant adverse comment. Over recent years, it has been supported consistently by the county council, by the south Somerset district council, by the parish councils that would be affected, by my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown), and by me. There is no obvious reason why the scheme should have to wait for the multimodal study which, we are told, is the reason for the current delay.

The future capacity of the road is not in question, and neither is its role in the overall transport arrangements for the south-west peninsula. The problem is simply that the piece of road about which I am speaking is very busy and dangerous, and it needs to be looked at. The previous Conservative Government agreed, and the public inquiry has been successfully completed. The Secretary of State has confirmed the orders, and the line orders and the orders for the side roads have been made. In short, nothing is stopping this scheme going ahead other than the ministerial say-so and its positioning in the capital programme. That is why, irrespective of the view that is eventually arrived at through the regional consultation study on the multimodal study for the rest of the A303, we believe that this stretch could be dealt with in isolation.

One consequence of taking this action would be to support and amplify the work that the county council has put into effect and that the Government have supported to remove heavy goods vehicles in particular from the A359 from Queen Camel in my constituency, and from Marston Magna, and Mudford in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil. We believe that this is so important because it would stop unnecessary movements, particularly of lorries, on roads which are less suitable.

There are concerns in my constituency that an unwanted effect of putting in place measures to deter vehicles on the A359 would be to divert lorries on to the A357 through Templecombe and Yenston. I hope that that will not happen—the temptation will certainly be reduced if the Minister could give a positive response with regard to the A303.

In the brief time that I have available, I should like to mention a few other schemes around the county. I do not believe that the Minister will suddenly wave a magic wand; I simply want to alert him to the many concerns of small communities that live by busy roads or roads incapable of taking the traffic that goes through them across the county. In Doulting, for instance, there has been a succession of accidents because a busy road bisects the village. People have been waiting for some time for relief of some kind. Podimore—not the roundabout, but the village—takes vehicles travelling far too fast that are trying to avoid queueing on the A303 at busy times. The Terry Hill crossroads on the A362 is another very dangerous junction that needs attention, and I would like the county council to address the problem. The very picturesque and important village of Barrington, which has many beautiful listed buildings, is spoilt by the vehicles using it.

There is a long list of small communities—Kingsdon, Charlton Mackrell, Charlton Adam, Berkley, Lamyatt, Long Sutton, Long Load—that are troubled by the effects of heavy goods vehicles and speeding cars. I believe that the county council is very much aware of its responsibilities to those communities and wants to do something to help them. However, it faces substantial problems, many of which are to do with funding. This is not yet another whinge on behalf of a county council that considers itself hard done by. Nevertheless, it is a fact that for as many years as I can remember, there has been a shift of resources within the county council from highways to education, simply to maintain the schools in the county as they should be maintained. That is a fundamental problem in terms of the standard spending assessment distribution for education.

Some of the problems are associated with the costs of many of the traffic-calming and improvement schemes that should be in place. I sometimes wonder whether they are over-engineered, and whether there is a need for the forest of signs in a rural area which often accompany sensible moves to reduce speed and improve road safety.

I want the Minister's support for the county council's plans and his recognition of the needs of rural counties. I suggest that there is a need for a national programme for rural communities to deal with the environmental effects of vehicles going through the smaller villages. We were able to able to undertake a national programme of bridge strengthening. Many of us thought that it was absurd to strengthen inadequate bridges so that ever-larger trucks could go through our villages, but that was Government policy. The point is that that highly expensive project always had assured funding. We seek the certainty and commitment that that programme produced, to underpin the efforts of local authorities to deal with traffic in our rural areas.

I shall finish with a letter from a 10-year-old girl, which I received last May. Jennifer Collins, who lives at Glenville House, Long Load, near Langport, wrote:

"I am one of the children from Long Load. Motorists just zoom through our village as if it was a motorway and I want to put a stop to it . . . I used to think of the country as a nice peaceful place to relax, with slow country lanes. Part of it may be that but our village isn't. Please do something."

That is my plea to the Minister. I hope that he can give me a positive reply.

11.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): As usual, I congratulate the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) on obtaining this important debate, which gives me an opportunity to explain what national and local government have done, and are doing, to improve road safety in Somerset. The hon. Gentleman highlighted his concerns about the section of the A303 between Podimore and Sparkford. I shall therefore turn first to safety on the motorway and trunk roads in Somerset.

The motorway and trunk road network in Somerset comprises the M5 and the A303. The M5 is a rural section of road and, like all motorways, is statistically safer than all-purpose roads. The A303 trunk road between Podimore and Sparkford is an unimproved section of single carriageway road between the Ilchester and Sparkford bypasses, both of which are dual carriageways. In October 1999, the Highways Agency undertook a study along the unimproved length of road between the Sparkford and Podimore roundabout.

At that time, the personal injury accident severity rate was above the national norm. A small safety scheme was therefore carried out, which involved changes to white lines and road signs and the introduction of gateway treatment at either end. A 50 mph speed limit was also implemented, with a speed camera at West Camel crossroads. The House will be pleased to know that in the 12 months after implementation of those remedial measures, the accident severity rate on that section of road fell from 0.25 to 0.08 fatal and serious accidents per kilometre of trunk road. Although there has, sadly, been one serious accident during that 12-month period, that is a significant reduction on the 14 fatal and serious accidents in the previous five years.

A study of the remaining unimproved sections of the route has been completed. It includes a detailed analysis of all reported personal injury accidents between 1 January 1994 and 30 June 2000 and a review of the present double white line system. Another important aspect of the study has been the setting up of local working groups with representatives from the local parish councils and the use of their local knowledge fully to investigate local road safety issues.

The Highways Agency is currently considering the findings of that study with a view to carrying out further small local safety schemes in 2001–02. The agency is also undertaking a route management strategy at the M5, including the length through Somerset. That approach to road investment planning looks fully from the user's point of view at the service that a road delivers. It focuses on better use of existing roads rather than building new ones. The strategy will deliver a 10-year vision for the road and the improvements that the Highways Agency would like to make.

Following the trunk road review, a total of eight trunk road improvement schemes on the A303, A30 and A38 were placed on hold pending the outcome of the London to south-west and south Wales multimodal study. As I understand it, the Liberal Democrats support the multimodal study approach, which seeks to examine the potential of all transport modes to resolve transport problems in key corridors. The study's terms of reference specifically require the consultants to consider safety problems on sections of the A303. In Somerset, the A303 Ilminster bypass improvement, the A303 Ilminster to Marsh improvement and the A303 Sparkford to Ilchester improvement are all being considered under the study.

The Government office of the south-west leads the study; it is managed by a steering group, which meets regularly. The group includes representatives of the Government office of the south-east, the Welsh Assembly, the south-west and south-east regional assemblies, the south-west and south-east regional development agencies, the Highways Agency, the Strategic Rail Authority, the regional chamber of the CBI and Sustainability South West.

In March 2000, consultants were appointed to carry out the study. They have been identifying the problems and issues associated with those three schemes and others. The study will consider solutions, including safety and the scope for reducing congestion by better management and modal shift in the whole A30-A303 corridor, in a strategic manner. An over-arching strategy for the study is being developed; we expect that to emerge in the summer—around June. Following the establishment of the strategy, consultants will develop detailed local solutions to the problems identified. The study is due to report by about February 2002. Progress can be followed through a website established by the consultants—the address is www.swarmms.org.uk. For the less computer literate, newsletters will also be issued to keep people informed.

In addition, the south-west regional assembly has recently considered recommending road schemes to be added to the Government's targeted programme of improvements. No schemes on the A303 were recommended, as they are being considered under the multimodal study. No decisions on taking forward any of the A303 improvement schemes will be taken before the study reports.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that, in Somerset, there is an excellent story to tell about road safety in local transport plans. Road safety is a high priority locally, and local transport authorities, such as Somerset, have a vital part to play in helping us to achieve national casualty reduction targets. Somerset has continued to build well on the foundation of its 2000–01 provisional local transport plan—the LTP—in developing its five-year LTP to 2006.

I was delighted that after a generous LTP settlement last year—£6.6 million, the fourth highest in the south west; of which £2.3 million was for integrated transport and £4.3 million for maintenance—the Government were able substantially to increase transport resources for Somerset, in last December's LTP settlement. Somerset's overall LTP allocation for 2001–02 is more than £16.6 million, of which £11.5 million is for road maintenance, especially to tackle the backlog of repairs to non-principal roads; but, equally important, more than £5.1 million is for integrated transport—more than double the previous year's allocation. Those allocations recognise the quality of Somerset's LTP.

Local road safety and casualty reduction issues cannot be tackled in isolation. They are an integral part of local transport planning and it is absolutely vital that other transport strategies such as safe routes to schools, home zones and other measures to encourage more walking and cycling are well integrated with road safety in transport planning locally.

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[Mr. Keith Hill]

We were particularly impressed that Somerset has developed its local transport strategy in that way. The county has a very comprehensive strategy, which demonstrates well the linkages to a variety of other local transport themes and deals with highway safety on a number of fronts: education, training, publicity and engineering. Furthermore, it is important that Somerset has adopted a multi-agency approach to local safety issues, which is to be commended. I look forward to learning about its progress through the LTP annual reporting cycle.

Even with the previous valuable work undertaken by the county council, I know that it regards the rate of death, injury and suffering caused by traffic as unacceptable. The role of excess speed as a contributory factor in traffic accidents needs to be tackled, so that speeding is considered as anti-social as drinking and driving.

Somerset's safety strategy is concerned with tackling these issues to enable people to travel in safety by giving advice on education, training and publicity and by taking measures to minimise conflict and to make safe the sharing of space on the highway.

The consultation programme undertaken by the county in developing its LTP revealed that safety was the most important issue in most people's minds, especially for children travelling to and from school.

The LTP capital resources that we have provided have enabled Somerset county council to respond positively to those concerns. It has allocated its LTP funding to reflect the priority of safety-related initiatives. It has undertaken a review of speed management policy, by setting up an independent working party designed to encourage free-ranging debate from several outside perspectives.

The working party recommendations, many of which the council has adopted, include implementing a speed limit strategy—for example, 30 mph speed limits in all settlements and 20 mph speed limits outside all schools. The county council is also supporting positive enforcement by the police and is using improved technology and hypothecation of the revenue from speeding fines to fund speed management.

I have mentioned the concerns about safety on school journeys. A "safe routes to school" programme is another initiative that is benefiting from the LTP resources that we have given. Somerset county council is adopting a bottom-up approach, in which the schools themselves are closely involved in the production of their own school travel plans—a package of measures to facilitate safer and more sustainable travel to and from the school.

The plans can include physical works—for example, road crossings, footway improvements, school front safety measures, cycle parking, speed reduction features and school crossing patrols—as well as initiatives such as promoting safe and sustainable travel to new parents and pupils. Some 46 schools throughout the county are currently working on those plans and seven schemes are in the process of being constructed.

I hope that the number of schools participating will now increase as a result of Somerset's successful bid for a three-year grant from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to fund a school travel co-ordinator, who will work closely with the schools to deliver those plans.

The use of local safety schemes—covering sites, routes and areas and combining engineering and education, training and publicity—is a key focus to ensure that the problem is tackled from all angles. Somerset county council has allocated approximately £1.2 million of its LTP integrated transport block allocation to delivering those local safety schemes.

The county is sensitive to the needs of rural communities and is committed to the concept of developing quiet roads. Work is currently being done on two pilot projects, aimed at benefiting the most vulnerable road users.

In conclusion, therefore, I hope that that provides the House with an adequate assurance of the importance that the Government and Somerset county council attach to local road safety issues.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at eighteen minutes to Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Wednesday 7 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Dee Estuary

1. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): When he last met the First Secretary to discuss environmental factors affecting the Dee estuary. [151048]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has regular discussions on environmental issues with the First Minister, and I have regular meetings with the Assembly Minister for the Environment. In the vast majority of cross-border environmental cases, decisions that affect Wales are a matter for the National Assembly for Wales, in discussion with the lead Whitehall Department and the Environment Agency, where appropriate.

Mr. Chapman: The Dee estuary is unitary in its economy and its environment. Given that, and the fact that my constituents work on Deeside and are concerned about cement kilns and dredging around Mostyn, does my hon. Friend think that sufficient resources are devoted to the Dee estuary strategy? Does he see any scope for drawing on the world-renowned expertise of the Mersey basin campaign in preparing and implementing the strategy?

Mr. Hanson: My hon. Friend represents one side of the Dee estuary—in England. I represent part of the other side, in Wales, so we share a common border; all that separates us is the River Dee. The Dee estuary strategy is already achieving a great deal on existing resources, bringing together in partnership more than 90 organisations to work towards integrated management of the Dee. Both the Dee estuary strategy and the Mersey basin campaign are part of the Irish sea coast partnership, and I have no doubt that there are excellent opportunities for the exchange of best practice in developing integrated management and sustainable use of those important environmental resources. As we share the River Dee, I assure my hon. Friend that we will not let it down.

Employment (North Wales)

2. **Mr. Gareth Thomas** (Clwyd, West): What discussions he has had with the First Secretary about employment levels in north Wales. [151049]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): I regularly meet the First Secretary and discuss a wide range of issues, including employment in Wales. Recent labour market statistics show that employment in Wales from October to December 2000 was 1,261,000—a rise of 17,000 over the year.

Mr. Thomas: I thank my hon. Friend for that encouraging response. Is he aware that unemployment in my constituency is at its lowest for many years, and that since—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Could the House come to order? Otherwise it is unfair on the hon. Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas).

Mr. Thomas: Is my hon. Friend also aware that, since 1997, an average of 500 new jobs have been created for each constituency in north Wales? Will he venture an opinion as to why that encouraging state of affairs exists?

Mr. Hanson: In Clwyd, West, unemployment when the Conservative party left office was 1,539, and it is now 1,125. I venture an opinion that that is due to low inflation, strong manufacturing support and investment in our public services. The years of unemployment under the Conservatives have gone.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): Will the hon. Gentleman come down to earth a little? How many more job losses in the manufacturing sector will it take for him to realise the massively damaging effect of the Government's economic policies in north Wales and elsewhere? Does he realise, for example, that since his Government came to power, 20,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost? When will he stop being Millbank's mouthpiece in Wales and start fighting for our interests?

Mr. Hanson: I notice that the hon. Gentleman did not mention the fact that on 1 May 1997, 2,585 people were unemployed in Ynys Môn and now the figure is 1,900—still too many, but 600 fewer. I notice that he did not mention the investment in Mostyn docks in my constituency and the 85 new jobs created there, the investment of £100 million in Toyota on Deeside, or the small business unit in Denbighshire. I notice that he did not mention objective 1 funding, which his party said we would never secure, but the Labour Government have delivered for Wales. There is still much to do and difficult issues to tackle, but separation and independence are not the answer for Wales.

Mr. Martyn Jones (Clwyd, South): Does my hon. Friend think that the comments about English incomers

by Seimon Glyn, a councillor in north-west Wales, which were racist in the extreme, will damage investment and the likelihood of creating jobs in the area?

Mr. Hanson: For hon. Members who have not heard about the remarks of Seimon Glyn, a Plaid Cymru councillor, he said that incomers to Wales were a drain on the resources of Wales. That means that many businesses, small and large, founded by people from England, will be threatened. I hope that the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Mr. Jones), as the leader of his party, will call on Seimon Glyn to withdraw those remarks. He might be interested to know that Mr. Glyn is the chairman of Gwynedd housing committee—what a disgrace for him to hold that position with such views.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I want to come in on this point, as it is important. The British Chambers of Commerce has estimated that there are 4,000 small business in north Wales, which employ about 20,000 people. Many of those businesses will have been started by people from throughout the world, including from England. Will the Under-Secretary confirm that his Government's policy towards such entrepreneurs will be positive and welcoming, unlike that of Seimon Glyn—and Plaid Cymru—who seems to want to control English entrants into Wales? Will he also confirm that, like the Conservative party, his party will have no truck with such a narrow and nationalist policy, which would devastate job creation in north Wales?

Mr. Hanson: Some important issues have been raised regarding rural housing and employment, but the approach of the nationalist party in discriminating against English people—that is what it is doing—who are bringing employment opportunities to Wales is nothing short of a disgrace. I hope that all hon. Members will recognise that Wales is against racism, that all people who come to Wales contribute to the economy and that all are welcome to live and work there.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): Does my hon. Friend accept that foot and mouth disease has wide-ranging consequences beyond the livestock industry? It has threatened jobs of those in the hotel and catering industry, in countryside pursuits, such as mountain guides, in the haulage industry and in other non-farming professions. Will he confirm that he is seriously considering the threat to such jobs and incomes in my constituency?

Mr. Hanson: The Government's first task has been to secure the end of foot and mouth disease and to contain it locally. Of course, there are areas where the disease has severe consequences for the local economy. I have agreed to meet next week a delegation from my hon. Friend's constituency to discuss the effects. I shall be happy to consider those issues and to receive representations on what the Government can examine with regard to their consequences.

BSK Plant (Llanidloes)

3. **Mr. Lembit Öpik** (Montgomeryshire): What discussions he has had with the Secretary for Economic Development of the National Assembly for Wales to secure the future employment of the employees at the former BSK plant in Llanidloes. [151050]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly meets the First Secretary, and I hold regular meetings with Assembly Ministers, in which we discuss a wide range of issues, including employment in Wales.

Mr. Öpik: The closure in Llanidloes will mean that one in four members of the town's work force will be out of a job. In that context, will the Under-Secretary consider visiting Llanidloes to discuss employment, and commit himself to working with me and the Assembly's Secretary for Economic Development to do all that we can to replace those jobs and keep mid-Wales working?

Mr. Hanson: The news at Llanidloes was devastating for the BSK work force. I share and understand the concerns expressed by the hon. Gentleman, who will be aware that every effort is being made through the Employment Service to find alternative work for those affected by redundancy. That includes ensuring that they receive the training that they need to secure other employment. Following the announcement, the team from the Assembly and the Welsh Development Agency is to meet regarding the problems. The Deputy First Minister has also visited the area.

I shall be happy to consider the hon. Gentleman's request for a visit, but I remind him that his constituency will still have the lowest unemployment in Wales—a rate of some 2 per cent. I do not underestimate the difficulties that are faced, however, and I shall consider the issues that he raised.

Mr. Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd): We have already had a question on the impact of racist comments made about investment by Seimon Glyn. What impact does my hon. Friend believe that Anne Robinson's racist comments will have on the image of Wales and its ability to attract investment?

Mr. Hanson: I presume that Anne Robinson's comments about Wales, which I understand were made on a forthcoming programme, were intended to be humorous. I can only say to Anne Robinson that she will have her point of view and that many of us in Wales will ultimately think that she is the weakest link.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): As I have family roots in the Llanidloes area, does the Under-Secretary accept from me that the loss of the jobs from Llanidloes could be as devastating as the loss of the steel jobs from the steel-making communities? In those circumstances, what approaches have been made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ensure that operating aids are available for stimulating new job opportunities in Wales?

Mr. Hanson: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been in constant contact with my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, and colleagues from other Departments, about the impact of Corus job losses on Wales. Obviously,

we are waiting for Corus' final decisions, and there are on-going discussions in government about a range of issues regarding any ultimate financial package. I hope, as I am sure he does, that Corus will reconsider its decision to announce the closures and that in due course, following representations from the company and the work force, the proposals will be withdrawn.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): What representations has the Minister made to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor about business friendly policies, especially towards manufacturing in Wales, where more than 4,000 jobs have been lost this year alone? The climate change levy will deal manufacturing another heavy blow. Farming is in deep crisis, and the countryside needs help, not a further body blow from the Government. It is important for someone with a strong voice around the Cabinet table to argue for Wales. The Secretary of State refuses to fight for a strong position. Is not that another reason why Labour will lose the next general election? The people of Wales will turn their backs on Labour just as the Secretary of State turns his back on them.

Mr. Hanson: First, Labour has no intention of losing the general election—in Wales or elsewhere. As someone whose party has no Members of Parliament in Wales, the hon. Gentleman can tell us a lot about losing elections. Long-term unemployment is the lowest ever in Wales, where there is massive job creation.

The hon. Gentleman knows through numerous discussions on the subject that there are no plans for changes to the Secretary of State's position, which is part of the devolution settlement. The hon. Gentleman has made a U-turn today by announcing his party's plans for a part-time Secretary of State for Wales, tagged on to some other Department.

Rural Affairs

4. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): What discussions he has had with the Minister for the Cabinet Office on the co-ordination of rural affairs across Government. [151051]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I regularly meet the Minister for the Cabinet Office to discuss a wide range of issues that require co-ordination across the UK Government, including key issues for rural affairs.

Mr. Gray: I take it from the Secretary of State's rather evasive and illusive answer that he has not attended meetings of the Committee that the Cabinet established under the chairmanship of the Minister for the Cabinet Office to study rural matters in particular. British agriculture was facing its worst crisis ever before the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. Should not the Secretary of State at least have the decency to attend those Cabinet Office meetings?

Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman agrees with the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), who said,

"of course there are farmers in serious difficulties, but I believe they have greatly exaggerated their case. And much of their case is based on distortions or plain untruths."

Will the Secretary of State repudiate those comments?

Mr. Murphy: The Wales Office and the National Assembly take the crisis in the countryside seriously. I constantly meet my Cabinet colleagues, and the First Minister and the Minister for Rural Affairs at the Welsh Assembly. Labour Members represent more rural seats than all the other parties put together—in Wales and, indeed, the United Kingdom.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): With reference to the foot and mouth outbreak, will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Powys county council, which has made special efforts to set up helplines, and the police and Assembly Members on assisting the farming community in its hour of need? Will he also join me in pressing for the resolution of animal welfare problems? Farmers are often wrongly accused of not looking after their animals properly. They are currently desperate to move pregnant ewes. Yesterday, I had to negotiate with the police the movement of sheep which had no water. The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has agreed to ensure that tack ewes are returned to their farms shortly. Will the Secretary of State make every effort to ensure that such matters are resolved quickly? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before the Secretary of State answers, we must have quiet in the Chamber.

Mr. Murphy: I agree with the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey) that there is co-operation at all levels of government in Wales to try to ensure that we end the foot and mouth crisis. It is appalling for us all, but I know that Powys county council works closely with the Assembly and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. We all hope and pray that the crisis will soon be over.

Mr. Jon Owen Jones (Cardiff, Central): Will my right hon. Friend congratulate Carwyn Jones, the Minister for Rural Affairs in the Welsh Assembly, on his work with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food? It means that we have the most competent and efficient provision for agriculture. It is promising that the spread of the disease has recently slowed down. Our approach contrasts with the way in which the previous Government dealt with BSE.

Mr. Murphy: I take my hon. Friend's point, and I agree that co-operation between the National Assembly, Carwyn Jones—the Minister for Rural Affairs—and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has been first class. That has been acknowledged by NFU Cymru, which fully supports the Government's policy and action.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Given the deepening crisis in agriculture and in the rural economy generally, the closure of post offices and rural businesses, and the problems affecting rural schools and rural transport, is it not time to have some form of standing conference to examine all the problems occurring in rural Wales? Is it not time for a joined-up approach to the problem?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I shall certainly ensure that our colleagues in

the National Assembly hear of that proposal. As he knows, the Assembly has a development plan for rural Wales, which is a vehicle for adopting the joined-up approach to which he so rightly referred.

Mr. Robert Walter (North Dorset): Is not it intriguing, Mr. Speaker, that, despite the Secretary of State's protestations about Labour representing rural Wales, the only Labour Member to catch your eye on this question has been the hon. Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones)? I wonder where those rural Members are.

The House is acutely aware of the terrible problems facing farming in Wales as a result of foot and mouth disease. However, the co-ordination of rural affairs in Wales is particularly difficult, first because the Secretary of State does not sit on the Rural Affairs Group of the Cabinet, and secondly because the Assembly has responsibility for rural affairs.

As we approach the general election, can the House and the people of Wales be assured that the Secretary of State and the Minister for the Cabinet Office will make it clear to the First Secretary and to the Minister for Rural Affairs in Wales that the public resources of the National Assembly will not be used for political purposes during the campaign? What safeguards have the Secretary of State or the Cabinet Office put in place in relation to that?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman is quite wrong to admonish Welsh Members of Parliament, of whatever party, because he represents North Dorset. Doing so was a bit rich.

On making representations to our colleagues in the Assembly, it is pretty obvious to everyone that the Assembly and my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food are taking the present crisis extremely seriously. It is by no means over, and it affects us all in Wales.

Job Losses

5. **Mr. Simon Thomas** (Ceredigion): What discussion he has held with the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the release of additional resources to the National Assembly for Wales to deal with recent job losses. [151052]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Paul Murphy): I have regular discussions with my Cabinet colleagues, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, about a range of issues affecting Wales.

Mr. Thomas: I thank the Secretary of State for that revealing answer. In the light of the 20,000 jobs lost in manufacturing, the 6,000 jobs lost in the past two years in the rural economy and the 300-odd jobs lost this week through the closure of abattoirs due to the foot and mouth disease outbreak, what further talks will he have to ascertain compensation for consequential job losses in the agriculture industry due to foot and mouth? Also, how can we re-market Wales as a tourist destination once the foot and mouth restrictions are lifted? We must get Wales back on the tourist map.

Mr. Murphy: I accept the hon. Gentleman's points, but, as he is aware, the first and most important thing is to ensure that we end the crisis. The hon. Gentleman is aware of the compensation arrangements that are already in place, and I am sure that the points that he raised will have been heard by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. However, the most important thing is to ensure that the crisis is overcome in the first place.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): May I re-emphasise to my right hon. Friend how disastrous and nightmarish it will be if the proposed closures in the steel industry go ahead? If Corus continues to ignore all our pleas, will my right hon. Friend assure us that, besides resources being made available, there will be some new, imaginative thinking in the National Assembly and Whitehall to deal with the crisis that will hit our communities?

Mr. Murphy: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that, with the National Assembly, we are thinking carefully about the measures that we would take in that event. As he is aware, we await the results of discussions between Corus and the trade unions on alternative proposals for the Corus plants. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must appeal to the House again. There is too much noise in the Chamber, which is unfair to those who are here for Question Time.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Will the Secretary of State accept from me that many manufacturing concerns are about to lay off people because of the haphazard and insensitive way in which the climate change levy is to be introduced? Does he not accept that that will place another heavy burden on British manufacturing industry, which will make it less competitive and, sadly, lead to it disposing of labour?

Mr. Murphy: The hon. Gentleman will have heard the Under-Secretary's earlier remarks on the climate change levy. Although I accept that there have been job losses in Wales over the past few months, particularly in manufacturing, I do not accept that they are the result of anything to do with the climate change levy. I believe that the economy in Wales is changing and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, 17,000 extra jobs have been created in Wales in recent times—because of that change.

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one way to secure even more job-creating investment in Wales is to ensure that we have a first-class international airport serving the Welsh business community? The way to achieve that is to provide a new access road—a dual carriageway—to that airport. Is he aware that an airport symposium organised by the business community will take place in Vale of Glamorgan on 31 March? Will he assure me that he will listen very carefully to its views?

Mr. Murphy: Of course I assure my hon. Friend that we shall listen very carefully to that symposium. I pay tribute to him as he is an assiduous fighter for the airport in his constituency.

Intermediate Care Standards

7. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): What discussions he has had with the First Secretary regarding implementing new standards for intermediate care. [151054]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I often discuss health and social services issues with the Assembly's First Minister and health Minister.

Mr. Swayne: Will the Minister extend those discussions to include the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), and ask him why one piece of legislation has given rise to two different sets of standards? What price the postcode lottery now?

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Care Standards Act 2000 set up two separate systems in England and Wales. That is devolution, although I know that he has great difficulty coming to terms with it. We considered the circumstances in Wales and in England and we have established regulatory patterns. He must start to learn to live with devolution.

Waiting Lists

8. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): What discussions he has had with the Prime Minister with regard to the progress of the Government's target for reducing waiting lists in Wales. [151055]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. David Hanson): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly meets the Prime Minister and other Cabinet colleagues to discuss a wide range of issues, including health. The Government's provision of extra resources has enabled the Assembly to allocate to the national health service in Wales £1.3 billion extra for the next three years.

Dr. Lewis: That answer is revealing because of its omissions. Is not it a fact that the number of patients in Wales waiting more than 18 months for operations has risen from 1,400 in 1997 to nearly 5,000 and that the number of people waiting to get on to the waiting list for their first consultation has risen from 6,000 in 1997 to 48,000, which is an increase of more than 700 per cent? Would not the Secretary of State do better if he put that on his list of matters to discuss with the Prime Minister and the Welsh First Secretary? That is a disgraceful record.

Mr. Hanson: The hon. Gentleman knows that more people are being treated in the NHS in Wales than ever before and that there will be £1.3 billion extra expenditure over the next three years on the NHS in Wales. People in Wales face a choice at the next election: to have that expenditure put into the health service to tackle the issues that he has mentioned or to face Conservative party cuts in expenditure across the board, including the health service. I have no doubt what they will choose when the time comes.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Would it not have been more appropriate for the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) to praise the hard work of NHS staff at all levels in Wales, and to praise the Government for investing additional resources enabling more than 1,000 more people in Wales to be treated each week than was the case under the Tories? Is it not a sign of confidence that so many people are now going to the NHS to receive the treatment that they deserve?

Mr. Hanson: As my hon. Friend says, the national health service in Wales is treating more people than ever before. I say to him, and indeed to all my hon. Friends, that the choice is still there: do we invest that £1.3 billion in the NHS over the next three years, or do we reduce it as the Conservative party proposes to do? I have no doubt that people in Wales want a strong health service. That will happen with £1.3 billion of expenditure; it will not happen if the Conservative party cuts the amount.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [151078] **Mr. Derek Wyatt** (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 7 March.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further meetings later today.

Mr. Wyatt: I thank my right hon. Friend for the nudge that he gave our new community hospital on the Isle of Sheppey.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given the on-going overhaul of the computer systems in the Department of Social Security, any plans to offer pensioners an opt-in or an opt-out would mean increasing the number of DSS staff by 3,000, and that it would take computer software engineers two to three years to reconfigure 10 million pensions at a cost of £1 billion?

The Prime Minister: I assure my hon. Friend that we shall do what we have done, which is pay the winter allowance to pensioners. We shall give free television licences to the over-75s. We are giving extra help with the basic state pension, which will come in shortly.

If we were to go down the route proposed by some, and end up offering some incredibly bureaucratic and costly choice, it would mean not merely £100 million wasted on bureaucracy but some 3,000 extra civil servants. It is no doubt for that reason that in recent Conservative party

literature the party chairman suggested that instead of using the word "Conservatives", the party might decide to use the word "we".

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): How much extra tax will pension funds be paying this year as a result of the Chancellor's abolition of dividend tax credits in his first Budget?

The Prime Minister: The value of pension funds has gone up dramatically as a result of the success of the economy. The abolition of payable tax credits was done for the reasons that we stated at the time. It is the right reform, and as a result of the buoyancy of the stock market the value of people's pension funds has gone up.

Mr. Hague: The stock market has fallen by 11 per cent. since September, so the Prime Minister cannot say that this year's tax is being paid out of an increase in the stock market.

The Government published estimates of the cost of pension funds for the first three years of the tax. Last year, it was £5.4 billion. Does not the fact that the Prime Minister will not give a figure for this year suggest that the figure is even larger this year? If he will not give that figure, will he give the figure—already published in Government documents—for the total amount paid in tax by pension funds in the first three years?

The Prime Minister: First, let me correct the right hon. Gentleman. As a matter of fact, the value of pension funds has gone up considerably as a result of the buoyancy of the stock market. Secondly, we have cut the rate of corporation tax—a tax which, of course, affects the businesses in which pension funds invest. Thirdly, just so that the right hon. Gentleman knows, the actual proportion of tax paid by businesses—the proportion of corporation tax receipts—has fallen, not risen, under this Government.

Mr. Hague: Let us get back to the actual subject. The figure is £11.7 billion: that is the amount of additional taxation taken out of pension funds. It teaches us all we need to know about the Government and the honesty of their Budget that, on Budget day, the Prime Minister cannot be relied on to read out the Government's own figures relating to one of the biggest tax rises in history.

The total that pension fund holders have paid out over the last four years is estimated to be £17 billion. If the Prime Minister disagrees with that estimate, what does he think the figure is?

The Prime Minister: As I have just said to the right hon. Gentleman, because the value of pension funds has gone up, the value to pensioners has gone up.

In its "green Budget" report, the Institute for Fiscal Studies says that

"if the Government implements all of the measures for consultation announced in November's pre-Budget report, there will have been no change in government revenues resulting from Budget announcements over the Parliament".

It goes on to say that by contrast, when the right hon. Gentleman's party was in office,

"Budget measures announced during the 1992 to 1997 Parliament meant that revenues by the end of that Parliament were £19.6 billion higher".

We would take the right hon. Gentleman a lot more seriously if he told us that he was going to reverse all the reforms that we have introduced, but he does not. Instead, he is committed to a cut in investment—which is the worst thing that we could have for public services—and irresponsible tax and spending policies that would cause mortgages to increase and take us back to boom and bust.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister wants to know whether we would reverse that measure. We will restore dividend tax credits to 630,000 people who have lost those tax credits and are too poor to pay income tax. So, now let us have some answers from him. It is a good thing that it is the Chancellor and not the Prime Minister who is giving the Budget—we might even get some figures out of the organ grinder that we do not get from the monkey. We cannot get him to give a figure.

Since the Prime Minister wants to quote about it, is he aware that, the last time that he gave that answer, a firm of accountants wrote to him and said:

"I suppose the Treasury tried to tell you that stripping £40 billion out of pension funds over a 10-year period . . . would have no impact on pension funds: this is fair game for a Treasury seeking to mislead the prime minister, although many would be surprised that you bought into it."

Will the Prime Minister now accept that a large new tax on pension funds has to be paid for either in reduced pensions or in increased contributions?

The Prime Minister: Undoubtedly many accountants write to Governments from time to time. However, I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the key issue is whether the value of pension funds and their stock has increased. That is the point that he will not deal with. However, as we are in a debate about parties' pension policies, I should quote the remarks that the shadow Chancellor made this weekend in Harrogate—*[Interruption.]* I think that we are entitled to have an exchange about the different pension policies. He said:

"Well you're perfectly right—that if people choose to take the option to move out of paying into the national insurance fund, then there would not be as much money to pay current pensioners—so we have to fill the pump. And we can do that by a variety of ways, for a start by selling gilts".

What that means is that we would end up either not paying pensioners the money that they are owed out of the national insurance fund—which is the very fund into which they paid—or with increased borrowing. It would be either unfair to pensioners or exactly what we have warned about all the way through—as the Conservatives' sums do not add up, they would be back to boom and bust.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister is not only economical with the truth, but less than truthful about economics. He has raided pension funds to a greater extent than Robert Maxwell or anyone ever in history, but seems to think that that has no impact on pension funds. One speech on the environment and he thinks that money grows on trees—ignoring the fact that of 200 pension funds surveyed on the matter, 11 had cancelled their benefit improvements, 55 had increased their contribution rates and seven had had to change the whole nature of the scheme. Is not the truth that funds that belong to millions of pensioners are being taken by the Chancellor in stealth

taxes, and that any claim that the Government have today to being a tax-cutting Government should be treated with total contempt?

The Prime Minister: If we are comparing economic records, we should first point out that inflation under this Government has been within the 2.5 per cent. margin, but that it averaged 6 per cent. under the Government of whom he was part. Mortgages and interest rates have averaged 6 per cent. under us, but were 10 or 11 per cent. under him. We all remember the days of 3 million unemployed under the Conservatives. Today, there are a million more jobs in the economy and just over 1 million unemployed.

So, I think that if we compare the record on the economy under this new Labour Government and the record on the economy under the Conservatives, it does not compare very favourably for them. That is no doubt why, at the weekend, the previous Deputy Prime Minister said:

"I have been in a dilemma, but I have resolved it in my own mind . . . I am going to vote Conservative. I've been a Conservative too long to do anything else."

If that is the best that the right hon. Gentleman can do to persuade people to vote Conservative, it only shows what a mess he has made of his party.

Q2. [151079] **Mr. Paul Marsden** (Shrewsbury and Atcham): Will my right hon. Friend review urgently a serious and growing animal welfare problem that is paralysing the countryside? The foot and mouth outbreak means that farmers are not allowed to move healthy animals down public highways, with the result that one of my farmers in Shropshire will have to slaughter 400 piglets in the next couple of days because the barn in which they are being kept is overcrowded. The piglets need to be moved to farrowing outbuildings only 100 yd down the road. With the right precautions, would not it be possible to save those healthy animals?

The Prime Minister: That is a very reasonable point. We are looking urgently to determine what further changes we can make. My hon. Friend will know that about 250 of the 390 abattoirs in the UK have now been licensed to slaughter animals under arrangement. The difficulty for us is to get the balance right between putting in place the measures necessary to make sure that the disease cannot spread, and not going over the top and limiting justifiable movements of animals. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food informs me that he has a meeting with the National Farmers Union later this afternoon, at which those very issues will be discussed. I hope very much that we can announce further relaxations of the restrictions in the not-too-distant future.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Following on from that question, and our exchanges last week, may I say that I very much welcome the fact that the Government have been able to take steps in the direction of allowing the controlled movement of animals for slaughter? That is giving a genuine degree of hope to the very hard-pressed farming community in our country. However, I have a couple of specific questions—

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Gently, gently.

Mr. Kennedy: When it sees these exchanges, the farming community will notice that the Conservatives are not interested in serious discussion of the problem.

Does the Prime Minister have any plans yet for widening the scheme? Given what the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Mr. Marsden) properly and sensibly said when he asked his question, will the Prime Minister make arrangements for the controlled transport of some ewes to suitable lambing sites? That is a real problem, not least for farmers in the hill livestock sector.

The Prime Minister: In addition to this afternoon's meeting to which I referred, there is a meeting on Friday specifically to discuss that matter. I understand that we shall move on next week to look at the possibility of permitting some longer-distance movements in unaffected areas. For instance, that will allow sheep that have overwintered in the lowlands to return to the hills. It will also help with the specific problem of the ewes that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned.

At the last outbreak of the disease in 1967, measures were relaxed too quickly, and the disease broke out again. It would be a false comfort to all parts of the farming community to relax restrictions before we are ready. So far, however, all the cases that have been identified can be traced back to the same source. That is a hopeful sign, although it is too early to be absolutely certain. The measures that we have put in place so far have worked. Obviously, we will look at how we can relax them as soon as possible, as we are aware of the heartache and the financial difficulty being experienced by farmers.

Mr. Kennedy: I thank the Prime Minister for that reply. Hon. Members of all parties hope that we get through this crisis sooner rather than later. The Prime Minister has called for an open and serious debate about the nature of sustainable agriculture in this country. When we get over the immediate crisis, will he be open minded enough to acknowledge the need for that debate to be conducted with representatives of the entire agriculture community and those involved in the wider farming and food-chain community? Does he agree that the debate should also be conducted on an all-party basis?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the discussions on that will continue. I emphasise that it is not as if these discussions have not been taking place as a result of the measures that were announced last June. There has been a debate about the right structure for the farming community in the future. In addition, the rural development regulation, which will amount to more than £3 billion worth of spending over the next seven years, will mean big changes in the way that we farm in this country. I am pleased to see the first signs in Europe that the debate is going wider than these shores. Without

fundamental reform of the common agricultural policy, it will be difficult to give our farming community the future that it deserves.

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): May I, along with my right hon. Friends the Members for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) and for Oldham, West and Royton (Mr. Meacher), express our profound sorrow at the tragic killing in Oldham on Monday evening of WPC Alison Armitage? WPC Armitage, who only two weeks ago had taken part in a successful operation to apprehend suspected armed robbers, was to be commended for her actions. She was one of the bravest and finest officers in the police force. The sense of shock in Oldham is deep and tangible. I am sure that the whole House will want to express its sympathy. Will the Prime Minister do all that he can to support the brave work of the police and to ensure that justice is done?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the whole House will join with my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the memory of WPC Alison Armitage, who was tragically killed while on duty on Monday. I understand that she was an outstanding young officer who lived for her job, and was greatly respected and regarded throughout the force. Our thoughts and prayers are with her family and friends and, of course, we hope that those responsible are brought to justice as soon as possible.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): What steps has the Prime Minister taken to guarantee the safety, the lives and the property of British citizens in Zimbabwe who are currently under threat?

The Prime Minister: We have taken what measures we can in respect of the Government in Zimbabwe, including reductions in our aid, the withdrawal of military training facilities and, of course, the representations that we make. We keep in very close touch with British citizens in Zimbabwe. Easily the best thing that can happen is that the Government of Zimbabwe live up to their responsibility to treat their own citizens properly.

Q3. [151080] **Mrs. Anne Campbell** (Cambridge): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the difficulties that have been caused by teacher shortages, particularly in maths and science subjects? Those shortages have been evident for at least 20 years. *[Interruption.]* Will he ensure that there is an adequate supply of well-qualified teachers so that our children can reach the highest standards?

The Prime Minister: Given the shouting from Conservative Members, I will give them the figures. The number of applicants for postgraduate teacher training places is up by 19 per cent. on this time last year. Applications for shortage subjects have seen the largest increases: maths applications are up by 14 per cent.; science applications are up by 27 per cent., including a 24 per cent. rise for physics; and modern foreign languages applications are up by 7 per cent. That reverses eight successive years of falling recruitment to teacher training.

Overall, there are 7,500 more teachers than there were four years ago. Yes, we need more, but no one should forget that when we came to office, the number of places had been cut, the investment per pupil had been cut, and it is only now that the damage done by the Conservative party has been put right.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): The outbreak of foot and mouth has left a lot of farmers and their families with no income whatever. They have to look after their animals and do not qualify for any kind of income support or benefit. In the meantime, a local self-publicist in Melton Mowbray has been driving around to try and find a local infected farm so that he can be photographed there. He has done the same in the local cattle market next to the abattoir and has invited photographers to take pictures of him putting up "Keep Out" signs near infected farms. Will the Prime Minister compensate the former and unreservedly condemn the latter?

The Prime Minister: I do not know of the particular case in Melton Mowbray that the hon. Gentleman is talking about, but if that is happening, of course it is wrong.

Farmers are entitled to benefits and are entitled to claim them. It is partly for those reasons that we agreed to draw down the agrimonetary compensation. I point out to Opposition Members, who were shouting at me a moment ago that we had done nothing, that in relation to agrimonetary compensation, which is of course reimbursed by the British taxpayer, we have drawn down more than £600 million over the past few years. When the Conservatives were in power, they drew down precisely nothing.

Local Government Finance

Q4. [151081] **Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North): What plans he has to reform local government finance.

The Prime Minister: The local government finance Green Paper, published last September, set out options for reform, including how we distribute revenue grant to local authorities, their capital finance regime and local taxation. A White Paper setting out decisions on the way forward will be published later this year.

Mr. Chaytor: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. The issue is important for my constituents in Bury, North, who want to see a funding formula based on agreed measures of need and not on historical accident. Will the White Paper appear early in the next Parliament; and does "early" mean in the first 12 months?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that I cannot give my hon. Friend a precise answer to that last question. However, I can tell him that we understand very well the strength of feeling. As he knows, it is an immensely complex and difficult area so it is right that reforms are carefully considered; but in any event, it is worth pointing out that, particularly as a result of the extra money that we are putting into education and social services as part of the health plan, all local authorities will have received a very considerable increase in funding. We are aware,

however, of the complaints of unfairness in different parts of the country; that is the reason, first, for the Green Paper and then for the White Paper that will follow.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): When the Prime Minister looks at the reform of local government finance, will he look into why towns such as my constituency of Bournemouth receive a lower than average increase in standard spending assessment year after year—3.8 per cent. this year—whereas our rival resorts, such as Labour-controlled Brighton, get nearly 6 per cent?

The Prime Minister: On any basis, of course, the money that we are giving local authorities is considerably more than was given under the previous Conservative Government. I understand the complaints about the fairness of the existing system. That is the system we inherited; it was in place for many, many years, as the hon. Gentleman knows. That is precisely why we are reviewing it.

Engagements

Q5. [151082] **Mr. Bill O'Brien** (Normanton): My right hon. Friend is aware of the vast number of applications from former mine workers and widows of miners for compensation under the emphysema and bronchitis regulations. We are concerned about the delay in paying that compensation and about the causes of the delay. The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), is working hard to speed up the process. Will my right hon. Friend advise the House what action he intends to propose to ensure that those compensation claims will be paid speedily and without excessive delay?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, this problem affects many constituencies—indeed, it affects my own constituency. The difficulty has been that the payment of money has, by law, to be checked in each individual case. That is what has held up the process. However, as a result of what has happened, some £350 million has been paid out in miners' compensation; that continues to rise—about £1 million a day is being paid out. Together with the settlement for 100,000 former miners on their pension claims, that is a considerable indication that we are trying our hardest to bring some hope and help to those in former mining communities. I know that my hon. Friend will be the first to join me in saying that it is only because the Government introduced those measures that the issue of compensation and its speed arises at all.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The Prime Minister knows that the first sitting of a UK youth parliament took place recently. About 250 young people worked extremely hard over a weekend to prepare a manifesto. Will the Prime Minister do those young people the honour of meeting some of them to discuss some of their very sensible proposals for the future?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate all those who took part in the youth parliament. I am not sure that I can give them here and now the absolute assurance that I will meet them, although my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has offered to do so, but if I have the time I will do so myself.

Q6. [151083] **Dr. George Turner** (North-West Norfolk): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the school in the village of Middleton is delivering improved education, despite the fact that half the pupils are in temporary or mobile accommodation and the other half are in a building that is overcrowded and needs much investment? Has the Prime Minister got a message for Middleton and the many schools like it, of which, despite our considerable efforts, there are far too many in Norfolk and elsewhere because of the Conservative party's 18 years of neglect? Has he a message that I can take back tonight?

The Prime Minister: Of course, under the new deal for schools, some 17,000 schools have benefited, and as a result of what was announced in January this year, there will be an £8 billion investment from the new deal and the Government's extra investment for schools over the next three years. That means an actual benefit for schools in Norfolk of over £30 million from the new deal for schools. The one thing that we know, unless its policy has changed in the past couple of days or so—which is always possible—is that the Conservative party is committed to scrapping the new deal. That is right, is it not? [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."] My hon. Friend asks for a message for people in Norfolk: people in Norfolk will have £30 million going into their schools to renovate their buildings if they stick with the Labour party, and they will lose that money if they go with the Conservative party.

Q7. [151084] **Miss Julie Kirkbride** (Bromsgrove): The Prime Minister has often spoken of his admiration for his former teacher, Mr. Eric Anderson—a former rector of Lincoln college, Oxford and now the provost of Eton. Does he therefore agree with his former teacher, who says that the criticisms made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the admissions policy at Oxford, in which he claimed that it is biased against women and pupils from state comprehensive schools, were deeply unfair, unjustified and offensive to the many dons at Oxford who try their best to be fair to all the candidates who apply?

The Prime Minister: It is a bit below the belt to be asked about the comments of my old housemaster, but I have to say that I am just informed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment that the admissions from state schools are up, and I am sure that the hon. Lady would welcome the additional money that we are giving to help that process—or, at least, she would welcome it if it were not part of the cuts that the Conservative party is committed to introducing.

Q8. [151086] **Dr. Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test): Is my right hon. Friend aware that more than 110,000 people have benefited from the minimum wage in my region, while unemployment in my region is at a 20-year low? However, does he remember receiving a piece of advice in March 1998 from a very influential source, saying that the minimum wage is the height of irresponsibility? In the light of that advice, will he please

help my memory by informing us who that might have been? Does he now consider that the minimum wage was a bad idea, given that advice?

The Prime Minister: It plainly was not that influential a source of advice, since we proceeded with the minimum wage. It is worth pointing out what those in the Conservative party said. The shadow Chancellor said:

"I think the Minimum Wage is an immoral policy."

The Leader of the Opposition said that the minimum wage is the height of irresponsibility. The shadow Secretary of State for Social Security said:

"It's a striking reminder of the basic difference between the two parties."

We are delighted that those sinners have come to repentance now, but the important point is that large numbers of people are benefiting from the minimum wage and the fact that it is now introduced—and introduced with the consent not simply of trade unions and people at the workplace, but of enlightened business, too—shows conclusively what the Labour party has always said: we can have a socially just economy and an economically efficient economy at one and the same time.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): May I ask the Prime Minister to turn his attention again to Zimbabwe? How long can a Government who intimidate judges, expel independent journalists and harass their political opponents expect to enjoy membership of the Commonwealth?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right. The behaviour that the Government of Zimbabwe have exhibited towards their own citizens is, of course, disgraceful. *[Interruption.]* May I say in relation to the shouting of Conservative Members that all the way through, however, we have to judge what is right and best, giving account to those who are actually opposed to the regime, but have to live in Zimbabwe as opposed to on the Opposition Benches. It is for that reason that we have taken measures that I think are sensible and right in terms of reducing our aid programme and reducing or cutting our military training advice to the Zimbabwean regime. We shall continue to put pressure on them through every single forum we can, including the Commonwealth. However, the important thing for the people in Zimbabwe is to get change.

Q9. [151087] **Mr. Tom Clarke** (Coatbridge and Chryston): Will my right hon. Friend join in the unanimous welcome given to last night's Second Reading of International Development Bill? Does he see that as another indication of progress from the Department for International Development, particularly as it focuses on eradicating world poverty? Combined with the Government's initiatives on international debt, that truly indicates remarkable successes which the world will be speedy to recognise.

The Prime Minister: It is one of the proudest achievements of the Government that we have not merely introduced the International Development Bill, but have increased aid and development money as a proportion of our national income. In particular, I pay tribute to the extraordinary leadership of my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for International Development. Between them, they have given leadership in respect not merely of this country but of the wider world. I believe that our obligations do not stop at these shores. Indeed, it is not merely right, but is in our long-term interest to offer a helping hand out of poverty to the poorest regions of the world.

Orders of the Day

WAYS AND MEANS

Budget Statement

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Before I call the Chancellor of the Exchequer, it may be for the convenience of hon. Members if I remind them that at the end of the Chancellor's speech, copies of the Budget resolutions will be available to hon. Members in the Vote Office.

3.32 pm

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Since we came into government, our first duty has been to secure economic stability. In 1997, with inflation rising, a £28 billion deficit and a national debt that had doubled, the British economy was once again at risk of repeating the old all too familiar pattern of inflation followed by recession.

There were many who opposed our decision to make the Bank of England independent, others who opposed the tough controls on borrowing and spending, and many also who opposed our new fiscal rules and disciplines. There were some in this House who predicted that our policies would bring recession.

I can report to the House today that, because of the choices Britain made, our country now has the lowest inflation for 30 years, the lowest long-term interest rates for 35 years, mortgages now averaging £1,200 lower than under the last Government, more people in work than ever before, and the lowest unemployment since 1975.

It is a new-won and hard-won stability, which Britain must not take for granted but which we must entrench—and, because there is still much to do, the stability built in the first years will be our foundation for building opportunity and prosperity for all in the years to come.

We know as a nation that, after a generation of under-investment in both industry and our public services, the ambitions that we have for our country—high productivity and full employment, education opportunity for all and an end to child poverty, a modern NHS and modernised public services—can only be realised if we make the choice to invest for the long term.

So this is the challenge for the Budget and for the future: by our tax and fiscal decisions, to secure rising levels of business investment and rewards for entrepreneurship; and for all hard-working British families, who deserve the best hospitals, schools and public services, decade after decade of past neglect and decline replaced by year after year of rising and sustained investment and modernisation. Our greatest long-term investment is in children. I have looked back at a century and more of past Budgets which have had one common feature: the needs of children in the tax system go almost unrecognised, and the needs of women were barely mentioned. And when the story of Britain is of families struggling to do the best by their children, to balance work and family life, and all the daily pressures they face, it is right that we have a Budget that puts families first.

So this is my Budget judgment: instead of the old short-termism of looking only a year or a month ahead, we lock in stability for the long term and, by striking the right balance between long-term investments and affordable tax cuts, we not only boost enterprise and savings, but meet the needs of not just some but all Britain's families.

Let me turn to the economic background and forecasts. Between 1979 and 1997, inflation averaged 6.2 per cent. Since 1997, it has averaged less than half as much—2.4 per cent. In the last year, I can report that inflation has averaged 2.1 per cent—it is the lowest annual inflation since 1963.

Interest rates from 1979 averaged 10 per cent. Since 1997, they have averaged 6 per cent. and have remained stable over the last year, the longest period of consistently low interest rates since the 1960s. Long-term interest rates—now around 5 per cent.—are for the first time since the 1960s as low as those in Germany and as low as those in America. Mortgage rates, which averaged 11 per cent. between 1979 and 1997, are now down to $6\frac{1}{4}$ per cent. or less.

Growth from 1979 averaged 2 per cent. Since 1997, it has averaged 2.7 per cent., and in the last year I can now also report to the House that the economy has grown at 3 per cent. exactly. I can also report that manufacturing—despite the euro-sterling exchange rate—grew last year by 1.6 per cent. Manufacturing productivity grew by 4.4 per cent., manufacturing exports by 11.8 per cent, and it is to the credit of thousands of British companies that overall British exports grew by 7.4 per cent. And business investment has grown this year by 2 per cent. as we lock in a higher level of investment as a share of our economy, over 14 per cent., higher than at any time in 40 years.

The faster the speed of international flows today on the financial markets, the greater the need for international and national vigilance if stability is to be achieved and sustained. And it is precisely because we have taken the time to get the fundamentals right and hold to a steady course that we are better placed to cope with the uncertainties in the world economy this year.

With the United States today experiencing a necessary slowing and Japan barely growing, the growth rate in the world's major economies this year is expected to halve, while the world still faces volatile oil prices.

But because Britain's economy remains stable, our Treasury forecast is that this year, Britain's growth will be within a sustainable range of $2\frac{1}{4}$ to $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent., and while elsewhere business investment is falling, I can inform the House that we are raising this year's forecast for business investment in Britain, which will rise by between $2\frac{1}{2}$ and 3 per cent., continuing at an all-time high of 14 per cent. of national income, with total investment growing by between $5\frac{1}{2}$ and $5\frac{3}{4}$ per cent. this year.

The Treasury forecast is that consumer demand will grow by $3\frac{1}{4}$ to $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent., manufacturing will grow by $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 2 per cent., and exports will grow between $5\frac{1}{2}$ and $5\frac{3}{4}$ per cent. Inflation is forecast to be $2\frac{1}{4}$ per cent. this time next year, and on target at $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. at the end of next year.

In the Budget, the Chancellor must confirm the inflation target for the coming year. With inflation forecast to be $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. next year, imposing a lower inflation target—as some have suggested—would mean upward pressure on interest rates and would risk lower growth and higher unemployment. So I can confirm that because stability will guide our approach, the inflation target will remain at $2\frac{1}{2}$ per cent.

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

And my Budget will meet each of our fiscal rules. Let me set out the detailed figures for the House. In the last Budget, I forecast a current surplus for this financial year, 2000-01, at £14 billion. I now forecast that the surplus will be £23 billion, and in successive years the current surpluses are projected to be 17, 15, 8, 9 and 9. Over the economic cycle, even on the most cautious of cases, we will meet our first fiscal rule: we will balance the current budget.

After a doubling of national debt in the early 1990s, the ratio of net debt to national income had, by 1997, risen to 44 per cent. Our second fiscal rule—that debt should be at a sustainable level, below 40 per cent. of national income—has led us since 1997 to cut the ratio of debt from 44 per cent. to 42, to 40, then 37, to what I can report for this financial year—31.8 per cent.

From the unacceptable level of debt we inherited—44 per cent. of national income—I now forecast debt in the coming year will fall to 30.3 per cent. and in the following years I project 29.6, 29.7, 29.9 and 30 per cent. successively—meeting our second fiscal rule and thus putting Britain in a far stronger position to deal with the ups and downs of the economic cycle.

Net borrowing, forecast to be in surplus this financial year at £6½ billion, now yields a surplus of £16.4 billion. As we invest according to our plans, the projections for future years are 6, minus 1, minus 10, minus 11 and minus 12. In every one of the next five years, adjusting for the economic cycle, we have locked in the tight fiscal stance we set out in both the pre-Budget report and the last Budget.

Because of this, and because of the spectrum cash proceeds, we are able to repay debt. Last year we repaid £9 billion. I can tell the House that this year the net cash debt repayment will be £34 billion. This is more debt repaid by one British Government in one year than all the total debt repaid by all the previous British Governments of the last 50 years.

So debt interest payments next year are £1½ billion lower than forecast in the pre-Budget report, and very substantially lower than expected in last year's Budget. In total, because of the Government's prudence, debt interest payments in the coming year will be £3½ billion lower than this year, releasing resources for our priorities.

In 1997, Britain spent more on debt interest payments than all the money it spent on our schools. In 2001-02, we will be spending £10 billion a year more on schools than on debt interest. And since 1997, lower unemployment has reduced social security costs by £4 billion a year, again releasing resources for public services.

Whereas from 1979 to 1997, 42p of every extra pound spent went to debt and social security, now the figure is only 16p, and that leaves more than 80p in every pound of additional spending to go direct to front-line public services.

So, because we have cut debt and cut unemployment—and achieved higher growth and earnings—we are also able to achieve what has eluded Governments for many years: to lock in a fiscal tightening, to meet all the fiscal rules, and then, within this prudent and cautious framework, to have extra resources available in this Budget to invest, in a balanced way, in Britain's future.

It is a balanced approach around which we will seek to build a consensus within the country in the coming years that, within a stable framework, the right kind of public investments and targeted tax cuts are both essential engines to drive forward our social and economic ambitions for Britain.

To achieve our first ambition—to secure the fastest productivity growth of our competitors over the next decade—business investment must rise even further, and today I am proposing further reforms needed to promote competition, innovation and entrepreneurship.

Competition at home is necessary for competitiveness both at home and abroad. Yesterday, the Competition Commission published its provisional findings on the banks and small businesses. The Office of Fair Trading is today publishing its report on the reform of the professions. Later in the week, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will announce his proposals for reform and for detailed further consultation.

Institutional investors are today responsible for assets of £1½ trillion. To promote long-term investment in our country and to protect investors, I have accepted the recommendations of the Myners report. We will abolish the minimum funding requirement; through tax and regulatory reform we will make it easier for life insurers and pension funds to invest in venture capital; and we will ensure both a strengthened role for pension fund trustees and a clearer duty on fund managers to promote beneficiaries' interests. I support the challenge to the industry that Mr. Myners has laid down and his proposal that we should be prepared to legislate as necessary to achieve the improvements that he prescribes.

And so that we secure for Britain's companies the true competitive benefits of the single market, on Monday we will submit to European Finance Ministers our proposals on capital and product market reform for the Stockholm summit, and for the Spanish presidency of 2002 a White Paper on economic reform in Europe will also be published.

And just as I will set out later our vision for the future of the tax system for work and for families, our vision for the future of the tax system for companies, large and small, is that by combining a wide and stable tax base with low and stable rates and a constant commitment to international competitiveness, we will encourage innovation, investment and entrepreneurship.

Building on our reduction of corporation tax from 33p to 30p, I propose a further modernisation of the corporation tax system to meet the needs of a more knowledge-based economy. After further consultation with business, I propose to introduce a new tax relief for intellectual property and for goodwill. We will also consult in detail on relieving tax when companies sell substantial shareholdings. And from next month I will abolish the withholding tax not only on international bonds but also on payments of interest and royalties between companies in the UK—all steps that are designed to create the best business environment in the world.

Enhanced capital allowances since 1997 and new tax credits to encourage investment and innovation have already saved business £1 billion, £¼ billion for manufacturing. It is now time for the next tax incentive to back manufacturing and innovation. Today we issue proposals and will consult on the best way to extend a research and development tax credit to the larger companies.

And we will legislate a new and special tax credit that will help British companies contribute to the relief of disease round the world, an incentive to accelerate research on AIDS, TB, malaria and other diseases that each year kill 8 million people, including 3 million children in our poorest countries—deaths that in many cases are avoidable, diseases that in many places are preventable. We have a capacity to help and we have a moral duty to act.

Subject to a commitment by the pharmaceutical companies to invest in and deliver new drugs and vaccines in ways that truly meet the needs of the poor and sick, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development and I are prepared to extend this new tax credit even further. And Britain is prepared to take a lead in establishing a new purchase fund for global health that will not only develop life-saving drugs but make existing drugs more widely available.

As we consider the next steps for taxation in the North sea, our approach will be guided not by short-term factors but by the need for a regime that raises a fair share of revenue and promotes long-term investment in the North sea.

For farming—an industry essential to Britain, which today faces immediate and long-standing difficulties—the Government, over and above their statutory obligations, have made available agri-compensation money worth £150 million. And I can confirm that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is taking steps to advance agrimoney and other payments as quickly as possible.

Last year, I cut the long-term capital gains tax rate for business assets from 40p to 10p. I can now go even further. For employees in all types of companies, including venture capital and non-trading companies, the long-term capital gains tax rate will no longer be 40p but 10p.

Growing companies offering share options will benefit from today's extension of the enterprise management incentive scheme that we created. I have decided to double to £3 million the share options that benefit from tax relief, and in qualifying companies I will extend the right to benefit from these share options to all employees.

Since 1997, the number of small businesses in our country has grown by 170,000, as we have cut small company tax from 23p to 20p, with a new starting rate of just 10p in the pound—an overall cut in the typical small company tax bill of nearly 25 per cent.

We now propose a new regime to simplify VAT for small businesses, and this will be of direct help to up to half a million companies. For firms with a turnover of up to £54,000, VAT will not be charged at all—more of business income not subject to VAT in Britain than anywhere else in Europe.

For firms with a turnover of up to £100,000, we propose a simpler and lower flat rate which after consultation we will implement next year. For firms with a turnover of up to £600,000 we will consult on a simplified VAT payments scheme.

And I now propose not just to simplify VAT, but to simplify small business corporation tax as well. Last year, we exempted small businesses from the costly obligation to submit audited accounts, thus cutting red tape and small businesses' costs by an estimated £220 million. The next step is an even more radical proposal: we will make the annual company accounts the basis for calculating tax, and that will cut more red tape and cut business costs once again.

On Friday the Deputy Prime Minister and I will announce new financial flexibilities so that regional development agencies can fulfil their strategic role in delivering high productivity and, for every region of our country, balanced economic growth.

Our rising prosperity still leaves too many people and places behind. Nor will they catch up if we rely on the old failed policies of the past—either paying out more and more unemployment benefits without the necessary investment in the areas, or paying out untargeted property subsidies without real job creation.

I see our inner cities and our older industrial communities not as no-go areas for new enterprise but as places of untapped potential, where there are young people with dynamism looking for work, and markets waiting to develop and grow.

Across Britain, whether in new towns, traditional inner cities or former coal, textile and steel communities, the way forward for regeneration is to harness both new public and private investment and new fiscal incentives to extend the opportunities for enterprise from some of the country to all of the country.

To speed up regeneration, I now propose, after our pre-Budget consultation, a total of six tax cuts targeted on enterprise at a cost over the next five years of £1 billion. To make the first stages of buying property and bringing land back into use tax-free, in designated areas stamp duty will be abolished. To bring disused properties back into use, we will cut VAT on residential property conversions from 17½ per cent. to 5 per cent.

For cleaning up contaminated land, there will be an accelerated tax relief set at 150 per cent., and consultation will take place on a further corporation tax relief for firms investing in the new urban regeneration companies. To help revitalise our high streets, we will provide 100 per cent. first year capital allowances for bringing empty flats over shops back into the residential market.

To cut the cost of small business borrowing in these areas, we will introduce a new community investment tax credit and we will now create the first community development venture capital fund, which is a partnership between Government, the financial institutions and the charitable sector, for which the chairman of our review, Sir Ronald Cohen, proposes a capitalisation of £40 million. To cut the costs of start-ups, the Small Business Service will offer one-stop support and up to £2,000 worth of advice and help for any start-up company drawing up a business plan, making it easier than ever in these areas to start and sustain a business.

In both urban and rural areas, our churches are essential features of our community life and are at the heart of our rich heritage as a nation. To help preserve that heritage and to cut the costs of saving and repairing our listed church buildings, we will introduce for repairs started after 1 April a new grant, which is the equivalent of a VAT reduction from 17½ per cent. to 5 per cent.—a reform long sought after by congregations across the country.

At the centre of our communities are also thousands of non-profit sports clubs, and we will now consider the best way for the tax system to give them further support and to recognise their contribution to community life.

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

The Government's policy is for free museums, and I can announce that we will change the law on VAT to make that possible. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport will set out the full details of this change.

The film industry tax incentive was introduced in 1997, and is contributing to the unprecedented success now enjoyed by independent British films. This will be extended, at a cost of £50 million a year, until 2005.

Our ambition for Britain is full employment—employment opportunity for all. I can report to the House that, one and a half years early and at a half of the planned cost, we have exceeded our goal: not 250,000, but 270,000 young people have now moved from welfare to work. In total, 1,100,000 more men and women are in work than four years ago, we have the lowest long-term unemployment since 1979, the lowest youth unemployment since 1975 and the highest employment ever among women—and there are today 1 million vacancies spread across the country.

But there is still more to do. The demands of the new economy mean that we are likely to need 2,500,000 more employees at degree or higher degree levels, and overall more workers requiring higher skills and qualifications to fill new and higher paid jobs. So at the heart of our approach is that Government must meet their responsibilities, providing incentives for work and training, companies must meet their responsibilities to upgrade skills in the workplace, and people must take up their own responsibilities to work and to prepare for the jobs of the future.

We have already made major changes to reward work—the new deal, the working families tax credit and the 10p income tax rate. Now we have decided that following on stage one of the new deal—when long-term youth unemployment has fallen by 80 per cent.—it is time for stage two, designed to link those who need jobs to the jobs that need skills.

Next week the Secretaries of State for Education and Employment and for Social Security and I will publish detailed plans to get the hard to employ back into work, to promote employer-led sector initiatives under which the unemployed learn key skills, and to improve training in the workplace. The starting point is the "employment first" principle. In the past, the unemployed signed on for benefit before they looked for work. Now, before receiving benefit, the employment first principle means that they will first have to be interviewed about job opportunities and the steps that they are ready to take to get back into work.

For the hard to employ, those still left behind, we are proposing from 1 April, at a cost of £200 million a year, a new regime built around more intensive coaching and stronger sanctions for the over-25s.

For 30,000 benefit claimants who have been drug addicts, a new three-year budget of £40 million will mean that they can receive the mentoring and training that they need—but to get on to the programme they will first have to get off drugs.

Next, to link the unemployed without skills to the jobs that require skills, we will announce separate initiatives to fill job vacancies in the IT industry, construction, hotels, retail and financial services. As a result of the spending review, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has now allocated over £1 billion so that modern apprenticeships—only 75,000 in 1997, over 220,000 today—will rise to 320,000, as we discharge our duty to invest in the skills of the next generation.

Already with the new deal, lone parent employment has increased by 100,000, on the road to our goal of 70 per cent. employment for lone parents. From next month, at a total cost of £100 million, we will enhance the choices on offer to include not only full-time and part-time jobs and training, but the offer of self-employment, in all cases accompanied by help for child care. In return, the Government have decided that from next year all lone parents on income support, including parents with children under five, will be required to undertake interviews about work choices at regular intervals.

In the new economy people already in work constantly need to improve their skills. As the Employment Secretary has rightly said, Britain cannot succeed when up to 30 per cent. of our existing employees do not have the basic level 2 qualifications. Here, too, employers, employees and Government all have a role to play. For our part we are prepared to examine radical new options. To back up the tax relief that we offer for employee training, we are prepared to consider how best we can help employers meet their responsibilities, including the case for a new tax credit.

If we are to reach our long-term goal of full employment, we must also do more to reward work. Our vision of the future of the tax system for work is of one which, by integrating low starting rates of tax and targeted tax credits, makes work pay, brings more people into work and moves us to that goal of full employment.

This Government introduced the first ever national minimum wage and it is this Government who have raised the minimum wage, as of October this year, from £3.70 to £4.10 an hour, and then, subject to economic conditions, next year to £4.20.

Today I can go further and announce that for all families on the working families tax credit, there will be a rise from June this year of £5 a week. This takes the hourly minimum rate for those on the working families tax credit not just to £4.10, but to £6.40 an hour. When we first announced the working families tax credit, the minimum family income for full-time work was £180 a week. This year, the minimum will be £225 a week, or £11,700 a year.

And as part of our programme to ensure new disability rights, I can announce that in addition to the new guaranteed minimum income for a severely disabled person of £142 a week, for those in full-time work the disabled person's tax credit will be raised from June this year by £5 a week, and that will guarantee a minimum family income of £250.

To help parents into work, I have also decided to pay working families more towards the costs of child care. In addition to the child care places being created for 1 million children, the child care tax credit will, from June, pay up to 70 per cent. of child care costs, up to—instead of £100, as now—£135 a week for one child, and—instead of £150, as now—up to £200 a week for two or more children, another step in our plan to place affordable child care within the reach of all working families who need it.

I turn to other measures that will help hard-working families.

I can announce that for the coming financial year we will freeze all rates of car vehicle excise duty. Having completed our consultation on new duty rates, I will now move ahead with the proposal to extend the £55 reduction on the standard licence fee from all cars up to 1200 cc to all cars up to and including 1.5 litres. This will include, for example, Escorts, Astras, Micras and Rover Metros—in total, an extra 5 million cars. The reduction, to be implemented in July, will be backdated to November last year. In total, 9 million cars up to 1.5 litres will pay licence fees of £55 less.

From this month also for all newly purchased cars, a new four-band vehicle excise duty rewards the most environmentally friendly vehicles, and 70 per cent. of all new cars will now enjoy a reduced licence fee.

Since last November, lorry owners have already received rebates for up to half of this year's licence fee, at a total of £220 million. Following our pre-Budget consultation and at a cost next year of £300 million, I will sweep aside the 100 separate lorry licence rates. We will consolidate them into seven rate bands. They will be linked to environmental standards and set in consultation with the industry, and we will cut the rates to match the lowest in Europe. For those lorries used most for international haulage, the fee reduction will mean savings on the old rate of between £1,500 and £2,100 a year. Around 115,000 vehicles will save over £1,000 on their licence fee.

Next month, we will also abolish vehicle excise duty for all tractors.

Transport spending is set to rise by 20 per cent. a year over the next three years, as we take forward our 10-year plan of £180 billion public and private investment.

In November 1999, I announced the Government's new approach to the fuel escalator. It was first introduced by the previous Government in 1993, and by 2010 it will have secured a reduction in carbon dioxide pollution of 1 million to 2½ million tonnes. As I stated in the pre-Budget report, this year we will not proceed with the annual inflation rise in petrol tax that has been the norm on Budget day.

After consultation on the pre-Budget report, I am able to confirm the further changes. In addition to the 1p cut in ultra-low sulphur petrol duty last October, the duty on ultra-low sulphur petrol will be further cut by 2p a litre. To make sure all motorists can benefit from this 2p cut, I will extend it to unleaded petrol until 14 June, by which time the industry says ultra-low sulphur petrol will be 100 per cent. available. The 2p cut for both ultra-low sulphur petrol and unleaded petrol will take effect at 6 pm this evening.

Lead replacement petrol duty will also be cut—by a further 2p per litre. And because it is right to maintain the proper balance in the tax treatment of petrol and diesel, I propose to match the cut in low sulphur petrol with a cut in excise duties in ultra-low sulphur diesel for all diesel users of 3p a litre, to take effect from 6 pm this evening as well.

The pre-Budget report launched the green fuel challenge. Industry was invited to submit plans for new, more environmentally friendly fuels. I can announce that duty will be cut radically on alternative fuels—a further 6p per kilogram duty cut on road fuel gases with effect from 6 pm tonight, and from next April, a 20 per cent. duty cut on bio-diesel. To allow the new industry to plan ahead, duty on road fuel gases will be frozen in real terms until 2004.

We cannot achieve the Kyoto targets, and our own goal of cutting carbon dioxide emissions by 20 per cent., without the climate change levy which, with April's simultaneous cut in employers' national insurance, brings no additional revenues to Government but will cut carbon emissions by 5 million tonnes by 2010.

To reward businesses investing in energy-saving improvements, the Government will publish this month the list of technologies that will now qualify for 100 per cent. tax relief, and later this year we will launch a green technology challenge, again offering 100 per cent. tax relief to companies investing in the next generation of environmental technologies.

As previously announced, the landfill tax will rise from £11 per tonne to £12 per tonne.

I turn now to the other excise duties. Last year, I froze duties on spirits. This year, an inflation rise would push the price of whisky up by 11p a bottle. Because of the competitive position of the industry, I will this year continue to freeze duty on whisky and on all spirits. And this year I propose to go even further: I will freeze duty on wine and on beer.

Beyond the normal inflation rise of 6p, I will not go ahead with any real-terms rise in cigarette taxes.

Following our consultation with the betting and gaming industry over the impact of internet trading, I have decided from 1 January to abolish betting duty, which has been in existence ever since betting shops were legalised.

I have now agreed that the tax on bookmakers' gross profits will be 15 per cent., which the leading bookmakers have agreed not to pass on to their customers. So by 1 January, no one will have to pay a tax on their bets.

For inheritance tax, I propose to raise the allowance, so that no tax will be charged on estates up to almost £¼ million—a threshold of £242,000. Ninety-six per cent. of estates will pay no tax.

I now turn to tax and benefit policy for families. A policy that puts families first in the tax and benefit system insists—as the Beveridge report said in 1942—that nothing should be done to remove from parents the responsibility of maintaining their children, but it is in the national interest to help parents discharge their responsibilities properly. Our vision of the future of the tax system for families with children is to support all families, to give most help at the time they need it most, and to give more help to the families who need it most. So, freed of poverty, every child has the best start in life. And consistent with our support for independent taxation of individual income, our vision for the integration of the tax and benefit system for families is that support should be based on family income, which is the basis of the new integrated child credit.

By 1997, support for children had fallen in real terms by 6 per cent. since 1979, as child benefit was often frozen; there was no recognition at all of the needs of children in the tax system. As a result, families with children had incomes that were 30 per cent. lower on average than families without children, and child poverty had trebled.

[Mr. Gordon Brown]

So first, we made radical improvements in child benefit, which is paid to all 7.5 million families with children. Child benefit in 1997 was only £11.05 a week, or £575 a year. From April this year, child benefit will be £15.50 a week—£806 a year.

Of course, we realise that £15.50 is too small a recognition of family needs for most families, and it is totally wrong that the tax system contains no allowance for the needs and costs of bringing up children. So, in addition to child benefit, and on top of it, the new children's tax credit is being introduced on 6 April and, after consultation, I have decided that the new children's tax credit will be paid not at £8.50 a week—or £442 a year—as was originally proposed, but at £10 a week: £520 a year. For families on average earnings, this is worth more than a 2½ per cent. cut in the basic rate of income tax.

With the children's tax credit, 5 million families who received only £11 a week for the first child in 1997 will now receive up to £25.50 a week: an increase from £575 a year to £1,320 per family. With this major change in the tax system, financial support for families with children has never been higher. We know also that the greatest help should be there when children are youngest—the time when family income tends to fall as family costs rise.

We can do more to help mothers and fathers balance work and family responsibilities. Indeed, we want to make it easier for mothers to make the choice to stay at home after the child is born, and for much longer than previously. I can announce that, following the maternity review set up in last year's Budget under the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, working with the Ministers for Women, maternity pay, which is £60, will be increased in successive stages to £75 next year and, the year after that, to £100—as big a rise in two years as over the previous 40 years.

We will also legislate so that, at the same time as the £100 is introduced, the statutory obligation to maternity pay will be raised from 18 weeks to 26 weeks. At a cost of £30 million, I will extend the help small and medium-sized employers receive for administering the scheme. Parents who adopt will for the first time receive similar benefits. We will introduce two weeks' paid paternity leave, set at the same level of £100, paid for by the Government, with further details of this and other measures to be announced by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

For the first year of a child's life, I propose a further innovation. From April next year, for families with new-born children, the children's tax credit will be set at an even higher level and paid up the income scale to all households where the main earner earns up to £50,000 a year. I propose to set this children's credit at over £1,000 a year, worth £20 a week, and I will ensure that this £1,000 baby credit will be continued, and it will be paid to the mother when the new integrated child credit comes in, in 2003. So, to summarise these changes: families receiving the higher children's credit and maternity pay will be up to £2,240 better off.

Our ambition for Britain is that every child has the best start in life. When we came into power, with one third of children in poverty, we had to take action. While child benefit starts at £15.50 for all families, the maximum rate of support for children will go as high as £51 a week, a rise of £23 a week since 1997. The income support child credit will be raised by £1.50 a week, and the sure start maternity grant will be set at £500. This will help to take more than 1.2 million children out of poverty in this Parliament as we work to cut child poverty by half, on the road to its abolition.

For the sake of every family in the country we must and will do more to fight drugs. For too long, in too many communities, we have fought a war against drugs which drugs have, unfortunately, won, so I have a further spending announcement. Next week, the Home Secretary, working with the Minister for the Cabinet Office, will announce a new three-year budget of over £200 million. To every one of the country's 350 partnerships against crime and disorder, in every area of the country, direct payments averaging £½ million to up to £1 million pounds will be made straight to police commanders and anti-drugs leaders. Similar funds will be available for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The war against drugs will never be won by Government alone, but can only be won neighbourhood by neighbourhood across the country, so further resources will also be announced to support a new anti-drugs campaign involving prominent figures from the world of business and sports to mobilise communities against drugs.

I come to the next set of Budget judgments.

Our success in cutting debt and unemployment and rising economic growth have permitted us—while locking in our tough fiscal stand—to release £4 billion a year more for our priorities. And after the decisions already announced I can still go further.

The Government could choose to pay off more debt—but we have already paid off £34 billion this year.

We could choose to repeat the pattern of Budgets at this stage of previous Parliaments, and make tax cuts that are unaffordable in the long term.

But it is right to choose the prudent course for Britain.

Let me tell the House what the Government have decided.

For savers, as I announced in November, the Government are extending the tax reliefs for individual savings accounts. Nine million new accounts were opened in the first year; £48 billion has now been saved through them. Because of the higher number of ISAs, tax reliefs for savers will by 2006 exceed projected tax relief for PEPs and TESSAs by £800 million. Tax incentives for savings will total £3 billion. We wish to see more ISAs and we want more tax-free savings, so for the next five years up to £7,000 a year of savings can generate income and capital gains that will both be tax free.

In this Budget I want to do more to cut tax for all savers, including pensioners. For pensioners we have already announced that from April we will raise pensions well above inflation—indeed, above earnings—by £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples, and next year by £3 and £4.80.

We will retain the winter allowance and the free TV licence for the over-75s that we introduced, and we will retain the Christmas bonus. Detailed announcements will be made in this year's uprating statement on social security.

Since November, we have been consulting on our new pension credit. It will be introduced in 2003. Pensioner couples with incomes below £200 and single pensioners with incomes below £135 a week—many millions of pensioners in our country—will receive the new pension credit, which will reward rather than penalise their saving. It will rise in line with earnings every year and in this way, it will give recipients more than even the earnings link in the basic state pension would have given them.

In this Budget I have decided that from 2003, when the pension credit is introduced, pensioners' tax allowances will also be linked not just to prices but to earnings. And I will do more on tax for savers, pensioners and working families.

To achieve our goal of full employment, I have previously cut the basic rate of income tax and I have introduced a 10p tax rate. For national insurance we announced and legislated in 1999 upper and lower earnings limits of £575 a week and £87 a week respectively for the coming year, taking 300,000 men and women out of tax altogether, in all amounting to a national insurance cut of £590 million in this coming year.

To reward savers, pensioners and hard-working families, my aim now and in the next Parliament is to ensure that more of savers', pensioners' and working people's incomes, now taxed at the 22p rate, should be taxed at the lower 10p rate.

And I propose to make a start today with a £1 billion a year tax cut: instead of the first £1,500 of taxable income at 10p rather than 22p, the first £1,880 of taxable income of every taxpayer in the country will be taxed from this year at the lower 10p rate. This is a measure that will benefit 25 million taxpayers.

And cutting income tax by extending the 10p band shows our intention for the next Parliament too: that all those who work hard and save for their retirement will find that more of their income that is taxed at 22p today should be taxed at the lower 10p rate. Seven and a half million pensioners will now pay no tax, or tax at just the 10p rate—70 per cent. of all pensioners in the country.

Taking into account the direct tax and benefit changes, and the changes coming in this year, households will be on average £240 a year—over £4 a week—better off after inflation.

With the new children's tax credit now paid from April, the direct tax burden for the average family falls from 21 per cent. in 1997 to 18 per cent., the lowest level for 30 years.

I said that our long-term goals are full employment, high productivity, strong public services, tackling child poverty and opportunity for all. Now, having made this tax cut for work, pensioners and savings, and having locked in our fiscal tightening, our economic strength allows us to release over the next three years a further £2 billion in total.

There is a choice. I have had representations from some for billions in further tax cuts. But our priority has been and is Britain's public services. So we will not cut investment, but we will raise it. We will increase spending not by 3.4 per cent. a year, as we planned, by 2003-04, but by 3.7 per cent. a year.

Let me give the detailed figures for the benefit of the House. To cut spending growth from 3.7 per cent. a year to 2½ per cent. a year, as has been proposed, would mean, if started now, annual cuts rising above £16 billion a year by 2003–04; and, even if started next April, cuts of £10.1 billion a year by 2003–04.

So I have rejected this course for Britain, not only because deep cuts would move us away from our long-term goals and put hospitals and schools at risk, but also because Britain must not repeat the short-termist mistakes of the 1980s—unfunded, unaffordable tax cuts, higher interest rates, cuts in necessary investment, with no fiscal rules. We will not return to boom and bust.

Within our cautious fiscal rules, education spending is already set to rise by 5.2 per cent. a year even after inflation. I now propose to increase substantially the sum of current and capital money paid to every school, and directly to every teacher, to allow them to make their own decisions as head teachers, as they meet the nation's educational targets.

Head teachers of every primary school will receive not £10,000, as planned, but £13,000. The larger primary schools will receive not £50,000 but £63,000. The head teacher of each secondary school will receive, for the smaller schools, not—as planned—£57,000 but £68,000, and for the larger schools a payment of not £92,000 but £115,000. And these payments will be made not just for one year, but for every year through to 2004. In total, £200 million extra each year for the next three years.

As a result of our spending review, cash spending on the NHS is rising by 50 per cent. over five years. Today we add to that. There is a strong case for extra capital investment, new scanners and renovating old Nightingale wards. And there is a strong case for money going direct to each hospital trust, and a case also for more primary care money going direct to local GP surgeries.

I am not, however, able to give £100,000 to each of the 200 acute hospital trusts. Instead, from April, for work on Nightingale wards and for new investment, acute hospital trusts will receive, as a result of this Budget, every year for the next three years, extra money of between £½ million and £1 million a year direct to the trust. Further announcements, including cash for GP trusts, will follow, as will allocations by the Scottish and Welsh Administrations.

So I have one final announcement. The Secretary of State for Health wishes to recruit an extra 20,000 more nurses by 2004. Next week he will announce three-year allocations from a new £135 million fund for recruitment of front-line staff. And next week also, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment will announce his three-year allocations from a new £200 million fund we are setting up today for retention and for recruitment of extra teachers.

In total, over the next three years £1 billion more to our hospitals and £1 billion more to our schools—money that we could not provide if we made irresponsible tax cuts.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have made our choice: more investment, not less; stability the foundation; tax cuts we can afford; schools and hospitals first. I commend this Budget to the House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Will hon. Members who are leaving the Chamber please do so quickly and quietly?

Under Standing Order No. 51, the first motion, entitled "Provisional Collection of Taxes", must be decided without debate.

PROVISIONAL COLLECTION OF TAXES

Motion made, and Question,

That, pursuant to section 5 of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968, provisional statutory effect shall be given to the following motions:—

(a) Hydrocarbon oil (rates of duty)(motion No. 2);

(b) Hydrocarbon oil (rebate on unleaded petrol)(motion No. 3);

(c) Tobacco products (rates of duty)(motion No. 4)—*[Mr. Gordon Brown.]*

put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 51 (Ways and means motions), and agreed to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I shall now call on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to move the motion entitled "Amendment of the law". It is on that motion that the debate will take place today and on succeeding days. The remaining motions will not be put until the end of the Budget debate next week, and they will then be decided without debate.

Budget Resolutions

AMENDMENT OF THE LAW

Motion made, and Question proposed,

(1) That it is expedient to amend the law with respect to the National Debt and the public revenue and to make further provision in connection with finance.

(2) Subject to paragraphs (3) to (6) below, this Resolution does not extend to the making of any amendment with respect to value added tax so as to provide—

(a) for zero-rating or exempting a supply, acquisition or importation;

(b) for refunding an amount of tax;

(c) for varying any rate at which that tax is at any time chargeable;

(d) for any relief, other than a relief which—

(i) so far as it is applicable to goods, applies to goods of every description, and

(ii) so far as it is applicable to services, applies to services of every description.

(3) Paragraph (2) above does not exclude the making of amendments with respect to value added tax—

(a) providing for refunds of the kind specified in paragraph (4) below;

(b) providing for that tax to be charged at a reduced rate of 5 per cent. on supplies of the descriptions specified in paragraph (5) below (and on equivalent acquisitions and importations); or

(c) making provision of the kind authorised by paragraph (6) below.

(4) The refunds mentioned in paragraph (3)(a) above are refunds of value added tax where—

(a) that tax is chargeable on a supply to, or an acquisition or importation by, a museum or gallery, and

(b) the supply, acquisition or importation is attributable to supplies of free rights of admission to the museum or gallery.

(5) The supplies mentioned in paragraph (3)(b) above are—

(a) supplies, in the course of a conversion of a building (or part of a building), of services related to the conversion if after the conversion the building (or part) contains living accommodation;

(b) supplies, in the course of the renovation or alteration (including the extension) of a dwelling that has been unoccupied for at least three years, of services related to the renovation or alteration;

(c) supplies of goods by a person making a supply of services within sub-paragraph (a) or (b) above if—

(i) those services include the incorporation of the goods into the building concerned (or its site), and

(ii) the goods are building materials within the meaning of Group 5 of Schedule 8 to the Value Added Tax Act 1994;

(d) supplies of children's car seats.

(6) The provision authorised by this paragraph is provision re-enacting, without altering any person's liability to value added tax or the amount of any such liability, provisions providing for that tax to be charged at a reduced rate of 5 per cent. on certain supplies, acquisitions and importations.—*[Mr. Gordon Brown.]*

4.26 pm

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): This is the Chancellor's fifth Budget, but those of us who have observed the previous four will already know a great deal about this one. The first thing we know is that those who naively relied entirely on what the Chancellor had said for

their Budget information ended up being grossly misinformed. In previous years, the clobbering of the pension funds, the abolition of the 20p tax rate, the billion-pound tax on high-tech entrepreneurs and the £2 billion addition to corporation tax were all introduced in the Chancellor's Budget, but never described—and in some cases never even mentioned—in the Chancellor's speech. So he will understand that people will be suspicious about some of the claims that he has made today.

When the Chancellor says that he will simplify corporation tax for small companies, people will remember that the last time that he said he was going to simplify something for the self-employed—national insurance contributions—they ended up with a £475 million tax increase which he did not mention in his Budget.

When the Chancellor talks about helping women and children, people will remember that he abolished the married couples allowance and left a gap for a year before introducing the children's tax credit, so that, in the current financial year, families—including many women and children—have been the victims of his stealth taxes.

When the Chancellor talks about what he has done for savings, people will remember the penalising of savings in his previous Budgets. For some reason, he omitted to mention—this is at page 170 of the Red Book, which was published a few minutes ago—that the forecast for the savings ratio has been revised downwards again, and that what was going to be 6 per cent. of the national income being saved—compared with 11 per cent. under the previous Government—has now been revised down to 4.75 per cent.

On a rapid reading of the Red Book, it is quite instructive to discover, on page 473, that the Chancellor's forecast for the balance of trade is a £27 billion deficit, which is £8 billion worse than the outturn for this year; that his forecast for a manufacturing output increase has been revised down from his previous forecast; and that although he said that he was increasing his forecast for investment, his figures show that the actual outturn for fixed investment for 2000 is 2.25 per cent., against the 3.25 per cent. that he forecast in the previous Budget. Therefore, as ever with his Budgets, all is not what it seems.

We also know that so many of the claims that the Chancellor makes on Budget day turn out to be false. For example, he said today that the tax burden on the average family will fall to its lowest level for 30 years. However, in saying that, he included only direct taxes and left out all of his stealth taxes on petrol, pensions, cars, alcohol, cigarettes and council tax. His statement was watched by millions of people, and some of them may even have believed it, but it would be true only for people who never drive, never smoke, never drink and do not have a pension or even a local council. In other words, it does not apply to anyone in the country.

Based on previous experience, therefore, no rational person can sit here and believe the Chancellor's assertions. It is just as well that the Prime Minister is sitting next to him. Labour Members cheer in ignorance of the detail, which proves that one cannot fool all of the people all of the time, but one can fool all Labour Members of Parliament on Budget day.

The second thing that we know for sure about the Chancellor's Budget today is that his every pronouncement is set against the massive increases in tax that he previously introduced. Taxes are £25 billion higher this year than when Labour came to office. In the four previous Budgets, the Chancellor introduced 45 stealth tax increases. Taxes have gone up on marriages, mortgages, pensions, petrol, diesel, cars, homes, medical insurance, savings, small businesses, large businesses and the self-employed.

The Chancellor turned up today with tax reductions as part of a cynical election Budget. It gives back to people for a limited period only a tiny part of what he has taken from them. He is like the thief who steals one's car and comes back the next day to return the hubcaps. That is the story of the Chancellor's five Budgets in this Parliament.

The Chancellor's extra taxes on families, drivers and businesses are already equivalent to an extra 10p on income tax. Today he announced tax reductions that would be equivalent to about 1p off income tax. It is therefore a 10p up, 1p down election Budget. What the right hon. Gentleman gives with one hand, he has already more than taken away with the other.

Because of this Chancellor's tax increases, the increase in people's real household disposable income—the amount of their own money that they can keep after taxes and inflation—has fallen to its lowest level for a generation. Under the Government of my noble Friend Baroness Thatcher, disposable household income rose at 2.9 per cent. a year. Under the Government of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), it grew at 2.5 per cent. a year. Under this Government, it has grown at 1.6 per cent. a year. The Government promised that they had no plans to increase taxes at all. The lowest increase in disposable income for a generation has been produced by a Government with the highest increase in disposable promises.

As ever, there are a variety of tax increases that the Chancellor has decided not to mention in the Budget. No doubt he thought it a minor detail, but he omitted to mention yet another stealth tax increase—the decision to impose from 1 June, for the first time ever, the full cost of VAT on the purchase of spectacles. That will add about £10 to each purchase.

Customs and Excise has written to the optical profession saying that local officers will apply that decision to all opticians businesses with effect from 1 June 2001. I received a letter from one of my constituents, Mr. Alan Brown—at least one Mr. Brown can be straight about taxation—who said about the Chancellor:

> "The above 'TAX ON EYESIGHT' I suspect will not be mentioned in his budget speech this Wednesday, however, I feel it is of sufficient national importance for you to mention it in your budget reply as it high-lights the sniide and underhand way in which the Government introduces these stealth taxes."

It is typical of this Government to announce with great amounts of publicity the introduction of free sight tests for the over-60s without telling them that they will not be any better off as the VAT on their spectacles will now outweigh the saving. How is it that something that affects millions of people and thousands of businesses around the country and is a major extension of value added tax has somehow slipped out of the Budget speech?

How is it that the increases in council tax were not referred to in the Budget speech? We now know that the council tax cost for the average band D property will rise by 7 per cent. this year—three times the rate of inflation. That means £60 more in tax bills for hard-working

[Mr. William Hague]

families and brings the total increase in council tax since the Government came to power to £220 on band D properties—a tax hike of a third.

Council costs are rising because of the Chancellor's other stealth taxes on fuel and pensions and because of extra regulations and bureaucracy. The right hon. Gentleman's best-value scheme has added £125 million to the cost of councils. Under this Government, council tax has become the ultimate stealth tax, piled on to taxpayers without any improvement in services. The Chancellor hopes that individual councillors will get the blame instead of him.

We also heard nothing in the Budget speech about double taxation relief—which was much vaunted in last year's Budget—by which the Chancellor was going to raise hundreds of millions of pounds. This must be somewhere in the Budget measures because the pre-Budget report said that the Government would be acting through the 2001 Finance Bill.

Today sees what should be the end of a saga of muddled thinking and failure to listen that has involved the Government in no fewer than three retreats from their original plans. They consulted on two options for changes to double taxation relief in 1998. The first retreat was when the Chancellor adopted totally different proposals in last year's Budget. So much for listening. He then slipped out those proposals in a Budget press release without mentioning them in his speech. So much for open government. When I asked the Prime Minister about the proposals at Prime Minister's Question Time, he insisted that the problems raised by PricewaterhouseCoopers were based on a misunderstanding of the tax position and that he knew more about double taxation than the accountancy profession. So much for knowing one's limitations.

Then came the second retreat. The Government admitted that they had been mistaken and changed the proposals in the Finance Bill Committee. Yet they have still not got the details right. The Chancellor is having to change them again in this Budget, but has not told us how—that is the third retreat. So, double taxation relief has turned into a triple taxation retreat and the details should have been in the Chancellor's Budget speech.

The Chancellor announced a change in income tax, widening the 10p tax band from £1,500 to £1,880. People will remember that the abolition of the married couples allowance adds £300 a year to their income tax bill. The abolition of mortgage interest relief adds £326 to their income tax bill. These more than cancel out the increases in thresholds and reductions in allowances announced in previous Budgets. The widening of the 10p tax band will produce in most cases £38 a year, or 75p a week. The right hon. Gentleman has got into trouble over 75p a week before, and I think that he might get into trouble over it again.

The Chancellor announced proposals on business taxation and said that he had to make it easier for businesses to compete. Who has been bringing about all the increases in business taxation over the past four years? The Confederation of British Industry says that the United Kingdom tax take from business has already gone up by an estimated £5 billion a year over the course of this Parliament.

The Government are steadily destroying Britain's competitive advantage. While they have been playing politics with the British economy, our competitors have been sharpening up their act. While other countries have been reducing their taxes—France, Germany and Italy are all proposing substantial business tax reductions—the Chancellor is going to produce a White Paper on economic reform in Europe. He will lecture other countries on what to do, when he has been increasing taxes in Britain while they have been reducing theirs.

Over the past four years, the UK's productivity growth has averaged 1.4 per cent. and the Red Book, just published, refers on page 162 to subdued productivity growth since 1997. What a coincidence. Who came to power in 1997? Over the previous five years, productivity grew 50 per cent. more quickly. No wonder the International Monetary Fund has said that the United Kingdom's productivity performance in comparison with other major industrialised countries is an area of weakness.

We will look at the detail of the Chancellor's business announcements, and where they reduce the tax and regulatory burden—if they do—they will be welcome. However, the right hon. Gentleman would have done better to tackle business burdens head on, to have stopped forcing businesses to act as unpaid tax and benefit administrators, and to have scrapped the IR35 tax that will drive people overseas. He should have set British business free to compete.

The Chancellor talked about simplifying tax arrangements for some businesses, but the director general of the British Chambers of Commerce has said:

"The CGT system is now so complex as to be almost unworkable. Many businesses say they and their accountants are just unable to work out their CGT liabilities."

Three years on from the Chancellor's reform we have one taper, two whole systems and hundreds of rates of tax. If the new deal had been as successful in creating work for the unemployed as the capital gains reforms have been in creating work for accountants, we would have the lowest unemployment rate in the western world. Only this morning—*[Interruption.]* If Labour Members do not know, that 14 OECD countries have a lower rate of unemployment than the United Kingdom, it is no wonder that they can be so easily duped by the Chancellor on Budget day.

The Chancellor talks about improving savings, while silently revising downwards his estimate for the savings ratio. Savers have borne the brunt of his stealth taxes—£5 billion a year has been raided from pension funds. In his Britain, there is no reward for people who do the right thing and save for themselves and their families. It is the double-take economy: "You take responsibility and the Government take your money." As a direct result of the right hon. Gentleman's policies, the savings ratio has fallen sharply—by more than half since he became the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The Chancellor announced new money to increase recruitment in public services, including the national health service. When will the Government understand that such an announcement is not enough to repair the morale—so cruelly undermined over the past few years—of teachers, nurses, doctors and police officers? Why did the Government not tell people in the public services that the Government would get off their backs? Ministers

should realise that there is no point in spending one day a year making helpful-sounding announcements if they spend the other 364 days piling on extra regulations and extra bureaucracy.

Last week, in an open letter to general practitioners, the chairman of the general practitioners committee stated:

"General practice in the UK is in crisis. Morale within the profession has plunged to new depths . . . Quite clearly, this government's interest in the problems of general practice is superficial. It has complacently shovelled more and more work on to general practitioners . . . Now we are saying that we have had enough."

He noted:

"For GPs across the UK struggling to cope with government initiative after government initiative whilst facing the daily reality of trying to deliver high quality patient care"

recent Government announcements are "the final straw."

That is the reality of trying to recruit and retain people in public services. That is why the chairman said that 60 per cent. of respondents said that they were

"thinking of retiring early or changing career and 54 per cent stated they would not recommend general practice as a career."

The Chancellor will not be able to achieve his objectives for recruitment in our public services unless he allows the professionals in those services to carry out their job without ever-increasing Government regulation and intervention.

The Chancellor announced an increase in the children's tax credit. Despite our deep misgivings about the organisation of the tax credit, we welcome that increase. But, as ever, the right hon. Gentleman did not give us the whole story. He glossed over the fact that 5 million of the married couples who lost their married couples allowance last year will not benefit from the new credit at all. The Chancellor's endless tinkering—creating a cat's cradle of overlapping benefits and credits, chock-full of inconsistencies and contradictions—means that a family with two earners, both on £30,000, earning £60,000 between them, will receive the children's tax credit in full, but that a family with one earner on £40,000 will not do so. That is the clearest example of the muddle that passes for welfare reform under the Government.

We know that we will have to sort out the mess that the Government are leaving behind, but we are not alone in having to do so—astonishingly, the Chancellor has already drawn up plans to sort out the mess that he will leave behind. He is already making new plans to change the plans that he yet to put into effect. That has been further confirmed in his statement today. What an admission of failure. He killed off the married couples allowance before he had a replacement ready, and now his new system is so full of holes that he is already planning its successor. He is creating a more and more means-tested society.

In 1993, the Chancellor said:

"I want the next Labour Government to achieve what in 50 years . . . has never been achieved. The end of the means test for our elderly people".

He is nodding; he said it. In 1997, 37 per cent. of pensioners were on means-tested benefits. By 2003, more than half of pensioners will have to reveal all their personal details to the state in the hope of being granted an income sufficient to pay the Chancellor's taxes. That is not just another broken promise from the Chancellor; he has deliberately set out to do the exact opposite of what he said he would do.

People have to fill in an extraordinarily long form, with 323 different items of information, on which pensioners are even asked whether they are pregnant. That shows the extent of the means-testing and the information required, as the Chancellor creates a more and more means-tested society. He tries to con people into thinking that he has suddenly been converted to tax reductions, so he must think that the people of this country are stupid. He must think that families are too stupid to notice that the typical family pays £670 more tax a year since he became Chancellor. That calculation allows for increases in child benefit and the cut in income tax rates, which are more than wiped out by the abolition of the married couples allowance and MIRAS, the pensions tax and the increase in duties on tobacco and petrol. He must think that people on low incomes are too stupid to notice that his stealth taxes have hit the poorest fifth of households the hardest because they are so regressive.

The Treasury figures show that the tax burden on the richest fifth of households—the kind of people who get invited to the Lord Chancellor's dinner parties—has increased from 35 per cent., when Labour took office, to 36 per cent., but the tax burden on the poorest 20 per cent. of households has increased from 37 to 40 per cent. of their gross income. The Chancellor goes around posing as the friend of the least well-off, but he hits them even harder.

The tax reductions in the Budget are entirely motivated by the onset of a general election in the not-too-distant future. In the Chancellor's first Budget, he increased taxes left, right and centre. Tax credits were abolished, MIRAS was restricted, vehicle excise duty was increased and the fuel escalator was accelerated. In his second Budget, he had the top rate extended to travel insurance, married couples allowance restricted, gaming duties increased, company car tax increased, reinvestment relief restricted and the fuel escalator accelerated again. That has gone on, Budget after Budget, with 45 taxes, until we reach this Budget, when suddenly some taxes come down. What could be happening in the next few months that could explain that bizarre change in behaviour? What could persuade a man who is so committed to taxing people more and more to do something so utterly out of character?

We know that those election tax cuts are for a limited period only. We know that the petrol tax cut is for a limited period only because the Prime Minister himself has told us that he thinks cutting fuel tax involves cutting the money that goes to vital public services. He told me:

"If the right hon. Gentleman is telling us that he would cut fuel duty, that means that he would also cut the money that we are putting into schools, hospitals and transport."—[*Official Report*, 28 June 2000; Vol. 352, c. 899.]

If that is what he really believes, the cuts in petrol tax announced today must be for a limited period only—in other words, until the election is over.

The Prime Minister complains about cynicism in politics. Does he not think that everybody who has paid through the nose since he came into office will be cynical about a Government who raid their pockets every year until the election is in sight, decide to give a little back just in time for polling day, and then plan to take it all back after the election? The stealth tax on pensions alone raises £6 billion for the Chancellor this year, more than outweighing all the announcements that he has made today.

[Mr. William Hague]

There are so many things that the Chancellor should have done in this Budget. He could have reversed the spiralling cost of running Whitehall; he could have proposed real welfare reform and tackled benefit fraud; he could have reformed legal aid and student loans; he could have made billions of pounds of savings and given the money back to the hard-working people of this country; he could have abolished taxes on savings; he could have raised the tax allowances for pensioners by more than he did and taken a million pensioners out of tax; he could have introduced a transferable married couples allowance that recognised the value of marriage, which he has removed from the tax and benefits system; he could have cut petrol tax for more than a limited period only; and he could have given the people's surplus back to the people. But he did none of those things; instead, he has produced a cynical election budget—the 10p up, 1p down Budget—that gives with one hand when far more has already been taken back with the other.

It is a Budget for a limited period only and, given the chance, we know that the Chancellor will take it all back. Only the Conservatives will give people back their money; only the Conservatives will tax less and look after people's money.

4.51 pm

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): To boil all that diatribe down, it seems that the leader of the Conservative party is rather upset that the Chancellor is behaving like a politician this afternoon. That was basis of the Leader of the Opposition's critique. The Chancellor is behaving like a politician and he is certainly behaving like the chairman of the Labour general election campaign—there is no doubt about that.

Let us put all that we heard from the Chancellor in a political and financial context. In terms of the expenditure that has been announced today, he is devoting five times as much financial priority to tax reductions as he is to investments in health and education. That is the truth of the matter. That comes on the back of a four-year Parliament in which, with a colossal parliamentary majority, for the first half of that Parliament he stuck to Conservative spending plans that his predecessor said on air in an interview the other day he would not have stuck to. As a result, we have had persistent underfunding in vital public services. So before the Chancellor blows his own trumpet to such a huge extent, let us remember the truth of the matter and the context against which this pre-election Budget must be judged.

Let us also consider a few facts. Secondary class sizes are at their highest since 1979; the number of people waiting to see a hospital consultant is higher now than when this Government came to office; police numbers are down by 3,000 and violent crime is up; public transport has effectively been immobilised in many areas; and last year—this is a terrible reflection on modern society—there were a record number of winter deaths among pensioners in this country. Those are the facts, and that is the backdrop against which the reality of the Budget and the looming general election should be judged.

There are measures to welcome. I do not think anyone in the House of any political party could fail to agree with the Chancellor when he rightly spoke about social policy and the need to tackle the absolute evil that is the drugs problem in our society. Additional hope and help for families are important. The greater emphasis on individual savings accounts is welcome. However, we must look at the detail of the social policies so that we are clear and specific about the extent to which we might end up loading extra costs on people and organisations, not least small businesses.

As for our hospitals, schools, pensioners and the fight against crime, so much more could have been done if only the Government had not displayed such a poverty of ambition over the past four years. That is the truth of the matter. We need front-line police on the streets and in communities, preventing as well as detecting crime.

The Chancellor has succeeded in reducing the Conservative deficit and replacing it with a Labour war chest. Yet spending on all the major heads of public services has been squeezed savagely as a result. He said that it is right to choose the prudent course for Britain. I know that he is fond of the word "prudent", because he uses it often. Such has been his prudence that official figures show that spending as a proportion of national income on schools, hospitals and pensioners is lower under this Government than it was under the previous Conservative Government. That is an undeniable fact.

What was missing from the Budget? I raised the countryside and the plight of the farmers with the Prime Minister earlier, but the Chancellor did not have an extra word—far less an extra penny—for the agricultural community. Although we welcomed the additional compensation, the Government have to understand that it is not just the farmers who are suffering considerable knock-on consequences and losses because of the foot and mouth crisis. I appreciate that Governments have never paid compensation for so-called consequential losses, but these are unprecedented times and precedent must not be an excuse for inaction. I hope that the Government will reconsider that issue as a matter of urgency, because the knock-on effect goes further than our rural communities. For sad reasons, the crisis is uniting urban and rural Britain, because no one is immune from the effect of the catastrophe. The Government have to address that.

Surely the mark of a society is what sense of opportunity it gives its youngsters and how much security it offers the most elderly and vulnerable. There was nothing today about the imposition of tuition fees. Like me, the Chancellor of the Exchequer represents a Scottish constituency and is a Scot. He must know what the figures reflect. The statistics show that student applications in Scotland are increasing, which is a result of the partnership Government in Edinburgh—at the insistence of the Liberal Democrats—abolishing student tuition fees.

The story elsewhere in the United Kingdom is that such applications are decreasing. Youngsters—I spoke to some in Devon at the end of last week—tell us that they cannot envisage taking up a university or college course because they know that they will take their first step on the job ladder saddled with £12,000 to £16,000 of debt. There was not a word about that in the Budget, despite all the money that is available. It would cost £0.7 billion to get rid of student tuition fees for Britain as a whole. The Chancellor has been boasting to us of the extent of the funds at his disposal, but he has chosen not to do that.

That matter is at one end of the age spectrum; at the other end is long-term residential care for the elderly. Again as a result of Liberal Democrat insistence,

the Scottish Parliament and Executive have committed themselves to free provision of such care. The situation is not the same elsewhere in the country. That is what we can do when we are given the opportunity. The big choice that the country faces will provide a real chance for real change in, probably, a few weeks' time, and that chance comes not from an over-hyped pre-election Budget, but from an honest, rational and sincere Liberal Democrat alternative.

5 pm

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I am grateful to have the chance to speak in this debate. I want to talk in particular about the many benefits that the Budget holds for women and families. The Liberal Democrats have tried to depict it as a purely tax-cutting Budget, instead of looking at the tangible benefits that it provides. For me, the essential point is that it redistributes wealth, including, in part, a transfer from the wallet to the purse or, to be more accurate, from the Coutts bank account to the purse.

I shall consider some of the significant changes which have already been greatly welcomed, particularly by women in my constituency. There has been criticism of the working families tax credit and the child care tax credit, but they are some of the most important benefits that the Government have already given people in my constituency. Some 3,200 families in Northampton already receive the working families tax credit, and many of them also receive the child care tax credit. I have heard stories from women who receive those benefits which leave me in no doubt that they are one of the Government's flagships and have probably done more to change the living standards and lives of women and children than almost anything else.

The Conservatives have pledged to destroy these benefits, but I do not think that they have even begun to comprehend what they plan to do. I have talked to women in my constituency who, having applied for the new deal, are better off by £60 or £65 a week because their child care is paid for and they can get out to work. Now that they have had a taste of economic independence, a threat to send them back to the kitchen spells absolute catastrophe.

The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have not got their heads round the fact that the tax credits benefit not only traditional communities with high unemployment, but areas such as my constituency, which has long had high employment, but where many families have split up and there are lone parents who need to go back to work. I went to a reception for lone parents and met a woman whose child had been at music class with my own child two years ago. She had then been happily married with a mortgage and a car. Two years later, she had lost all that, but she was benefiting from the new deal and receiving the working families tax credit, so she had been able to get her life back on course. The Conservatives need to understand that family breakdown changes many of the dynamics in society, and we have rightly reflected that in the tax and benefits structure.

It is no good the Conservatives saying that the Budget measures are merely for the election. Last weekend, I was talking to people in my constituency, and one woman said that she had already switched her loyalty from the Conservatives because of the effects of the package of the working families tax credit, the child care tax credit and the new deal. That is a sign of the dynamic for change that can be achieved through the proper use of the tax and benefits structure which the Government have begun.

Increases in benefits have been announced, and I shall refer especially to the child care tax credit. The increase will be a real help for women who need money to pay for child care. The expense of child care is one of the greatest barriers faced by women who wish to work, or who want to get a reasonable job instead of a small part-time job.

Yesterday—can I say Baroness Jay, Mr. Deputy Speaker, or am I not allowed to mention her in that way? I cannot remember.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): It is indeed in order to refer to Baroness Jay as a noble Lady in the other place.

Ms Keeble: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Baroness Jay visited a local nursery in my constituency. We saw—it was fantastic—an independent nursery sharing premises with a state primary school, and providing the wrap-around care that the public sector is not able to provide yet. The nursery has a full waiting list for babies—for the smallest children—until spring 2002. That is a measure of the demand for quality child care.

The increase in the child care tax credit will be important in ensuring that women can afford quality child care, which is expensive. It will be important also in giving women the chance to go to work. Given the national child care strategy, the new deal, the working families tax credit and the child care tax credit, and because of the improvements that have been announced this afternoon, many more women will have the chance of working and achieving economic independence. The Conservative party will have no chance in future if it thinks that it will take these opportunities away from women.

I welcome, as I am sure will my constituents, the increase in the children's tax credit, which will be up to £520 a year. There has been discussion of whether the tax credit has been claimed; criticism has appeared in newspapers relating to confusion. I can say from constituency experience that it is a greatly appreciated tax credit. I am sure that the improvements will be welcomed and equally appreciated.

When the tax credit was first being advertised on the radio, I knocked on doors in my constituency to ascertain whether the advertising was effective. I found that people had heard the radio advertisements, had obtained the application pack from the Inland Revenue, had completed the forms and had returned the pack. They were quick off the starting blocks. They were quick as well to understand the benefits that the tax credit would offer them. I am sure that the improvement of the child credit system, along with improved child benefit, will be much appreciated by many families in my constituency.

I welcome the improvements in maternity leave and maternity pay. They seem to have come remarkably soon after the ending of consultation on these matters, which was only yesterday. I sent a response from my constituency. I can hope only that it had some influence on today's announcement.

It was apparent from a consultation meeting and a questionnaire in my constituency that the main priority for women was to see an improvement in maternity pay

[Ms Keeble]

so that they did not have a sudden dip in income after so many weeks at 80 or 90 per cent. They wished to receive more for the whole of their maternity leave, which they wished to be longer. I am extremely pleased that both aspects have been dealt with by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor this afternoon.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): I agree with my hon. Friend's acclamation for increases in the children's tax credit and other tax credits. However, does she agree that the problem with trying to alleviate child poverty through a system of tax credits is that it leads to relatively deeper poverty for the children of women who are unable to go to work, either because they believe that their children are too young to leave or for other reasons? Although the tax credit does well by women who are able to return to work, I believe—I hope that my hon. Friend does—that women with children under five should have a choice. If it is good for middle-class women to stay at home with their toddlers, working-class women should be offered a genuine choice as well.

Ms Keeble: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and agree with her. Improvements to child benefit are also important, even though they are small in relation to a full income.

In my constituency, the benefits of the new deal for lone parents are particularly important. It as an area of high employment and, because there are jobs, it is possible to get women into work. A lot of my support for the new deal for lone parents in an affluent area comes from my experience of chairing a jobs and industry committee for a council in an inner-London borough, when I supported training courses with child care for women in the inner city. When I was in that position, and later as leader of the council, I found it a bitter experience to close those courses because of cuts in local government spending made by the Conservatives. They had no commitment to deal with unemployment and were not prepared to put money in on the same scale as this Government have. They were not prepared to look at the care offered by people such as personal advisers in the Employment Service, who deal with the particular difficulties that women have and the barriers that stop them getting into work.

My bitter experiences—shared, I am sure, by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) in her local government experience then and now—have made me supportive of the Government's measures. I recognise that there are clear differences between the inner cities and seats like mine, and I hope that my hon. Friend recognises that that is a genuine sentiment.

Support for two weeks' paternity pay is strong in my constituency. There is a feeling that times are changing and that men want to get involved in the care of their children as much as women do. Parents are not always married, which is their choice. The Opposition do not approve of supporting unmarried couples, but it is right that we should support mothers and fathers in the arrangements that they make for their children. That is also important throughout the schooling system. When I went round schools in my constituency, the main reasons that head teachers gave for special needs in schools included behavioural difficulties associated with repeated family breakdowns. The more we encourage stability and the involvement of fathers with their children, the more communities such as those in Northampton, North will appreciate the benefits.

Last year, the Chancellor had small items in his Budget that he did not mention. One was the cut in VAT on sanitary protection. This year, I believe, he did not mention the cut in VAT on children's car seats. That is a small thing but, for many families, it will be a welcome tax relief on something that they regard as essential for their children's well-being.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am listening closely to the hon. Lady's oration. Given the importance of preparing for the future, how is the objective of prudence compatible with the reality of a halved savings ratio?

Ms Keeble: That is a great issue, which the Opposition always bring up, so I always check the figures beforehand. It is true that, in the first years of the Government, the savings ratio declined. It was then projected to stabilise and start to improve again.

The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) should consider two additional factors. In his speech, the Chancellor gave the figures for the number of people who have taken out individual savings accounts. I have certainly heard people in the industry say that ISAs are another of the Government's success stories.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Lady cannot be serious.

Ms Keeble: We have many. ISAs have succeeded in attracting people to save, over and above those who had previously saved in TESSAs and PEPs. I have not studied the Institute for Public Policy Research publication in detail, but it refers to the number of families who have no assets. It is right that the Government should take account of that end of the market as well, and encourage saving among people who have not done so previously. I welcome the Government's emphasis on that, and not just on the earnings:savings ratio.

Pensioners are a group who have been strongly encouraged to save. The consultation in my constituency on the pensioners tax credit was extremely successful. The only question from pensioners concerned why it would take so long to introduce the tax credit. Because many people in my constituency have had the good fortune to be in work for most of their adult lives, they have access to private or occupational savings schemes, and some derive their income from savings. They welcome the fact that their prudence and thrift will be rewarded by 60p in every pound of their savings above the level of the state pension.

People might say that that applies to all pensioners, which is right, but women tend to live longer than men, and any measure that helps pensioners will particularly help women. For women who have experienced considerable difficulties in retirement, the introduction of the pensioners tax credit will provide substantial help. I hope that, after the announcement today, the measure will be unfolded quickly, with all the necessary publicity and simplification of the application forms, so that pensioners in Northampton, North will soon feel the benefit.

In summary, the Budget has huge benefits to offer to families, and will be welcomed wholeheartedly by many families in my constituency. The Budget contains particular benefits for women, and by providing extra money for hospitals and schools, it will address some of the priority services that are highly valued by the whole community, but especially by women voters, as research has shown. I commend the Budget to the House.

5.17 pm

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): The hon. Member for Northampton, North (Ms Keeble) seemed to be saying in the last part of her speech, in answer to an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), "Don't confuse me with the figures." I feel some sympathy for the hon. Lady. Like the rest of us, she had to wait for the real figures on personal savings to come out in the Red Book. No doubt she had been told by her researcher or her Whip that she should include in her speech a picture that personal savings were going up from a very low level, but as we discovered today, they have gone down from a very low level. She cannot get around that.

Ms Keeble: Perhaps I can help the hon. Gentleman. I said, first, that the figures initially showed a reduction, but later showed an increase. Yes, the projected figures went down for a while, but the figures last year showed a rise. Secondly, there is a major issue in relation to families who have no assets. The publication by the IPPR shows the significance of that, and it is one of the issues that the Government are addressing.

Sir Michael Spicer: The hon. Lady has forgotten the end of the Mexican wave, when the figures went down again. Those figures are in the Red Book, where she can examine them.

The other figure which the hon. Lady may have been told wrongly by her Whip was the figure for productivity rates. It has been the Government's message for a long time that productivity rates are stable and rising. As has been shown again today, however, the rates have been falling since 1997. That is a great indictment of the Government, to which I should like to address much of my speech.

In the light of the explosive nature of the Government's spending plans, which, contrary to what the Liberals are saying, are massive, many commentators—most recently, the International Monetary Fund—said that it would not be prudent of the Chancellor to cut taxes at all in the Budget.

While I am on that subject, I have a question for the Minister of State. If he can answer it now, I shall be grateful. Will it be feasible or even legal under European arrangements to carry out what the Chancellor has announced in respect of VAT on derelict land? I think that a similar scheme was proposed a year ago for churches—my memory may be wrong—but that the European Commission refused permission. I imagine that that is why the arrangement announced today for churches is based on a grant rather than on VAT reduction. Is it not likely that the same European Commission ruling will apply to the reduction of VAT in respect of derelict land, and also to excise reductions?

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): I seem to recall that we heard the same noises about VAT on fuel before the last election. The then Conservative Government kept telling us that we could not reduce VAT on fuel, but we did so.

Sir Michael Spicer: Perhaps I should slightly rephrase my question. Does the Chancellor have the European Commission's permission? Has he been to Brussels to check with his masters there that he is allowed to reduce VAT in respect of derelict land? Surely the Minister accepts that that is exactly what happened last year with regard to a VAT reduction for church renovation and that permission was not given. Will he admit that that is why assistance had to be introduced in another form?

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is unfortunate that the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing? The Minister of State is obviously oblivious of something that is well known to the parliamentary spokesman for the Church Commissioners, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell), who has made the matter clear. *[Interruption.]* The Minister can chunter from a sedentary position, but the hon. Member for Middlesbrough made it clear that the European Commission did not give approval to the VAT reduction for church repairs. If he did not know that, it is about time that he did. *[Interruption.]*

Sir Michael Spicer: I hear the Minister thanking my hon. Friend.

Mr. Battle: I was not thanking him. I was informing him.

Sir Michael Spicer: The Minister appears to be getting excited. Does he accept that I have described correctly the position regarding the attempt to reduce VAT on church renovations? A Minister went to Brussels, permission was refused and help has now been introduced in another manner. Surely it is worth asking whether permission has been sought in advance for the announcement of a VAT reduction in respect of derelict land, which has been presented as a certainty.

Mr. Mark Hendrick (Preston): I think that the confusion was about whether churches could be included in the scope of suitability for VAT reductions. The 5 per cent. level at which the grant is aimed does not contravene any European Union legislation.

Sir Michael Spicer: I am not saying that any laws have been broken. I am suggesting merely that permission was not given for the reduction of VAT on church renovation, which had been announced previously. I was asking a simple and rather innocent question about whether such permission had been granted in advance in relation to the arrangement announced today, which has been presented as a fact and entered into the Budget calculation. I hope that the answer will be yes and that the Chancellor has permission. If not, the Government may look a little foolish on that matter as well.

[Sir Michael Spicer]

The effect of today's speech must be that the Monetary Policy Committee will be unlikely to reduce interest rates in the near future, especially with the current tightness of labour markets. The distinction that the Chancellor makes between current spending and capital spending in his so-called golden rule appears less and less credible. As the International Monetary Fund has repeatedly said, especially recently, the growth of private finance initiative arrangements renders almost meaningless the distinction between capital and current spending. Making such a distinction is dangerous for managing the economy.

Public spending is at the centre of the debate on not only the Budget but the Government's entire economic strategy. Current public spending was planned to increase by some £77 billion in the next five years: from £370 billion in 2001–02 to £447 billion in 2005–06. If my calculations are right—Ministers are entitled to intervene and say that they are wrong—we must add another £10 billion to the £77 billion. That means a total increase on current public spending of £87 billion or approximately 25 per cent. in the next five years.

Like all socialist Governments, the Government have embarked in the past few years on a massive programme of public expenditure. That has already led to much higher taxes.

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that even on his projected figures for future capital expenditure—

Sir Michael Spicer: Current expenditure.

Mr. Purchase: I am sorry, I thought that the hon. Gentleman said capital expenditure. However, the same point applies. Debt repayment has made room for lowering year-on-year recurrent expenditure.

Sir Michael Spicer: Surpluses, if one believes in them, rely heavily on fiscal drag. They prove my point about the vast increases in taxation: they do not appear from nowhere. There is no dispute between us about the fact that public expenditure is rising fast. For a surplus to exist on top of that expenditure, there must be an even greater increase in taxation.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether we can have some protection from the Chair? Several documents, to which the press notices for the Budget refer and which, according to normal practice and procedure, should be made available in the Vote Office, have not been provided. We have been told that they are not likely to be made available. They are: REV BN 6, REV BN 8, REV BN 12, REV BN 13, REV BN 17, REV BN 18, REV BN 19, BN 63/01 and BN 73/01. That is a serious matter. Much of the detail of the Budget statement is hidden in the press notices. It is essential that hon. Members have an opportunity to study them.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that I cannot give him an immediate answer. I have no means of knowing why documents are not available, if that is the case. However, Government Front-Bench Members will have heard the hon. Gentleman's comments, and I am sure that Mr. Speaker will want to ascertain what has happened so that the matter can be remedied as quickly as possible.

Sir Michael Spicer: The Government are engaged on a massive expenditure programme, which is accompanied by a massive taxation increase, higher interest rates than would otherwise be necessary and, as the Red Book establishes, falling personal savings and productivity. Perhaps the missing documents would further confirm that.

The long-term effects are likely to be profound. Earlier this year, a fascinating but deeply disturbing study was produced on public expenditure in the 14 most economically advanced countries. The work was published in a book entitled "Public Spending in the 20th Century: A Global Perspective". The main work was done by two economists: Vito Tanzi, who has been director of the fiscal affairs department of the International Monetary Fund since 1981, and Ludger Schuknecht, the principal economist in the fiscal policies division of the European central bank in Frankfurt.

I want to develop for the House the analysis that those economists undertook. They began by showing that public expenditure throughout the 14 western countries rose fairly gradually during the first half of the 20th century. The massive explosion in spending started throughout those countries in the mid-1960s. For example, table 1.1 shows that the average rate of public spending in 1960 was 28 per cent. of gross national product, and that by 1980 it had risen to 41.9 per cent., which is close to a 100 per cent. increase. By the late 1990s, the rate had gone up to close to 50 per cent. That is a massive increase.

Ms Keeble: On the savings ratio, which the hon. Gentleman has been going on about, I have now had a chance to have a look at the new edition of the Red Book. On page 170, we see that although the ratio went down for a while, it stood at 3.75 per cent. last year, is 4.75 per cent. this year and is projected to reach 5 per cent. and 5.25 per cent. in the next two years.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): The hon. Lady should look at last year's Red Book.

Ms Keeble: Yes, but will the hon. Gentleman accept that, although the rate went down for a while, it is now going up and that that trend is projected to continue?

Sir Michael Spicer: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention, because she confirms the fact that the rate has gone down. It has been going down, give or take a few years, throughout this Government's term of office. The projections that are being made are a matter of hope.

Ms Keeble: Up.

Sir Michael Spicer: Well, the "up" bits are the projections, the forecasts, the hope, the aspirations. They have nothing to do with the facts. Governments can put any figure that they want on personal savings projections in the Red Book if that is what they are inclined to do.

However, the fact is that, throughout the period, taken on average, personal savings have been low and are going down.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): It might be of assistance to the hon. Lady if she realised that she needed to look at last year's Red Book to see how those forecasts have changed and been revised downwards.

Sir Michael Spicer: That is very helpful. The aspirations may well go down. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady keeps putting her thumb up, but she should put her thumb down, because that is the direction that personal savings have taken. As my hon. Friend has just mentioned, the revisions have gone downwards rather than upwards every time they have come out.

I was making the point that there was an explosion in public spending throughout the western world from the 1960s to the end of the 20th century. Britain followed much of that pattern, except for the fact that, during the 1980s and very early 1990s, we got our public spending under some sort of control. We left the flock and showed a downward trend in public spending relative to GDP during that period, but the rate subsequently started to increase rather rapidly.

The effect of the public expenditure increase was pretty benign in the first part of the 20th century in terms of economic growth, employment and social welfare. In all countries—I am not making a party political point here—the turning point came in the mid-1960s, just as public expenditure began to take off. The turning point came in terms of the effect of public expenditure from the mid-1960s onwards. From then on, growth rates—for instance—began substantially to slow down across the board in those countries, except, latterly, in the United States, where public expenditure is lowest, relative to other countries.

Unemployment, especially in high public expenditure countries such as France and Germany, began to rise dramatically as public expenditure began to rise dramatically. Perhaps most interestingly of all, income distribution, which, in the latter half of the past century was the primary reason for the explosion of public expenditure, especially on social services and public health, was brought virtually to a standstill. There has been almost a negative effect on income distribution as public expenditure has expanded for the precise objective of spreading income more widely.

As the authors say on page 96 of the study:

"When the total tax burden becomes a large share of the country's GDP, it is no longer very progressive and, equally, when public transfers become very large, they tend to be poorly targeted."

That adds up to a picture that is familiar to Conservative Members. When the state takes over, everyone, after a certain point, becomes poorer, especially the poor themselves. An example of that is the virtual collapse of this country's public services. We have the worst health service, the worst transport system, the lowest state pensions and, arguably, the worst education system in the western world. Examples have already been given for education and other sectors.

In health and with respect to guaranteed pensions, we need an average percentage improvement not of 5, 10 or even 20 per cent., but one that would probably stretch into the hundreds. Given the exhaustion of the taxpayer, that can be achieved only by the application of a mix of private and public resources with the taxpayer supporting those who cannot, for whatever reason, buy their own insurance policies. On health, the necessary massive injection of extra private resources would not only improve the motivation and morale of those working in the service, but achieve real accountability to the customers, which no amount of Government-run consultative bodies could ever achieve.

Sir Raymond Whitney (Wycombe): Is my hon. Friend aware that, on present NHS funding, it would be possible to give every man, woman and child in this country a voucher for £800 to go towards health care and still leave an adequate reserve for national priorities at the centre?

Sir Michael Spicer: I thank my hon. Friend for providing that interesting figure, which very much supports my argument.

Ms Keeble: Does not the hon. Gentleman accept that it is nonsense to say that the health service could be funded out of private means? That £800 would not go very far. For example, a constituent of mine was having particular problems getting care and, in 15 months, he spent £6,200 on cancer treatment. In terms of treatment that is needed, £800 is nothing. The need for equity and access is what makes the NHS so crucial to our country.

Sir Michael Spicer: I could never expect the hon. Lady to accept what I am saying because she is a member of a socialist party and that is her philosophy, but I ask her to think about the fact that I am referring to a mixture of public and private resources and that such a mix occurs in all western countries, which have far better health services than we do.

Let us talk about France, not America. Precisely because the French are applying private as well as public resources in a way that we are not even contemplating, especially because we have a socialist Government who will never achieve that, they get far better quality and put far more resources into their health services than we can possibly put in off the back of the taxpayer, which is what is proposed here. I cannot hope that the hon. Lady or her party will ever be imaginative about the matter, but I assure her that that is what is happening in every single country in the western world. They have health services of far better quality than ours and that is the way that we shall have to go eventually.

Of course that could never happen under a socialist Government. There was a brief moment when we thought that something like it might emerge, but the sacking of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) put paid to that. It will be left to a Conservative Government to pick up the pieces and reform our public services, which we began to do with our productive industry and services in the 1980s. Today's Budget is a move in precisely the opposite direction.

5.40 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Even as we speak, my colleagues are surging through the television studios hailing a Budget that provides a marvellous election-winning platform. It is a

[Ms Diane Abbott]

masterly Budget, presented in a masterly fashion, and it is no surprise that Opposition Members are struggling to attack it.

Having sat through at least 14 years of Budget statements, I know better than to reach a final conclusion before reading the finer print. Any more detailed comments on this Budget will have to wait until I have had time to study the Red Book. I can say, however, that some changes in principle will be welcomed by my constituents in Hackney, notably the extension of maternity pay from 18 to 26 weeks. I speak as one who was not given one day of maternity leave from the House when I had my son in 1991. As we were in the run-up to a general election, there was no time for maternity leave. I voted here three days before my son was born, and I was voting again eight days after his birth. Nevertheless, I welcome the extension.

I also welcome the principle of providing paid adoption leave, and two weeks' paid paternity leave for working fathers. The extension of the right to adoptive parents is a long-awaited change. I welcome, too, what appears to be a move towards changing the structure of value added tax to allow free access to museums.

There are many changes in principle to welcome, but I must tell my hon. Friends who will welcome—and have already welcomed—the cascade of children's tax credits, working families tax credits, pensioners tax credits and other tax credits that, sadly, a system of relieving poverty through such credits cannot reach millions of poor people in constituencies such as mine, particularly single mothers of very young children. It is easy enough to say that those ladies—those women—should leave their children aged one, two or three and find jobs, but it is easier said than done.

As I have said in our debates since 1997, at the end of the day we want, as a Government, a structure that allows poor single mothers a choice. Of course the majority of single mothers whom I meet in Hackney want to go out to work, but they should not be driven out to work by a system of benefits and tax credits that, bit by bit, forces single mothers who have young children and cannot work into a position that makes them relatively worse off than they would be otherwise. Millions of people up and down the country did not vote Labour to see the creation of a structure widening the gulf between working single parents and single parents who choose not to work.

I note from the small print that we are introducing compulsory interviews about work for all single mothers, however young their children may be. I realise that such interviews are supposed to acquaint single mothers with the benefits of work, but people do not need to go to the dole office for an interview to find out how much better off they might be if they worked.

Practical issues, such as training, access to jobs and child care, stop very many single mothers in areas such as Hackney from working. As I have said before, underlying the thinking of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, who is the most modern of Chancellors—he is a masterly Chancellor, who has presented a masterly Budget in a masterly fashion—there is a very old-fashioned notion. It is the belief that there are the deserving poor—those who are prepared to leave their children, however young, and go out to work—and the undeserving poor, such as women who choose to stay with their children at least to school age. I tell him and my other Front-Bench colleagues that the Victorian distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor which is embedded in the tax credit system does not reflect well on a 21st-century Labour Government. *[Interruption.]*

In the 14 years in which I have been an hon. Member, I have always striven to do my job. My job is not to say that which is popular—or that which will secure me advancement or the sunny smiles of the Chancellor of the Exchequer—but to speak up for my constituents in Hackney. That is what I am paid to do, and that is all that I can do. In the words of Martin Luther, I can do no better.

I should like to deal with a matter in which very many hon. Members will not be much interested, although it is a passionate concern for those of us who live in London. That matter is public transport, which is a key factor in considering economic growth, helping poor communities and looking to the future. For Londoners, the future of the London underground is a key issue.

Extraordinarily, given the range of his Budget speech, the Chancellor did not find time to touch on that issue. In the stirring passages at the beginning of his speech, he reminded us of his £23 billion surplus. However, that will make Londoners wonder why it is so difficult to find a way in which to fund properly, under proper democratic arrangements, a 21st-century transport system for London.

As some hon. Members may not use public transport in London—perhaps they drive—I should remind the House that public transport is more important to people in London than it is to those in other big cities. Public transport in London is not only a means of transporting people from place to place, but a key issue. Transport links are key to regenerating communities. No other single action could do more to regenerate my constituency in Hackney than for the Government to find the money to build the Chelsea-Hackney line, which would produce for the first time an underground station in the centre of my constituency and link us to the Jubilee line. Public transport is about regeneration. It is about people's lives—getting them to jobs—and about urban redevelopment.

What action has there been? Last year, as part of fulfilling our manifesto commitments, a Labour Government restored local government to London and gave us a Mayor. Although, sadly, there were a few hiccups along the way, finally, right triumphed and the people's choice, my colleague the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), became the very first duly elected Mayor.

The future of London Transport was the central policy issue in that mayoral campaign. It was at the heart of everyone's manifesto—Labour, Tory and Liberal Democrat. There can be no doubt that, in that election, the majority of Londoners, including very many Conservative-voting ones, voted emphatically against the Government's proposed system of public-private partnership for renovating and improving the underground.

Before colleagues say that I am old fashioned and stuck in the past and ask me what is wrong with private investment in these big public sector projects, I say that no one is opposed in principle to private investment, least of all my colleague the hon. Member for Brent, East. It is, after all, a matter of new Labour, new Ken Livingstone. He is the darling of the City and of business. They are

wholly behind him in his opposition to the Government's PPP proposals. It is not a question of opposing private investment. The point at issue in the mayoral campaign, and in the fraught negotiations in the run-up to the general election, is how that private investment should be structured.

Treasury Ministers, as opposed to Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, have proposed the system of public-private partnership. Every commentator has said that the proposed system has all the worst characteristics of that deployed in the disastrous privatisation of British Rail. If the system is introduced, Londoners will find themselves in the same position as rail travellers before the Hatfield crash.

If a safety risk such as a broken rail arises, there will be no one in charge of transport in London able to deal with the problem immediately. The people responsible will have to talk to contractors, who will talk to subcontractors, who will perform a survey and then perhaps hire other subcontractors. In the end, the problem will be put right, but the resolution of safety risks will take an indirect and circuitous route.

The Hatfield rail crash showed that the delays, the complications, and the layers of bureaucracy introduced by privatisation can mean that safety problems are addressed too late to save lives. The Treasury advocates that London's transport system should be split up between three different companies. Unified management control will be lost, but the Treasury is trying to impose that structure on Londoners.

I do not accuse all my colleagues on the Treasury Bench of acting in bad faith. Ministers in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—and especially the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill)—have negotiated with a view to cutting the best deal for Londoners. My hon. Friend is a loyal member of the Government, and a Londoner, and he negotiated in good faith with my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East and the city's transport commissioner, Mr. Bob Kiley. The negotiations went on with the utmost energy and dispatch for many weeks. All sides believed that a deal had been reached.

Everyone wants there to be private investment in the tube, but we do not want the PPP to replicate the worst features of rail privatisation by not allowing the unified managerial control of repairs and safety precautions that will secure the safety of Londoners on the underground. Ten days or a couple of weeks ago, after weeks of negotiations, the Department thought that a deal had been reached, but then the Treasury stepped in. A few days ago, it said that the negotiations had gone on long enough and that nothing else would do but the PPP system originally proposed.

I accept that token concessions have been made.

Mr. Purchase: I am loth to interrupt my hon. Friend's interesting saga, and no one will feel anything but sympathy with the proposition that all possible measure must be taken to prevent fatal tragedies, but she predicated her remarks on the fact that the Treasury has a surplus of £23 billion. I may be mistaken—it would not be unusual—but that revenue has been accrued by different means. Some of the means were planned, and some were accidental or fortuitous windfalls. When the £23 billion has been spent on recurring expenditure, will my hon. Friend say what we should do for an encore?

Ms Abbott: I shall put my hon. Friend out of his misery. I am not saying that we should spend the £23 billion on renovating transport in London. I am arguing that the Government's PPP, which so resembles that used in the privatisation of British Rail, will mean that more Government money will have to be given in subsidy to private contractors. The Government do not draw attention to the fact that the Treasury is prepared to put in more public subsidy simply to bolster its stubborn insistence that only its preferred PPP option will do. My hon. Friend may rest assured that I am not attempting to lay a finger on the £23 billion, but my remarks about the future of London Underground had to be put in the context of public spending policy as a whole.

Mr. Purchase: I understand.

Ms Abbott: As I said, successful and positive negotiations had been held between the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the mayoral representatives when the Treasury stepped in at the last minute and said, "Our way, or the highway." Some token concessions had been made: Mr. Kiley will sit on a few more boards and will have the theoretical power to remove the chiefs of some of the privately contracted infrastructure companies. Those contractors have squealed about the concessions, but the fundamental issue—of unified management control of repair and safety issues—remains.

The excitement of today's Budget speech will die away, and a general election is expected in the spring. Londoners will focus as never before on what one of the most successful Chancellors in Labour party history has chosen to do with regard to transport in London. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor appears to have obstructed a constructive conclusion to negotiations on the future of public transport in the capital.

No one is asking the Government to spend a penny more on transport in London, and no one excludes the use of private investment. However, Londoners, the Mayor and the transport commissioner are all saying that there is a better, cheaper and safer way to structure transport in London. Londoners have made their preference clear over and over again. What is the point of devolving power to Londoners if the Treasury insists on retaining power at the centre when it comes to the most important element of London's economic regeneration? The Treasury is blocking the expressed will of Londoners, and of their Mayor and transport commissioner. When the glitter of today's Budget, with its masterfully presented cascade of tax credits, has faded from Londoners' memories, people will focus on the question of transport and the Treasury's insistence on its PPP model.

I have sat through Budget speeches in this Chamber over the past 14 years, and I know better than to jump to conclusions about how a Budget will turn out until I have studied its fine print. However, I can tell hon. Friends on the Treasury Bench that Ministers must be seen to act in good faith on the future of the London underground. They must not act in a partisan and arbitrary way.

The new Ken Livingstone scoured the world to find the best public transport manager, and he found Bob Kiley. Mr. Kiley is not some terrible left winger: I understand

[Ms Abbott]

that he used to be a member of the CIA. That must surely endear him to Conservative Members, although some of us are worried that he may have seen our files. None the less, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East, the Mayor of London, went out of his way to find the most technically proficient, experienced and successful manager of public transport in the world.

Londoners have chosen their Mayor; he has chosen a transport commissioner. Londoners are not asking the Government for more money; they are asking them to put aside past animosities, grudges and stubbornness. They are asking the Government to put the interests of Londoners first and allow these negotiations to come to a successful conclusion—so that there is a way of financing the long-desired renovation and upgrading of the London underground that sits with the desires of Londoners and of London's transport commissioner.

6 pm

Sir Raymond Whitney (Wycombe): The hon. Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) says that she speaks for herself and her constituents, and I am sure that the House would agree wholeheartedly with that. She certainly does not automatically seek the approbation of the Chancellor of the Exchequer or any other Member of her Front Bench. She talks about her details being held on file, but I suspect that the Labour party's headquarters at Millbank is more likely than the CIA to have a large file on her.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, in a brilliant reply to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, quoted, among other things, what the chairman of the general practitioners committee said about general practice being in crisis. We all know about the state of the health service in general from our local hospitals and consulting practices. Over the last quarter for which the figures are available, the waiting time between seeing the GP and hospital treatment has increased to 203.8 days—about seven months. Such a long waiting time would be incomprehensible and inconceivable in any equivalent industrialised country. It is on the state of the national health service, and the Government's attitude to it, that I wish to dwell.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer exultantly announced that over the next five years, health spending would increase by something like 50 per cent. However, that betrays either ignorance or a wilful determination not to understand the size of the problem. If we increased spending by 50 per cent. over the next five years, where would we be? Our health spending would still be £200 to £300 per head less than Germany's. We might just be at the level of the spending in France this year.

Over the next five years, health spending in France, Germany and all the other industrialised countries will not stand still. The gap will widen—indeed, it has been widening steadily over many years. Those countries spend so much more, and the Chancellor's proposals will not close the gap. Even those proposals, as the IMF has warned, represent a danger to our national finances. The right hon. Gentleman is sailing very close to the wind.

That issue underlines the need for new thinking in the structure of the national health service. I have been speaking about this ever since I was a junior Health Minister in the mid-1980s. We must go right back to the creation of the national health service to understand the extraordinary blight on thinking that this extraordinary institution has imposed on politicians of all parties.

The creation of a national health service, with its wonderful concept of health care free at the point of delivery, was an ambition shared by all the three major parties from before the first world war. The basic structure that was adopted in 1946 and put in place in April 1948 was based on the White Paper of 1944 introduced by Henry Willink, a Conservative Health Minister in the wartime coalition Government. Sadly, the idea of having everything free at the point of delivery was a flawed one.

Aneurin Bevan has been glorified as the architect of the health service—a highly contentious proposition. Yet only months after the creation of the national health service, even he complained about the

"cascades of medicine pouring down British throats."

In 1950, he wrote to the Cabinet:

"The position cannot be evaded that a nationally owned and administered hospital service will always involve a very considerable and expanding Exchequer outlay."

That is precisely what happened.

In 1949, the principle of totally free health care was abandoned, with the introduction of prescription charges. Bevan, with reluctance, went along with that. Two years later, when this fundamental problem was being revealed so that no one could deny it, and the Labour Government of the day introduced charges for spectacles and dentures, Mr. Bevan resigned. That was when he described the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Gaitskell, as a desiccated calculating machine.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am following my hon. Friend's analysis with fascination. I am sure that he is aware that quite recently the French health service was rated as the best in the world by a comprehensive and impartial survey. I know that he will be aware that French people pay when they go to their GP and are then refunded if appropriate, according to their level of income. In connection with his analysis of the development of charges post-Bevan, does my hon. Friend not think that that is an idea that any thinking person should consider?

Sir Raymond Whitney: My right hon. Friend will not be surprised to learn that that is precisely the path down which I hope to proceed, if you will allow me to, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am sure that we shall arrive at a joint conclusion.

After that, matters were very clear. Eventually, even the British Medical Association, normally the most conservative body involved in the development of medical care, decided that something had to be done. In 1970, it set up a committee under Dr. Ivor Jones, which concluded that the wonderful ideal of 1946 was unattainable and unrealisable, given all the pressures that were growing in health care.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend's natural generosity of spirit should not be allowed to get the better of him. I understand why he makes some favourable reference to the late Aneurin Bevan. However, will he put it on the record that in 1952 the late Iain Macleod famously denounced the Bevan approach and attacked him

specifically for the crude, vulgar and intemperate speech to which the House of Commons had listened? Does my hon. Friend recall that, along with another great parliamentarian and Minister, the late Enoch Powell, Macleod went on to pen a magnificent pamphlet with a radical view of the development of the health service and social services entitled "Social Services: Needs and Means"?

Sir Raymond Whitney: I must not allow my hon. Friend to lead me down the road of militant partisanship. I am strongly of the view that this is a national issue, although it has never been treated as one. Given the probable imminence of the general election and the fact that I shall not stand again, this is my last—I shall not say "despairing"—chance to get the matter looked at calmly, so I shall resist, up to a point, the temptation offered by my hon. Friend.

However, if my hon. Friend studies the pamphlet written by the late Enoch Powell—whose great qualities we all admire—he will find a brilliant analysis of the ills of the NHS in the mid 1960s, but no solution. Why not? Because in the first paragraph of the last chapter, Mr. Powell said, in effect, that the political situation in Britain was too difficult, so rationality had to go out of the window. That is the measure of the problem that we are dealing with. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to make that point.

I was referring to the Jones committee, which reported in April 1970 and recommended an insurance-based system—such as those used with considerable success in several countries. However, by that time, the wind in the BMA had changed; caution was back in and Dr. Jones and his crew were out. People of equal eminence to Dr. Jones received CBEs and knighthoods—he received nothing. The issue went quiet again—it was put back in its box.

Both parties staggered on with the old system until 1982, when the Central Policy Review Staff took the papers down and looked at the problem again; 12 years on, it was much greater than in 1970. The CPRS, too, produced the idea that there should be an insurance-based system that people should chip into. Again, there was horror. By that time, there was a Conservative Government. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) refers to the idea with horror in his book; that dreadful cat was nearly out of the bag, but he cheerfully reports how it was safely put back into the bag. The next year the CPRS was obliterated—it was suspended. I suspect that I, too, shall be suspended soon, because the subject is dangerous.

That is where we have arrived. Is there an answer? There must be one; we have to look at what other countries do. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) suggested, not only in France but in all the industrialised countries people make a contribution. That is understandable. What is more important to any of us than our health and that of our families? According to our circumstances—I shall discuss the very poor in a moment—we are very ready to chip in with £100 or £200 to bolster health care, whereas we all know that a rise in our taxes, by stealth, income tax or whatever, goes into a great pot and nothing seems to come out.

That could not have happened in 1946 because the personal disposable income of the average Briton was extremely low. If it was grossed up to today's money, it would be only about $5,000 a year at most—equivalent to the current national income per capita in Namibia or Gabon. In real terms, we are four or five times richer. By whatever statistical tricks one might play, we are manifestly much richer. Today's society is not the one for which the NHS was created.

We must thus ensure that the public understand what is happening. Very, very gradually, the penny is beginning to drop. In these days of speedy communication, when we all think that we know everything that happens in the world the day before yesterday—in Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe and so on—it is extraordinary that, somehow, we have kept what is going on in health care across the channel from the British people. I hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends will not engage in our other familiar debates—

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): Don't tempt us!

Sir Raymond Whitney: The idea that, because of disparity in expenditure, people should wait seven months, or even 18 months, for treatment is simply not comprehended in those countries. I accept that NHS spending is not necessarily inefficient. Inevitably, in private health care there are duplications.

We have 1.64 doctors per thousand; the Germans have 3.19. We have 4.5 nurses per thousand; the Germans have nine. On life expectancy at 60, the UK ranks 19th in the world—level with Turkey. There is nothing wrong with Turkey, but we might have assumed that our health service would have given us better provision. We are 14th in the Economist Intelligence Unit health rating system for European countries. That is a measure of how far we are behind. It is difficult to understand why politicians will not recognise that.

There has been an extraordinary political no-go zone for so long. However, I hope that, especially given the dangerous high-wire act that the Chancellor seems so ready to perform over the next couple of years, it will become clear that the situation cannot continue. To achieve the expenditure of continental countries—leaving aside that of the United States—would require an unbelievable and unsustainable burden of Treasury spending, even if we called it Treasury investment. We must, therefore, calmly say that although the NHS was a great idea in 1944 when the White Paper produced it, and that for more than 50 years, we have tried hard to make it work, Aneurin Bevan was right when he said that it would mean constantly expanding pressure on the Exchequer. We must have some new thinking. I do not think that is too much to ask.

6.18 pm

Mr. Ken Purchase (Wolverhampton, North-East): I add my congratulations to those offered to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on an extraordinarily clear and well put Budget speech. If we are to believe the newspapers, this may be the final Budget before the general election is called, so it is important to judge my right hon. Friend's speech in the context of his chancellorship in the longer term.

By any post-war reckoning, my right hon. Friend's chancellorship has been exceptional, although one would not expect the Opposition to reach that conclusion.

[Mr. Ken Purchase]

That is to be expected in the cut and thrust of politics. However, after the speech of the hon. Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney), who expresses himself so moderately, it is especially appropriate to point out that the people of this country will have seen that, over the past four years, successive Budgets have benefited, by and large, not just some people—not just a few of them; not just most of them—but the whole country. The whole country has benefited from the Chancellor's stewardship of our taxes and revenues.

Budgets always take time to be fully and properly understood and to mature in their widest effects, and we shall have to suck this one and see, as we do on every occasion, but in the fulness of time, we shall find that the nation has prospered, that its taxation revenue has been spent wisely and that people have benefited from a range of services under the Budgets of my right hon. Friend's chancellorship. One of his themes today was investment in public services. People will see that services are improving, and I shall refer later to the national health service. I accept that that is vexatious, but it is not beyond our wit to improve it.

I regret that the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) has left the Chamber. He always makes an interesting contribution, if sometimes one that is rather eccentric and extremely right wing. He would certainly have qualified for a job as Hoover's right-hand man in the CIA and would have sorted out the liberal wets on the Conservative Benches; he would not have bothered getting round to us. The hon. Gentleman made his usual extraordinary contribution to our debate.

I must confess in the hon. Gentleman's absence that we share one thing in common—a love of the countryside around West Worcestershire. The Malvern hills are a beautiful part of the country. I sometimes think that if the hon. Gentleman admired the countryside around him as much as I do, he would spend a little less time worrying about the international monetary scene and a little more on developing his soul, which would benefit us all enormously. None the less, his was an interesting contribution. I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman has gone because I want to deal with the savings ratio and I know that he would have interrupted me at least three or four times.

Mr. Bercow: We will do that.

Mr. Purchase: I thank the hon. Gentleman.

To rehearse the point about the savings ratio, it is a matter of agreement that savings tend to rise more steeply when people are concerned about their future prospects. That is a natural and normal response to a worsening economic scenario, when people decide that they need to put money away for a rainy day. If that goes too far, the savings ratio rises steeply as a consequence and there is a fall-off in demand, so the thought that we must save for a rainy day becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is, of course, vital that people save for a rainy day, because misfortunes that do not affect the population in general may fall on any family: it is always a wise precaution to try to make savings from our disposable incomes.

It is interesting that the savings ratio is now not such an important indicator as it used to be, in so far as people now have greater wealth in goods, houses and so on than has ever before been known in the history of the United Kingdom. For the past 20 years or so, people have recognised that they have the opportunity to reward themselves with a plethora of consumables and white goods that make our lives so much easier, so they are investing in their lives now.

In those circumstances, the ratio of savings to expenditure clearly falls, but let me reassure hon. Members that the important point is that the money available for investment in productive industries and services has in no way fallen. Money is, in fact, available through many different sources, especially the merchant banks, to provide opportunities to borrow and invest. That is an important facet of the whole equation.

Mr. David Davis: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. He is right to say that there has been no decrease in investment as a result of increased savings, but he must consider the source of the money, a large part of which now comes from outside the economy. If the money is not being generated within the economy, it comes from abroad, and one of the effects is that those who invest in portfolio investments in this country buy pounds, pushing up the pound's value and causing one of the problems that British industry faces today. So low savings lead to a high pound, which is a problem.

Mr. Purchase: I would not disagree for a moment with what the right hon. Gentleman says. That is clearly one of the dangers of the United Kingdom's current economics, and outside the eurozone it remains quite acute. The pound is strong, which is helpful and, in part, a reflection of the economy, but, without question, it is also overvalued, which reflects what the right hon. Gentleman says. I was trying to say that we have to find the balance between the savings ratio and the money available for investment coming into the country when interest rates are too high, so pushing up the pound's strength and value unacceptably.

In the circumstances, I do not believe that, in one Budget or five, the Chancellor can overcome the problems, many of which are detailed and require enormous analysis. The best arithmetical technology available must be used to understand them. I believe that we are going in broadly the right direction, given that we see around us investment in this country continuing at high levels—but other measures will no doubt have to be taken.

What we used to regard as the medium term—three to five years—is now very much the long term. We simply cannot see horizons as clearly as we did perhaps 10 or 20 years ago. The time scales involved are much shorter, and the velocity of change is absolutely incredible compared with what was happening 20 or 30 years ago. Overall, I believe that, in successive Budgets, the Chancellor has brought about an improvement in the management of the economy, which points us in the right direction, improves prosperity and decreases essential costs, such as mortgages, for our population. Generally, the moderate voice in our society would say that, on the whole, a good job has been done.

I am happy to say, as I have done before, that, towards the end, the previous Government's efforts were of considerable help. They started that movement, and we have been able to build on it. I know that hon. Members

would expect me to say that, but a fair analysis will show that we have done so. I am not frightened of saying that there is a continuum; we went through a very poor period when enormous improvements in productivity were achieved almost wholly at the expense of rising unemployment. People obviously understand that increases in productivity involve less input for the same output, or the same input for greater output, depending on which way people want to dress it up.

The truth is that during the early part of the 1980s, we lost an enormous swathe of workers. To an extent, we are suffering from that in so far as there is a major shortage of highly skilled and technical people in our country. Some of that shortage was caused by the tremendous shake-out in the engineering industry at the beginning of the 1980s. This country has a long history of sons following in their fathers' footsteps and learning at their fathers' elbows, but we lost many skills, such as pattern making, tool making and print setting—all essential ingredients in a successful economy.

There has been an interregnum, and, to an extent, we are now paying the price. We are catching up, but more resources need to be put into the training and education effort in our country. That would not be altruistic but practical—without a well educated, well trained work force, any hope of improving productivity and thus world competitiveness goes out the window. A well trained and well educated work force with transferable skills will benefit us all.

Most of us have witnessed in our constituencies the tragedy that has befallen workers—usually men—who have worked for 20 or 30 years in a particular industry. The steel industry is a good example. Many of the men who work in it are highly skilled—they can roll steel and operate the furnaces—but those skills are not transferable. If a town has one major steel manufacturer and that closes, we have the pitiful sight of men of long experience and great skill being unable to transfer their skills into another enterprise without considerable help and assistance.

Often the culture among those men is such that they do not recognise as manly some of the opportunities that exist in the service industries. One of the United Kingdom's great successes has undoubtedly been the enormous growth in service industries, and financial services are an outstanding example. The boom in retailing has also provided many opportunities for good-quality work, but such jobs do not seem appropriate to those who spent many years working in trades that require great skill.

The more general mathematical skills that were required in tool making and pattern making were, to some extent, lost between 1981 and 1986. That is a great pity, because we will have to work hard to catch up. Such skills will be vital to this country's future success.

We are trying to move towards a society that is less dependent on the state. Let us confess that there is no question but that people became overly dependent on the handout; there is no other way of describing it. It is a great misfortune that what started as the wonderful idea of a safety net through which no one should fall became somehow distorted, so that people considered it a right that the state should take care of them if they were out of work, could not get work, were ill or felt ill because they had not been in work. Of course, the state should take care of them, but there is a limit to the number of people in that position that a successful economy can sustain.

Changes have had to be made. Rather than an erosion of benefits of the kind that the Conservatives tried to achieve in the 1980s and early 1990s, there has been a tightening up on people's ability to claim benefits willy-nilly, and many would claim that there is room for still more tightening. Through my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's Budgets and other measures for training and education, we have initiated a structural change that has created a different understanding among people. They realise that they must begin to take care of their general needs and cannot afford to fall back ad infinitum on the state.

I was a member of a local authority for 20 years that ran important services and I have been a Member of Parliament for nine years. Many young single women of not more than 21 or 22 years of age have visited my surgery and many of them have up to four children. The times I have heard a young woman say, "Mr. Purchase, how do they expect me to manage on this?" Let me clarify what that means. For those women and for many young people, the girocheque was their only understanding of wealth and income. That was a disaster. Those young people were totally disconnected from the idea of work, wealth and looking after their own welfare.

Young men and young women left school at the age of 16 and they often had very little in the way of qualifications. The thinking was, "Why should I? Our kid never got nothing". Many of the young women became pregnant and were unable to manage on what the state was able to provide. This is not a mean state, but there are practical limits to what it can do. People must reach the new understanding that they are involved in a partnership. In essence, we are talking about co-operation and about people making provision for themselves as far as they can, while leaving the safety net—and a generous one—for those who cannot make it over the high hurdles that life puts in front of them.

The girocheque became a symbol of income, but it meant that people had no understanding of wealth creation. This nation exists in its present form only because we have had a long history during which we have understood what is involved in wealth creation. People came from the countryside to the towns because they thought that they would find work and would be able to improve their lives and those of their children. Similarly, many people now invade America, Britain and Europe because they are looking for a better way to look after themselves and their families. In this country and many parts of Europe, the rural-urban drift began to take place and it became an avalanche. However, people in this country learned that they had to make provision for themselves.

In successive Budgets, our aim has been that of "making work pay", as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor would describe it. It is not a bad slogan, because people understand it. How many Members have heard their constituents—Conservative voters, Labour voters or non-voters—say, "It is all right for those who never go to work. They get everything they want and I get nothing"? I have heard that and it is still being said. However, the truth is very different. In my experience, unless they are doing something else as well, people on benefit generally just about manage. However, those who

[Mr. Purchase]

work—perhaps for low wages—have the perception that the state does everything for those who do not work and nothing for those who do.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has started to make work pay. The methods may be difficult. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) that there is a limit to what one can achieve with tax credits. In the end, productivity and improved performance at work will bring about the higher wages and salaries that will improve our lives and those of our families.

Mr. Bercow: I am greatly enjoying much of what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but can I ask him to focus on a slightly different aspect of the equation? He talks about the importance of making work pay, but does he not agree that it is also important to generate a culture in which people think it is worth while to start a business? To that end, does he not regard it as regrettable, if not deplorable, that the Government continue to refuse, even as a starting measure, to publish an annual statement of the costs of regulation on business? What possible good explanation can there be for that omission?

Mr. Purchase: The hon. Gentleman is pushing at an open door as far as I am concerned. I would love to see the annual costs of regulation. I do not believe that we have made a significant dent in the costs of regulation. In fact, in some sectors, we have undoubtedly added to them, but we believe in the greater good, and the administration of the minimum wage is an example of that. We can disagree about that, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that I am absolutely open to ideas and suggestions on how we can reduce regulation.

I have one such idea in my head, and I shall tell the hon. Gentleman about it. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has taken an interesting step forward in encouraging new businesses to start up. The offer of £2,000 worth of free advice and assistance is very welcome. Without that advice and assistance, I fear that more businesses would fail than needed to. My right hon. Friend also said that we had liberalised the approach to account reporting and the rules for audited accounts have been relaxed, to some extent, for smaller companies.

My suggestion for my right hon. Friend is that we should not insist on using the European convention on accountancy—which is very good for larger companies—in smaller companies. Smaller companies with a turnover of less than £1.5 million to £2 million should perhaps be able to base their reporting unaudited, on a profit and loss account, a balance sheet and a source of application of funds. That would give them a quite a boost, and would save them a lot in accountancy fees.

Mr. Bercow: I confess that I am veritably put in a state of high excitement by that concession. I do not want to push my luck, but I am tempted to have a go. Consistent with what the hon. Gentleman says about encouraging the enterprise culture are two propositions. The first is that it is about time that the Government conducted a proper assessment of the United States Regulatory Flexibility Act 1980 and the Small Business Regulatory Enforcement Fairness Act 1996, because that would yield benefits. The second is that it would also help if the Government signed up to the policy of sunset regulation, which applies in the United States. That would mean that a regulation would automatically expire or lapse—perhaps three or five years after its enactment—unless it is judged sufficiently worth while for Parliament to take time to renew it.

Mr. Purchase: I am not in an argumentative mood. However, I keep my wits about me and recognise that everything that comes from the United States is not always welcome or helpful. The adoption of chapter 11 would have been useful, but I know that the Opposition oppose it. They believe that it does not help to keep businesses afloat.

We could consider what the hon. Gentleman suggests. Indeed, I invite him to join me in admiring the concept of continuous improvement, which most of industry applies. Reconsidering, deleting and adding to legislation is the right approach to any Act that involves regulation. Continuous improvement is an important part of industry and commerce. It is right to have a lighter touch within the bounds of good health and safety practices and good labour relations.

Ms Abbott: I listened with great care to my hon. Friend's argument on what is usually known as welfare dependency and I agreed with much of it. I can identify individuals in my constituency who are in an advanced state of welfare dependency and whole estates that contain generations of people who are mired in welfare dependency. But moving complete communities from a state of mind that accepts welfare dependency to the more preferable state of enterprise and looking after themselves is not a simple matter of providing tax credits and making speeches. However undeserving many of those people may be, if our approach to moving them off welfare dependency is too short-term or mechanistic, the poorest children in society might suffer. That is the danger.

Mr. Purchase: That is a profound point and I have no objection to it. If I wanted to pick a fight, it would be with Samuel Smiles. The concept of the deserving and undeserving poor has never served the country well. We need a more rational approach to understanding the cultures that people inhabit and the way in which things develop. I welcome my hon. Friend's intervention. There is room for discussion, debate and analysis. I agree that a mechanistic approach cannot solve the cultural difficulties. However, it demonstrates that there is a way out in the shorter and medium term. It is important to give that signal. I commend the stance taken by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, but accept that there needs to be a wider debate about the future and how we apply short-term measures in the wider context of cultural change.

The hon. Member for West Worcestershire mentioned the International Monetary Fund and the European Union institutions and criticised the funding of longer-term spending and debt. I am an absolute supporter of my right hon. Friend's golden rule on that matter. I have always believed that we should pay for the acquisition of a capital asset over its useful lifetime. For example, a new school in a local authority area will serve successive generations. It is right, therefore, that successive generations pay for that asset. It would be unfair to front load that expenditure for capital acquisition so that today's tax burden becomes intolerable. That would be nonsense.

A similar case can be made for current expenditure. The golden rule, expressed many years ago by Mr. Micawber, is, "Expenditure 19s 6d, income £1—good fun; expenditure £1, income 19s 6d—not too good."

Mr. Forth: That is Thatcherism.

Mr. Purchase: It is good socialism because moneylenders are owed nothing and they cannot take their pound of flesh.

It is right that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor should balance his revenue budget over the cycle and ensure that, year on year, we can sustain desirable improvements in our society. There is no better way to organise our financial affairs than by employing the golden rules that he has set his stall by.

I welcome the improvements in exporting. I hope that I do not encourage raucous remarks when I inform the House that, with the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe), I am joint chairman of the all-party group on exports. We have made a real effort because exports are a most important facet of British economic life. Without exports, we cannot import. We are an island economy and we are short of certain items, so we have to import them. If we do that, we must pay for them, and the only way to do that is by selling abroad.

I welcome the improved figures. I especially welcome the improvements in manufacturing. I am delighted but surprised, because there have been considerable manufacturing job losses in my constituency over the past few months. Goodyear has made 500 people redundant. Skilled tyre workers and management are finding themselves out of work. The Chubb safe company will soon send about 200 workers down the road. Some 200 jobs at the Britool factory on the border of my constituency, which employs many of my constituents, are being exported to France. About 350 jobs are going at a food processing company. All those jobs are well paid. Even the workers at the food processing factory receive hourly rates in excess of £5, which is well-paid employment in the west midlands for that industry.

Redundancies are also a major problem elsewhere. There has been a disastrous loss of employment in the steel industry. However, my right hon. Friend is able to announce that our manufacturing exports are improving. We are matching the best exporting countries in the world and we have internationally competitive companies that are doing the business for Britain. They are to be congratulated on that and we should be proud of them. We should recognise that their efforts support our way of life, because we have to import many of the things that we enjoy. The dreadful affliction in farming is bound to lead, at least in the short term, to an increase in imports. I make no comment about the disease itself or the handling of it; I merely point out that in the short term we will have to find the money to pay for increased imports—that is a fact of life.

Mr. Bercow: I am determined to provoke the hon. Gentleman, which has thus far not been possible. He has just made yet another interesting and valid point. Given our improving export performance, does he accept that despite his reference to the overly high exchange rate, the overall strength of our capacity to sell overseas means that the exchange rate difficulties in no way justify a decision to abolish our national currency for ever and permanently to hand over to the European central bank the power to set our monetary policy, given that we do not elect that bank and cannot remove it and, under the treaty of Amsterdam, it would be illegal to seek to persuade it of the British national point of view?

Mr. Purchase: There is much to consider in what the hon. Gentleman has to say.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): Disagree!

Mr. Purchase: I am being urged to disagree—how extraordinary.

It is interesting to reflect that no country, except perhaps America, is entirely in charge of its own interest rates, for the simple reason that it has to take note of what everyone else is doing and, to an extent, reflect any changes elsewhere in its own arrangements. If we allow rates to get too high, we attract hot money; if we allow them to get too low, out that money goes. We are not independent in the way that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) would lead some of his Eurosceptic supporters to believe.

On exports, I gave the House the good news first, because I did not want to fall out about the bad news, which is that Britain's exports, as a fraction of total world exports, have been falling for many years. We are not reversing that trend even though we are increasing our exports. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman understands that we can have rising exports and a falling share of the world markets.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that that damaging trend is likely to be accelerated, rather than slowed, by the imposition of the climate change levy on British manufacturing? Does he accept that the Chancellor's earlier comment seems spurious to those who represent constituencies in the north or the midlands which have many manufacturers, because although there have been offsetting reductions in tax costs for some service industries, manufacturing companies are not benefiting from those?

Mr. Purchase: The hon. Gentleman may know that I have been in the front line of west midlands MPs from all parties, standing shoulder to shoulder, saying to the Chancellor that the levy represents a significant challenge, especially for companies that are energy efficient and which have been careful to introduce new energy-saving technology. They run a good monitoring system to ensure that they are always on the cheapest tariff and are therefore running furnaces and heat exchanges at the lowest possible cost, and have done so for several years so that they remain competitive. We have acquainted the Chancellor with that difficulty, and he has partially responded by agreeing that there can be special dispensations where they can be shown to be beneficial.

I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, and I accept that the levy is extra expenditure. We have to weigh the good against the bad, and there is no question but that a serious crisis in the world's energy use is looming. Fossil fuels are undoubtedly running out, and we have to find ways of meeting the energy needs of a developing world so that it can keep its people in comfort.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his characteristic generosity in giving way. I accept his

[Mr. Bercow]

point that no nation is omnipotent, but does he accept that the experience of our forced ejection from the extended recession mechanism demonstrated that a country that is not tied to a fixed exchange rate system has some flexibility in setting its own interest rates, as we discovered when we were able to slash our rates after our ejection in September 1992? Does the hon. Gentleman further accept—I hope that he does—that increased stability within the eurozone could be bought for Britain at the damagingly high price of increased exchange rate volatility with the dollar and the yen? Is not that particularly important to this country, which trades more with north America than do other member states of the European Union?

Mr. Purchase: Again, the hon. Gentleman makes interesting points. I will not fall out with him because those are matters that we should discuss and analyse. I say to him and to the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) that not one single factor has a total influence on our position. We need balanced consideration of a series of indicators, including the option to join the euro, if not yet then at some time when it is appropriate to our needs. I believe that that will assist British exports, although I accept that the climate change levy and energy taxes have an impact. We must measure all those costs against the benefits of joining. If there were a sophisticated enough cost-benefit analysis model, we would be applying it and making the right decision, but much of this is a matter of judgment.

I must return to the subject of the Budget, or you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will rule me out of order. Today's Budget, as one of a series, will broadly find a welcome in the country. It is a path towards the balance that we seek.

We have heard today that the management of pension funds is to be freed up. That matter is an important part of our lives because pretty well all of us are now dependent on the investment of our present contributions to ensure that we receive a pension in future. I am a little concerned because I am rather old fashioned when it comes to pension management. I have always understood first, that no pension fund should have too great a holding in any individual stock because one sometimes needs to make an orderly retreat without disturbing anything; and secondly, that not too many of those holdings should be in equities.

In boom times it is nice to say, "Look how well we are managing the fund; pay us our fees now", but there are difficulties when the market flattens out or goes into recession. People who depend on their pension may then find that its value has diminished. One must ensure that the investments of the pension fund as a whole are properly balanced, with not too great an amount in equities, so that pension commitments can be met and the auditors and actuaries are always satisfied that the fund is equal to the job it has to do. I sound a note of caution because it is important for people's future that they are able to rely on their pension fund managers to guarantee that the income that was promised will be paid.

As for the national health service—

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Will the hon. Gentleman comment on the Chancellor's abolition of dividend tax credits and the impact that that will have on pension funds? Clearly, the hon. Gentleman speaks with some authority on the matter. Does he agree with the estimate that this year the abolition has cost pension funds £5.4 billion?

Mr. Purchase: Yes, because I do not know other than what the hon. Gentleman has just told me. However, I would like to put the matter in context. I listened to Prime Minister's Question Time and my right hon. Friend's answers on this matter. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made exactly the right point. Opposition Members will be surprised to hear that. The cost of the abolition has been more than met by growth in pension funds. It is—*[Interruption.]* That has excited Conservative Members. I can tell that they will become argumentative—

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry) *rose*—

Mr. Purchase: I will give way.

Mr. Boswell: It is because I respect the hon. Gentleman that I want to make a point. Has he considered that whereas pension funds get no relief from the knock that they have suffered with the abolition of dividend tax credit, exactly the same regime applies to charities, and the Chancellor has acknowledged the potential problem by giving charities compensation?

Mr. Purchase: That was a fine gesture. Indeed, it was more than a gesture. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor is to be congratulated on taking such a measure.

If the loss to pension funds will be £5.4 billion, and if there had been no change, that sum would have been in addition to the funds. There is no question about that, if that is the figure. However, that must be seen within the balance that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is trying to strike.

Funds have increased greatly and the cost of the change will be £5.4 billion, or whatever. That cost will be more than met by growth. To a large extent, that growth has been engineered by successive Budgets together with the growth in our economy, given the way in which, for example, engineers, manufacturers and others in the service industries have performed. There is an obvious loss and it could have been greater, but we always want more. We must have a Chancellor—Labour or Conservative—who makes a judgment on what we have in our pockets and what will be needed to fund public services.

I move on to the national health service.

Mr. Forth: Oh!

Mr. Purchase: I can tell that the right hon. Gentleman is upset.

There has been a considerable boost in expenditure. I expect Conservative Members to accept that as a fact. In real terms, there has been a real boost. I believe my local health service managers—they are honourable men and women—when they say that the difficulty is in getting the money to the front line. There must be a cultural change in the way in which the health service and other public services are managed. We must adopt in public services

the ethos that is widespread in high-tech industry, which is getting things right the first time and every time. We must also—

Sir Raymond Whitney: I understand the problem of getting the money to the front line. However, does the hon. Gentleman recognise that there is a much more fundamental problem when per capita money available in Britain is about 50 or 60 per cent. less than that which is available in other continental countries?

Mr. Purchase: I would have to examine carefully how per capita expenditure is assessed. I would have to consider, for example, how much is the result of direct taxation in each country and how much stems from personal contributions in the form of buying private care, or a state-run system that has a mixed economy of private and public money. These are difficult issues when I have not seen the relevant figures, which the hon. Gentleman has probably carefully examined. However, I believe what he tells me. I know that he would not lead me in the wrong direction.

We must compare apples with apples, not apples with pears. We must ascertain the components of individual expenditures. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister talked some time ago about health expenditure in the UK reaching the European average. It was necessary to analyse exactly what was meant by that—I understand that it is that our level of state spending would match European state spending nation by nation. However, a great deal of additional expenditure in other European countries, as in this country, will have been incurred by individuals.

The hon. Member for Wycombe is able to give chapter and verse on our position in the league table, but we are beginning to see some genuine improvements, which are welcomed by all and which were striven for by all. In my constituency, where the general hospital in Wolverhampton is situated at New Cross, there is a £110 million development and refurbishment programme that is ready to get moving. We heard news today of between £500,000 and £1 million that will go directly to the hospital trust rather than being brokered through the health authority. Next week, I shall have the great honour of declaring open our refurbished accident and emergency department. There is a huge programme of such refurbishments throughout the country, which are welcomed by all.

People of good will recognise that sometimes our efforts are not always rewarded by excellence in the health and education services. However, when we work together, co-operate and pull in the same direction, and when the necessary resources can be made available, we can appreciate the work that others do for us. It is always worth thanking those who work in hospitals and schools, for example. Often, they are like the neglected civil servants who look after us day and night, and sometimes for 24 hours a day. We should applaud the work that is done and encourage those who are involved. There is certainly room for further salary increases in the public sector, especially in teaching and nursing. Such increases should be introduced to bring about a revitalised NHS—a service of which we all want to be proud.

The Budget, when seen as part of a series of measures, will be good for Britain. Everyone will benefit, or has benefited. We must wait a little longer to see the full effects of the Budget, but I believe that we are on the right path and that the balance is right. That balance can be criticised—and, no doubt, it will be criticised. However, I think that the Budget will have many defenders. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor deserves our congratulations on bringing forward a Budget that is neither too prudent nor too expenditure driven.

We are in an election period. Had my right hon. Friend spent less, no doubt he would have been accused of doing a Jenkins on the Labour party; had he spent more, it would have been open season for Opposition Members.

7.9 pm

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): The hon. Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase) finished by saying that the Government may have spent less than they might have. Perhaps the Chancellor spent less because he has more lives to lose in the election than would otherwise be the case. If he has a large number to lose, he can afford to lose a few extra and still win.

By general agreement, it is a most interesting Budget. I must welcome the continuing use of tax surpluses to repay the national debt. I listened carefully to what the Chancellor said. He told us that he would repay about £34 billion this year—a vast sum. The only larger sum that I can remember being announced was, unfortunately, a £50 billion debt, which was acquired rather than being repaid. This repaying of the national debt is welcome. As the Chancellor said, it will mean a £3.5 billion saving on public debt interest. I suspect that that would go a long way to covering some of the hand-outs that we will be told tomorrow by the press the right hon. Gentleman has given us. It is a useful and tidy sum, and much can be done with it, especially if it is to be saved year on year. It is more than welcome. However, when one looks at the more detailed figures, some of which the Chancellor read out, one realises how the public sector debt will fall. It will do so only for a fairly shortly period, but it is then projected to start rising. Exactly the same is true in regard to public sector debt as a percentage of the gross national product, which drops to a minimum of 29.6 per cent. in 2000-03. After that, it is projected to rise slightly, to 30 per cent.

Of course, those are substantial figures. One aim that is a long way from the hopes that we heard about in the past, and which I thoroughly endorse, is to wipe out national debt. If we are to get £3.5 billion to spend from the repayments this year, think of the wonderful benefits to the nation, year on year, if we do not have any interest payments to make. As the House will know, I have been interested in that for a long period and I am hopeful that, as time goes on, there will be a slow reduction until we get rid of the huge burden that has hung around our necks. I have always thought it very sad that, whenever Chancellors talked about balancing the Budget over the cycle, few of them were prepared to say that they wanted to achieve more than that when the cycle had finished, and have lower national debt, both as a percentage and in real cash, until it was eliminated.

My hon. Friends and I are especially disappointed that, once again, the Chancellor has not seen fit to do rather more about reducing the duty on tobacco. If it was purely an instance of a morality tax to improve health, we might be more willing to support the Government on increasing duty or maintaining the present level of duty, as happened this year. We are all only too aware of the damage that

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smoking causes to the nation's health and to individuals. It kills thousands every year one way or another, and costs the national health service millions annually. It is not purely an issue of morality taxation, as practicalities are also involved, which are particularly clear to me, coming from where I do.

In the past few years, the number of smokers in Britain has increased, which shows that increasing tax to limit smoking has failed. The issue is now severely complicated by the continued growth of cigarette smuggling. I mention cigarettes in particular, but the problem goes wider than that. However, cigarette smuggling has shown the largest increase in recent years and the market for that kind of tobacco is huge, with an estimated £4 billion in lost revenue each year. Those figures were given to us by trade unions in Northern Ireland, which say that a phenomenal amount of money has been lost.

Mr. Forth: I am looking at page 192 of the Treasury's Budget document under the heading "Public sector current receipts". To my surprise, it suggests that tobacco duties yielded £5.7 billion in 1999–2000; £7.5 billion in 2000–01; and will yield an even greater amount—£7.6 billion—next year. Is my hon. Friend as puzzled as I am by that? I thought that it was common knowledge, even in the Treasury, that the yield is falling because the tax is now too high and smuggling is rampant? Can my hon. Friend help me with those figures?

Mr. Ross: May I tell the right hon. Gentleman that if those figures are correct, they represent a change from past projections, which show a fall in revenue from duties, despite an increase in taxation? On the other hand, perhaps Inland Revenue officers are going to get so efficient that smuggling will be stopped altogether.

It is estimated that 30 per cent. of all the cigarettes that are consumed are purchased outside the United Kingdom's jurisdiction, thereby avoiding UK taxes. The percentage of cigarettes purchased on the black market continues to rise. I shall give vivid examples of that in a few moments.

Mr. Bercow: I have not smoked a cigarette since 25 June 1986 and have no desire to do so ever again. Nevertheless, in common with a small but insistent minority, I am against the social fascism that says we should continually smother people with excessive taxation for indulging in perfectly legal activities. Is my hon. Friend aware that, on 6 June 2000, when I presented the Taxation (Right to Know) Bill, I calculated that 79.3 per cent. of the cost of a packet of 20 cigarettes went directly to the Exchequer? Has my hon. Friend worked out what percentage of the cost of a packet of cigarettes goes to the Exchequer as a result of today's tax changes?

Mr. Ross: I have not worked that out, but later I shall give the hon. Gentleman extremely interesting figures showing the difference between the sum that people pay for a packet of fags in this country and elsewhere.

It is a fact that tobacco manufacturers and trade unions predicted a good many years ago the consequences of increased taxation on cigarettes. That prediction followed their correct forecast of the consequences for hand-rolled tobacco, practically all of which is now smuggled. Quite a lot of it goes out of the Gallagher factory in Ballymena one week; then, ten days later, it is on market stalls throughout the country. All that tobacco is smuggled. It is true that the Chancellor has increased investment in Customs and Excise to counter tobacco smuggling, but those efforts have not been effective, owing to the potential rewards for those involved in smuggling.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Smuggling is not necessary. The problem is that people can go to France, Holland or another country perfectly legally and buy cigarettes for their own personal consumption at such a dramatically low price that it is worth undertaking that journey. That is one of the problems with a high tax.

Mr. Ross: Of course, the hon. Gentleman is correct. I understand that one can now bring in 800 cigarettes for one's own use. A man, his wife and his non-smoking grown-up children can take a day trip to France and come back with enough to do them for several months and still make a considerable profit on their visit. Rather than raising the tax, the Government would be wise to freeze it at the very least. If the increased resources for the Revenue fail to prove effective against smuggling, a cut in tobacco duty must be seriously considered.

Such a cut is not unheard of, as that step has been taken in other European states and Canada to combat the type of smuggling that currently plagues the United Kingdom. The current policy of morality taxation—as it has been christened—has failed miserably to decrease the number of smokers in the United Kingdom and has damaged the moral fabric of society by precipitating general criminality—smuggling—in the population.

Other options must be considered. Decreasing duty would increase total Government revenues; as the profits from smuggling decreased, the extent of smuggling would diminish, and a far greater number of taxable products would be sold in the UK, thereby compensating for a lower percentage in duty. Consequently, additional investment to combat mass smuggling would become unnecessary, and there would be savings in the cost of Revenue officers if the incentive to smuggle were removed. The size of that incentive is evident, as has been said, in the difference in the cost of tobacco products retailed here and elsewhere.

I have, given to me by trade union visitors from the Gallagher factory in Ballymena last week, a packet of one particular brand which is sold in the United Kingdom at £4.27, in Spain at £1.47, in Luxembourg at £1.66 and in Belgium at £1.95. I also have two packets of Old Holborn which, as I do not smoke, I will eventually return to the factory of origin. One packet is printed in English and states:

"United Kingdom price duty paid £8.70".

The other shows the Luxembourg duty paid: £1.95.

The stuff all comes out of the same factory in Ballymena, in County Antrim. It goes across to Europe and back it comes. The House will agree that, with an incentive of that size, the idea that smuggling can be stopped, other than by the harshest and most repressive measures, is nonsense. It just will not happen.

That illustrates more clearly than anything the real problem that we face. The House will be aware that with a land frontier between Northern Ireland and another

European state, tobacco smuggling is not the only problem that we have. We have road fuel smuggling—not only diesel, but all road fuels. Many petrol stations along the northern side of the frontier have been closed and are derelict, and their counterparts in the Republic are thriving, as are many little stations set up along the roadside.

The grapevine tells one things which it is sometimes impossible to trace back to source, but they are revealing. I heard of one gentleman who was invited to allow some people to sell fuel on the forecourt of his closed petrol station. He refused for a few days, then he allowed it. The reasons for that I leave to the imagination of hon. Members who are listening.

Who is profiting from that trade? Who owns the closed Northern Ireland outlets? What will the situation be when the system reverts, as it inevitably will? Some time in the future, the relative value of the pound and the punt may change, and even with the difference in taxation, the trade may start to flow the other way. We will then find that many dozens of decent, hard-working people who built up their business have been ruined; they are gone, and their establishments are run on either side of the border by paramilitary organisations.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful, again, to my hon. Friend. Does he agree that it is highly likely that one of the reasons why the Republic of Ireland can keep its tax levels lower than ours in matters such as the one being discussed is that money is flowing from the European Union into the Republic, thus saving the Government of the Republic a great deal of money? Some of that is our money, which has gone from Britain to the European Union and thence to Ireland, thus allowing the Irish to keep their taxes lower. The position is even worse than my hon. Friend describes. Not only are the Republic's taxes lower, causing the problems described, but it is happening because of our money going via Europe to Ireland.

Mr. Ross: The House debated a Bill yesterday to help development in the poorer nations of the world, so I suppose we have done the same for a former part of the United Kingdom. However, the situation is changing rapidly. Instead of receiving money, the Republic of Ireland will start to have to pay it out. It has also, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, signed up to the euro, and is now being told to toe the line.

There was one blooming awful row recently between the Republic's Finance Minister and the European authorities, because the Republic refused to toe the line. It was wonderful to see that nation, which was so pro-European that it made one sick, coming to understand the consequences of being in the euro system. Hon. Members who did not read the reports in *The Irish Times*, which is the best paper for such stuff, should go back a few weeks and read it. It is extremely revealing.

I digress, however. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) has a habit of taking me away from the subject of the debate. The night is moving on and I want to hear what he has to say, so I shall return to my own remarks.

The effectiveness of the Government's countermeasures against fuel smuggling has been, at best, questionable. In response to an oral question that I asked last year, the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office informed me that 13 illegal fuel processing plants had been closed, and an estimated 40 million litres of illicit fuel had been prevented from reaching the Northern Ireland regional economy. I welcome that success, as every right-thinking person would.

I welcome any success in the war against criminality, but 40 million litres is like a drop in an oil well, compared with what is going on. A comparative analysis of the legitimate third quarter fuel deliveries into Northern Ireland since 1994 provides a far more accurate indication of how widespread and how massive the Northern Ireland fuel smuggling crisis was and continues to be. Since 1994, fuel deliveries into Northern Ireland have fallen by a staggering 55 per cent. Between 1994 and 1996, third quarter deliveries dropped slightly, by more than 10,000 tonnes—that is, 6 per cent. of the total fuel delivered. By 1997, a sharp decline had begun, and by the third quarter of last year the total fuel delivery into Northern Ireland was just over 100,000 tonnes—less than half the equivalent delivery for 1996. Unfortunately, that amazing decrease has only one possible explanation. It must be remembered that over the same period there was an increase of almost 20 per cent. in the number of vehicles licensed in Northern Ireland.

One aspect of the Chancellor's Budget today that I particularly welcome is the change in the road vehicle excise duty, which will be extremely beneficial to the road haulage industry in Northern Ireland. Some firms are transferring their vehicles to the Irish Republic because of the very much lower taxation on heavy lorries there. That incentive, at least, will now be removed.

I return to the subject of fuel. With 20 per cent. more vehicles, 50 per cent. less fuel delivered and Northern Ireland having no indigenous resources of road fuel, the figures just do not add up. The estimated revenue lost to the Treasury is astronomical, although when one starts asking questions, the Treasury keeps going round in circles and one never gets an answer. The causes of those astounding figures are simple: diesel smuggling, petrol smuggling, mass blatant smuggling across the frontier every day, plus, of course, the thousands of people who drive across every day and fill up.

The problem must be dealt with in the same way as cigarette smuggling—by reducing duty and consequently removing the incentive for smuggling. I am disappointed that a pragmatic solution to fuel smuggling has yet to be considered by Government. I admit that, unlike cigarette smuggling, fuel smuggling is primarily a regional problem for us. It should not be forgotten where the smuggling profits end up. The profits of cross-border fuel smuggling fill to overflowing the coffers of the republican terrorist organisations. They go to the IRA which, as we all know, controls the whole trade.

The scale of the smuggling, not only in fuel and cigarettes but in farm livestock, has become abundantly clear in recent days. Only recently did the public learn how foot and mouth disease reached Northern Ireland from Carlisle. In *The Irish Times* yesterday there was an article to the effect that some 8,000 sheep had been taken illegally from the United Kingdom into the Irish Republic over the past two months—that is a lot of sheep.

Let us remember what happened to the lorry. It went in and dumped off the sheep, some in South Armagh and some at the slaughterhouse in the Republic, then it was used to transport livestock all round the island of Ireland

[Mr. Ross]

and maybe on the mainland—heaven knows where. I hope that it was well cleaned down and disinfected. It is beginning to look as though it was, because if it had not been, there would be foot and mouth from one end of the island of Ireland to the other by this time. That could not have been avoided.

It is estimated that a third of the filling stations in Northern Ireland are now controlled by paramilitary terrorist organisations, which use these businesses to launder the proceeds of their criminality.

The fuel differential has far greater implications than merely cross-border smuggling. The taxation of aggregates is another significant matter that is impinged upon by the cost of fuel. Transportation is an important factor in the distribution of aggregates and the downstream products in which they are used. Northern Ireland's aggregates industry differs greatly in character from that of its mainland counterparts. The Province has a rural industry with a wide distribution of small quarries and sand and gravel pits. Most of those quarries process the aggregates on site into concrete and other downstream products. They generally supply them within a relatively small radius, although that could include the whole of Northern Ireland.

The tax will apply to both raw and refined aggregates and to imported aggregates, but not to imported downstream products. That means that concrete building materials—whether they are beams, pipes, bricks or anything else—can be made in the Republic of Ireland and then imported, which creates the potential to swamp the Northern Ireland market with much cheaper products. Another comparison might be pertinent in that respect. In Northern Ireland, the average value of raw aggregates is £2.60 a tonne. On the mainland, the average value is £6.50, which is a very large difference. The tax per tonne in Northern Ireland will, therefore, be 60 per cent. of the product's value; on the mainland, it is 25 per cent. of the current aggregates value. Consequently, there is a massive difference between the burden that the tax places on the quarries in each region. An unfair burden is imposed on the industry in Northern Ireland, and there is no value in taxing industry in the Province in that manner. It can only result in a substantial economic and job loss.

In 1999, total aggregates production in Northern Ireland was 23 million tonnes. With exemptions taken into account, 22 million tonnes would be taxable under the new tax, so the total revenue for the Treasury would be a mere £35 million. The estimated consequences for the industry of the new tax include the loss of up to 4,000 jobs, which is more than 70 per cent. of the total number of jobs in the industry in Northern Ireland. The estimated cost to the Treasury is some £60 million.

There was an obvious and simple solution to that potential disaster for the region's aggregates industry. The tax could have been disapplied in respect of Northern Ireland, with a saving for the Treasury. At the very least, it could have been applied to the value of the product and not per tonne. Taxing the value by 25 per cent. in Northern Ireland, as on the mainland, would provide a pragmatic solution to a salient regional problem.

Those in the industry point out that their products are heavy and not easy to transport. There is one manufacturer who manages to sell bridge beams in England. All his competitors would like to know how on earth he manages to make them in Northern Ireland, put them on a boat to south-west Scotland or Heysham, cart them half way across England to be used to build a bridge—and still make a profit. He is a neighbour of mine and apparently he gets on very well. There are also certain products that are not made elsewhere in the United Kingdom, such as concrete pipes of a particular size, so Northern Ireland is the only source of supply. However, the reduction of the tax in Northern Ireland on a percentage basis would not hurt manufacturers in the mainland, as the materials are generally too heavy to transport and the cost of doing so would be too great.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend referred to a £60 million loss to the Exchequer. Does that calculation reflect merely taxation forgone and benefits paid, or does it also take into account—I fear that it probably does not—the obvious loss of purchasing power that has been experienced in the process?

Mr. Ross: The calculation does not take account of the second point at all.

I am disappointed that the Government have not taken the problems on board or acted on them. Their tax policy in two of the areas that I have mentioned has failed to deliver the benefits that we hoped for. It will also fail in the third area, as it will do great damage to the Northern Ireland economy. Heavy taxation of fuel has not led to a reduction of car use in Northern Ireland, whose rural nature means that people have to use their cars. It has simply become a source of terrorist funding. Those are two very good reasons for doing something serious about it.

With regard to tobacco, taxation has greatly increased law breaking and smuggling; that is positive proof that one cannot make people good by passing laws that it pays them handsomely to break. I have demonstrated that the policy on fuel and tobacco does help pay them handsomely to break the laws. I fear that smoking reduction has become a matter of education and not of exorbitant taxation. I have also rehearsed in some detail the danger to the quarrying industry. I hope that the Chancellor will listen to my comments on that issue, as he can improve the situation without much difficulty and without causing any great damage to similar industries on this side of the Irish sea.

7.35 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): Before my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, North-East (Mr. Purchase) leaves the Chamber, I should like to say that I greatly enjoyed his speech. His performance, which is best described as emollient, provided a neat counterpoint to the speech made by the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer). I much preferred my hon. Friend's analysis of the future, as he spoke about consistent and adequate investment in core public services and targeted spending for the rest of the public services. That contrasts with the vision presented by the hon. Gentleman, who spoke of a future in which, as I understood it, even health and education services would be accessed only in accordance with the size of a person's wallet.

I want first to speak about the happy situation of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in making his statement, perhaps in the shadow of the next general election, and

the strong position that enabled him to make his announcements. I should like to illustrate that position by comparing his speech to the past three speeches made by Labour Chancellors in the shadow of general elections that Labour went on to lose.

Initially, we must go back to April 1951, when the late Hugh Gaitskell, who has already been mentioned, delivered the Budget of the then Labour Government. He was wrestling with two huge problems that were exercising the minds of all hon. Members. First, there had been a huge—30 per cent.—devaluation of our currency, which had made it impossible to balance the Budget. Secondly, he had to find the finance to wage a war in Korea—which some might forget today.

Those two demands made his position hopeless. His Budget set a starting income tax rate of 3 shillings in the pound, which is 15 per cent., and an intermediate rate of 5s 6d in the pound, which is 27.5 per cent. The standard rate was 9s 6d, or 47.5 per cent. The maximum surtax was another 10 shillings in the pound for people with incomes of more than £20,000 a year. That is another 50 per cent., which makes a maximum payable income tax rate of 97.5 per cent. It is no surprise that Mr. Gaitskell mournfully observed:

"I know that this budget will not be popular".—[*Official Report*, 10 April 1951; Vol. 486, c. 865.]

Those who had to respond instantly for the Opposition—a very difficult job—were a great deal politer than today's politicians. I do not make a party political point; it is merely the passage of time. The late Sir Winston Churchill had that duty in 1951 and he was politeness embodied. He said:

"I pay our compliments to the Chancellor of the Exchequer upon the lucid, comprehensive statement which he has made to us this afternoon".

Before he sat down, he thanked the Chancellor again for a gracious speech, but politeness did not get in the way of trenchant political criticisms. His summing up of the Government's performance reflected the difficulties that they faced at the polls shortly afterwards. He said:

"If we take the whole period of the rule of the Socialist Party, I think it is fair to say that the mismanagement of our finances over the whole period tells the same tale . . . as the mismanagement of our defences."—[*Official Report*, 10 April 1951; Vol. 486, c. 879-881.]

Mr. Hayes: I believe that, in 1951, Winston Churchill voted in half the Divisions in the House. That starkly contrasts with the current Prime Minister's performance. The hon. Gentleman should consider the difference between that Labour Government and the current Government in their methods of taxing the British people. The hon. Gentleman spoke of tax at 97p in the pound, but the 1951 Government were not taxing by stealth. He should compare the honesty of the 1951 socialist Government on tax policy with the dishonesty of the current Administration, who tax by the back door and do not tell people of their real intentions.

Mr. Kidney: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. On dishonesty in modern taxation, I shall shortly consider the great shift from direct to indirect taxation. I should be interested to know how taxes that are announced in a manifesto for a general election can be labelled stealth taxes. The hon. Gentleman makes an odd criticism that I reject.

Mr. Boswell: The hon. Gentleman claims that the Labour manifesto for the general election announces several taxes. Doubtless he will tell us more shortly. However, does not he recall that, when the Prime Minister was Leader of the Opposition, he said in an article in *The Sun*—an authoritative publication—on 14 April 1997 that the Labour party planned no increases in taxes?

Mr. Kidney: That has been explained many times. The Prime Minister was referring to the rates of income tax. Let me demonstrate the inaccuracy of the hon. Gentleman's criticism. He claims that the Labour party said that there would be no new taxes. That is not true; the manifesto stated that there would be a windfall tax on the excess profits of the privatised utilities. The Opposition claim that the Labour party said that there would be no increases in taxes. Again, that is inaccurate; the manifesto stated that the fuel duty escalator would continue. I am happy to continue the debate.

Mr. Hayes: I do not want to test the hon. Gentleman's patience, but will he comment on some of the other taxes that have been introduced by stealth, such as the pensions tax that I mentioned earlier, the changes to national insurance contributions for the self-employed, holiday tax and insurance tax? The list is almost endless; there are 45 such taxes. How many are included in the manifesto?

Mr. Kidney: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point: not all the changes to which he refers appeared in the manifesto. Policy evolves; that applies to every Government.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Kidney: I would have been surprised if the hon. Gentleman had not asked me to give way.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, whose constituency I recently had the great pleasure of visiting. The Prime Minister specifically said that there would be no increase in taxation at all. That obviously referred to the overall level; it was not a decision to rule out the introduction of any specific tax. To argue the contrary is to argue about the number of angels dancing on the head of a pin.

Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that there is an innate contradiction between the Government's attitude to public finances at Government level and at local authority level? What assessment has he made of the effect of the change in the rules for the use of capital receipts from the sale of council houses on the size of interest repayments on local authority debt?

Mr. Kidney: I am happy to stand toe to toe with the hon. Gentleman on the head of that pin, and to continue to argue that the Prime Minister referred to income tax rates. I shall not be diverted by the hon. Gentleman's second point.

Let us move on from 1951. For a long time after that Budget, there was no Labour Government. However, we were back in power in the 1960s. Let us consider 14 April 1970, when the Chancellor who delivered the Budget speech was Roy Jenkins. He perceived an improvement in his position. He said:

"The circumstances in which I open this Budget are, I am glad to say, more agreeable than those in which I made my last two Budget statements".

[Mr. Kidney]

He continued:

"In 1968, we were in the trough of crisis."—[*Official Report*, 14 April 1970; Vol. 799, c. 1212.]

What were the problems with which Roy Jenkins had to wrestle? In 1970, *Hansard* included headings and subheadings for the Budget speech. One was, "The record since devaluation". That Labour Government were struggling with the aftermath of a devaluation and its terrible consequences in 1968, when debt had peaked. The current account debt was the largest ever, as was the country's total indebtedness. The then Chancellor found time to single out a Staffordshire Member of Parliament, the late Sir Hugh Fraser, whose tenacity of criticism of the financial position especially irritated Roy Jenkins.

People mainly remember the decision not to make the 1970 Budget a giveaway Budget. Roy Jenkins was determined to avoid blatant electioneering and to be thoroughly decent. He explained his intentions thus:

"I therefore conclude that it is right to give a moderate stimulus to the economy, but to spread this between monetary and fiscal measures. On both, I intend to proceed fairly cautiously. If I find that my judgment is too cautious, it is much easier to correct this later in the year than if I go too far in the other direction."

Hansard then records "*[Interruption.]*" In my imagination, the interruption consists of Labour Members shaking their heads, gnashing their teeth, weeping into their handkerchiefs, beating their heads against the wood on the back of the seats and begging the Chancellor to go further.

Roy Jenkins also said:

"With my approval, therefore, the Bank of England is reducing Bank Rate to 7 per cent. with effect from tomorrow."—[*Official Report*, 14 April 1970; Vol. 799, c. 1231-36.]

A clear difference today is the welcome decision in 1997 to give independence to the Bank of England to set interest rates without reference to the political cycle and the difficulties of the day.

What had happened to income tax rates by 1970? Roy Jenkins continued the standard rate at 41.25 per cent; he also applied surtaxes, which could total another 40 per cent. That gives a top rate of 81.25 per cent.

In 1970, Leaders of the Opposition continued to be polite in their responses. On 14 April 1970, the duty of replying to the Budget speech fell to the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), who is now Father of the House. He began by "warmly congratulating" the Chancellor on his speech and said that the Budget was

"delivered with such lucidity and fluency and in such a well-constructed speech".—[*Official Report*, 14 April 1970; Vol. 799, c. 1254.]

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Does the hon. Gentleman recall that there was a selective employment tax in 1970? I believe that it was 15 per cent. of the surcharge. Not only was it a terrible tax, but it condemned, for example, hairdressers to suffer additional taxation. That was unreasonable.

Mr. Kidney: I do not know why the hon. Gentleman refers to hairdressers, but he is right about the existence of the selective employment tax. It was telling that, as in 1951, the Leader of the Opposition observed that the Chancellor sat down to comparative silence. Labour Members probably felt that an opportunity had been missed. The Labour party went on to lose the general election.

Mr. Hayes: I hope that my comments will match the hon. Gentleman's expectation of politeness. Will he reflect on two matters that were relevant to the run-up to that election? The first was the publication of the balance of payments figures. Many people believed that that had an impact on the result of the election. The second was the savings ratio. Both are less healthy now than they were then.

Mr. Kidney: The hon. Gentleman's first point is quite interesting, because the then Chancellor referred to our obsession with the balance of payments figure, and said that he looked forward to the day when people were no longer obsessed by it. At that time, people looked at the figure and thought that it was extremely worrying if it was an unhealthy one, whereas today people take a much more relaxed view of that indicator of economic well-being.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about the savings ratio, I confess that I do not recall the position in 1970. I adopt the approach of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, North-East, who said that the savings ratio is not taken quite so seriously as it was in the past, because other economic factors are at work at the same time. Perhaps a good illustration of that is that in America, during its very successful period of growth in the 1990s, there were times when its savings ratio was negative, yet that did not impinge on its success.

Mr. Bercow: If published, the hon. Gentleman's brief history of Budget debates would make a racy read and a standard text book. He ought to savour that compliment, because I shall probably not volunteer many more in his direction. He made an important point about the 41.25 per cent. tax rate under the chancellorship of Lord Jenkins, as he now is. Will he now take the opportunity to acknowledge that the then Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton, South-West, the late Enoch Powell, was arguing at the time—as he did in a publication from Elliot Rightway books—for income tax at 4s 3d in the pound? The argument was developed in a legendary speech in Morecambe.

Mr. Kidney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that assistance, and I shall come back to that matter in a moment, in a different context.

I shall move on to 3 April 1979, and the Budget that never was. Denis Healey—now Lord Healey—was the Chancellor, and he was due to deliver his 15th Budget in five years, believe it or not. That is a telling indicator of the difficulties with which he was wrestling in the late 1970s. The reason that he did not deliver that Budget was that, the week before, the Labour Government had suffered a defeat in a vote of no confidence and his Budget was scrapped. Instead, he came to the House to deliver a Finance Bill that would merely continue the authority to collect taxes and keep the Government in

funds until the next Government were formed. In his usual colourful language, he described his position at the Dispatch Box, saying:

"I confess that I feel a little bit like a man who turns up to play the leading role in the opera and all they want him to do is to help them hold the scenery together."—[*Official Report*, 3 April 1979; Vol. 965, c. 1187.]

We spoke earlier of the problems of devaluation and the resulting growing debt but, my goodness, the difficulties that Lord Healey wrestled with were manifold. He had just succeeded in returning inflation to below double figures for the year. In relation to debt, he was planning the following year to finish repaying the International Monetary Fund borrowings that he had had to access. He complained of sluggish manufacturing output, wage inflation, oil price rises—although we were just starting to benefit from North sea oil production—and the uncertainty of oil supplies from Iran. So he had an enormous amount of difficulty, and perhaps the writing was on the wall for him.

To return to the story about income tax, the standard rate then was 33 per cent. There was a huge number of different rates, but the top rate was 83 per cent. I think that Lord Healey had just about had enough of the job by then, because during his speech he described the job of Chancellor as

"this heavy burden, this poisoned chalice".

Opposition responses were no longer polite. The Leader of the Opposition did not respond on that occasion, as the debate was on the Finance Bill, but Sir Geoffrey Howe, now Lord Howe of Aberavon, said:

"we celebrate the Chancellor's demise today with great enthusiasm."—[*Official Report*, 3 April 1979; Vol. 965, c. 1196-7.]

He went on to give a clear statement of what to expect if the Conservatives won the next election, which they went on to do. He said:

"The nation clearly needs substantial reductions in personal taxation to restore incentives, reductions in public spending programmes so that public spending is in line with what the nation can truly afford, and a willingness to shift the balance of the tax system away from pay-as-you-earn to pay-as-you-spend."—[*Official Report*, 3 April 1979; Vol. 965, c. 1205.]

That reinforces a point that I made earlier, and that is what we got in spades over the subsequent 18 years. I suggest to Opposition Members that there was a need to readjust the pendulum, but it swung massively too far in the other direction.

I am pleased that that little history lesson has entertained at least one hon. Member present. It has enabled me to make the point that today's Budget speech was delivered from a position of immense strength and power, built on four years of preparation and the laying of proper foundations. We are in this position through choice, because of decisions that have been made, rather than by chance or happenstance.

When I listened to the leader of the Liberal Democrats make his contribution to today's debate, I was struck not only by his call—naturally—to spend more money, but by the inadvisability of spending such money before preparations have been made. That is the lesson of the previous three Labour Governments, who churned out a great deal of spending on public services at the beginning of a Parliament, hit a crisis in the middle of it, then spent the rest of it recovering their position and going to the polls saying, "We are sorry, we have made a terrible mess, but we will try to do better next time." Today, we have a Chancellor who has, through choice, made good, strong decisions and who gives hope and a vision that he can do the same in the future.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for disturbing the hon. Gentleman, who is making a most entertaining speech, but I wish to refer to a point of order made earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) concerning information provided to hon. Members in relation to the Budget.

The original Budget bundle contained an indication of a number of additional press releases that were to be available to hon. Members, but they were not in the Vote Office when my hon. Friend raised his point of order. Since then, I have made an additional inquiry at the Vote Office and have received another bundle of documents that was not made available to hon. Members with the original Budget bundle, but is now available. It includes one important document referred to in the original bundle—"A Review of Small Business Taxation".

I have just been to the Vote Office again to inquire whether the press releases have now arrived, as they relate to important measures affecting business taxation. I was given an envelope that contains only parts of the Budget bundle. The press releases are still not available. I understand that they may be available on the internet, but I do not think that that is an adequate way of informing hon. Members of the contents of the Budget. Given the importance of the details of this Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget statements, it would be helpful if the Ministers on the Treasury Bench could arrange for those press releases to be made available in written form in the Vote Office at the earliest possible moment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): The supply of documents to the Vote Office is not the responsibility of the Chair. I have no doubt that Members on the Treasury Bench will have heard what the hon. Gentleman said.

Mr. Kidney: I am happy to excuse the hon. Gentleman for interrupting my speech. He made an important point and wherever the fault lies, it is unacceptable that we cannot have access to the documents that we need on Budget day, of all days.

I shall move on to make three brief points that will conclude my observations. The first concerns public spending. Opposition Members have raised eyebrows and expressed concerns about the Chancellor's announcement that he intends further to extend his commitment to spending money on public services over the next three years. However, the cautionary note that I would sound to the Chancellor, and to those who might think that that was a worrying thing to do, is that so far, our Departments seem to be having difficulty coping with spending the money that they have already been given.

An article in the *Financial Times* today points out an underspend on the working families tax credit, and there is an even greater worry about capital spending, in terms of the inability to spend the money allocated. Ten months of this financial year have passed, and we are told that about £2.2 billion, out of an allocation of £7 billion, has been spent.

[Mr. Kidney]

I am sure that the position will improve by the end of the year. Nevertheless, this appears to be becoming a bit of a habit. The previous year, the Select Committee on the Treasury, on which I served, pointed out that even the more modest capital spending total for that year had not been met: it had been underspent. On that occasion, the Chancellor told us that the Departments had got so used to being starved of capital resources that they were neither used to spending money nor geared up to do so. However, I would have thought that 12 months later, we would now be ready to spend the money.

When I talk to Treasury Ministers about the matter, they point out that there is now the ability to carry forward money, and it is not lost if it is not spent in the financial year allocated. That is a welcome development, and very healthy indeed. Nevertheless, there is an urgent need to spend that money, and those with responsibility for spending it ought to consider doing so as a matter of urgency.

We want investment in law and order, roads, railways, bridges, schools and hospitals. We want good quality and good design and we also want all those to appear physically sooner rather than later—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) urges me on, and he will like my next point, which is on fair education funding.

The hon. Gentleman knows that a number of Members are unhappy about the way in which the Government distribute money to local authorities, however generous the sum. I received a letter from a constituent, Mrs. Eunice Finney, who says:

"The disparity between the highest funded shire LEA and Staffordshire is now £235 for primary children and £286 for secondary children. This is totally unacceptable!!"

The last sentence appears in bold, which should give the House an idea of how formidable Mrs. Finney is. She is a tireless critic of that unfair system for distributing the money and has pressed me on the matter.

Mr. Hayes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. Does he agree that the easiest way to address the anomalies that he describes would be through a national funding formula, which would bring greater equity. Is he aware that the base figure used to calculate education standard spending assessment in terms of cost per pupil is based not on a thorough and detailed analysis of what it costs to educate a child, but on a statistical convention?

Mr. Kidney: That is music to my ears, although the hon. Gentleman's remarks contrast entirely with what the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Waterson), who speaks for the Opposition on local government, said to me in the debate on this year's local government settlement. I am delighted that there is at least one Conservative Front-Bench supporter of a national minimum entitlement for funding children's education. The local government finance Green Paper proposes that very measure, and I was heartened to see the same formula repeated in the schools Green Paper.

The Government have consistently accepted that the current formula is unfair and change will come. Earlier this Parliament, they tried to make piecemeal changes to the formula, but found that there would be unintended consequences. They also tried to achieve a consensus among local government representatives, but they would not play ball. The Government's own determination has led to the production of the Green Paper that will eventually lead to change, although change requires legislation and is therefore still some way off.

That is disappointing, but the good news is that the Chancellor has built on the success of last year's Budget in which, for the first time, he announced flat rate payments for every school in the country. Today he announced an enhanced rate for those payments, guaranteed for the whole of the next Parliament, which is excellent. At least no one can complain about their school getting the same amount as every other school in the country. That will go some way to alleviate the unfairness—until the unfairness itself is made a matter of history by new legislation.

Following our entertaining diversion through history, my final point is about a war. The leader of the Liberal Democrats again mentioned the war chest, which has been consistently referred to over the past 12 months or so. It was implied that it represented a lot of money that had been gathered together only to be given out on the eve of an election, but that idea has proved to be wrong. However, thanks to the Labour Government, there is a war going on in this country—a war on poverty.

At home, the war is about relieving the poverty of children, families and pensioners who struggle to survive. Overseas, it is about helping the world's poorest countries through debt relief, support for United Nations development targets for eradicating poverty, bringing primary education to all children and putting public health in reach of all citizens. That is a war that I encourage, and I urge my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to continue it in the next Parliament.

We inherited a situation in which 4 million children in this country were living in poverty. For the first time ever, a Government have announced the target of eradicating poverty, giving themselves 20 years to do it. Policies such as increasing child benefits, the national minimum wage, the working families tax credit and the children's tax credit are making an impact and during this Parliament, more than 1 million children have been raised out of poverty. If the blistering pace of the past two years is continued, we can meet the target to eradicate all poverty within 10 years, not 20.

The same is true for pensioners, and it was right for the Government to target first the poorest pensioners with the minimum income guarantee. Between 1 million and 2 million pensioners have been lifted out of poverty in that way. In the Stafford constituency, those who receive the minimum income guarantee have told me what a difference it makes to their personal circumstances. No amount of increasing the basic state pension within affordable limits could have achieved that so quickly.

Next, we must face the problem of those who do not qualify for the minimum income guarantee because of modest savings or a small occupational pension. That is what the pension credit is about. From 2003, it will help not 1 million or 2 million pensioners, but up to 5 million. The consultation on the pension credit has gone down well in the Stafford constituency. In the meantime, all pensioners appreciate the winter fuel payments and help with their bus fares. The over-75s agree that the free television licence is fair. Britain leads the world's efforts

to achieve meaningful poverty reduction around the globe: from debt relief and free trade to UN development targets and access to medicines, we are at the forefront of the war on poverty.

I conclude with a reference to the late Audrey Wise, my parliamentary colleague—a former Member for Preston who died last year. When Audrey was between seats, she lived in Stafford. I knew her and her family very well and I still see her husband, John, often. She contributed to the debate on the 1979 Finance Bill and was oft referred to because of the 1977 Rooker-Wise amendment, which she introduced with my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), who is now a Minister of State. The amendment provided for the indexation of personal allowances. Audrey said:

"I agree that it is not sufficient to consider taxation alone. It is necessary to consider the underlying health of the economy. The economy will only be healthy when working people dominate decision making about the use of their labour. Then, talent—rather than cunning or deviousness—will be released."—[*Official Report*, 3 April 1979; Vol. 965, c. 1216.]

In my view, we are all workers now. We are engaged in serious work in trying to unlock the talents of all our citizens and trying to marry economic efficiency with social justice. We have come a long way in four years, but there is yet much unfinished business, be it improving productivity, eradicating poverty or protecting the environment. There is plenty of work to keep a Labour Government busy for many years to come.

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It may help the House if I say a few words in response to concerns expressed by hon. Members about the availability of Budget documents. This year, as in previous years, packs of Budget literature, containing the main Budget document or Red Book, press notices, a summary leaflet and other key papers published alongside the Budget, were readily available.

The Government have also made an increasing amount of supplementary information available on Budget day, covering more detailed and technical information. As in previous years, the Treasury ensured that all that information was available in sufficient quantities in the Vote Office shortly after the Chancellor has concluded his statement.

There is absolutely no substance in any suggestion or allegation that information is being concealed from Parliament. I give that absolute commitment to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. On the contrary, the Government are making more information alongside the Budget available than ever before.

Following the approach adopted by Customs and Excise in previous Budgets, this year the large volume of specialist technical information previously included in Inland Revenue press notices has been published in a separate series of Budget notes, as referred to in the pack, making the material issued more accessible and usable. This specialist, detailed, technical information is available on the Inland Revenue website and from Somerset house. Precisely the same amount of information is available this year as in previous years.

If it is convenient for Members, I will certainly require the Treasury to arrange for copies of those notes to be placed in the Vote Office before the debate resumes tomorrow. I emphasise, however, that all the information that is available, is available to Members.

Mr. Luff: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Although the Opposition are grateful for the Minister's courtesy, I am afraid that her point of order fell well short of our expectations.

I do not think the Minister understands the exact nature of the information that has not been made available to Members. I am looking at a list of press notices that would normally have been available in a wodge about two inches thick; instead, we have a thin document from which a number of items are missing. They include "Further help for Small businesses", REV C and E 1; REV 3, "Tax boost for employee share ownership"; REV BN 8, "Stamp Duty Reserve Tax and Individual Pension Accounts"; C and E, BN82/01, "VAT: Increased turnover limits for registration and deregistration" and—what about this one?—REV BN 21, "Loophole closed in controlled foreign company rules". Then there is "VAT: Changes in fuel scale charges".

I am afraid, Madam Deputy Speaker, that information of that kind would have been made available in earlier years as part of the Budget bundle. The Minister should reflect on what she has just told the House.

Mr. Sayeed: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been present for nearly five hours—certainly since 2.30 pm. I am not able to get to Somerset house, to a computer or on to the internet. I require the documents here, and I consider it an extraordinary insult to Parliament that the Government should not provide Members of Parliament with them.

Mr. Forth: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you confirm, or at least reflect on, the Government's tendency to assume that putting information on to something called a website, or something called the internet, is an acceptable substitute for the provision of information directly to MPs in the House of Commons for the purposes of a House of Commons debate?

I hope you will be able to confirm, Madam Deputy Speaker, that even in this day and age we as MPs can still expect the Government to provide information in written form when it is necessary for a debate in the House of Commons. Will you confirm that until the day comes when I am forced to use the internet or a website—neither has happened yet—or when we have those ghastly appurtenances in the Chamber, we can require information in written form when necessary?

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have heard three points of order, and I think that it is time for me to respond.

I said earlier that what is in the Vote Office is not the responsibility of the Chair. The Minister has offered Members an explanation, and will have heard the further comments that have been made. I think we should now return to the Budget debate.

Mr. Bottomley: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Having looked at the press notices that

[Mr. Bottomley]

we do have—they are contained in a bound volume—I note that the page numbers are not consecutive. People who look for the press notices that they do not have will find that the first list is on page 19, the second on page 11, the third on page 3, the fourth on page 4 and so on. I have found the one I want on page 7. The point that I am trying to make—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is continuing to discuss an issue raised in earlier points of order. Members have heard the comments that have been made and the Minister's reply, and I hope that due note will be taken.

Mr. Bottomley: The point is, does the Treasury, or do Treasury officials, have any copies of these press notices in the House at present? If they do not, it is disrespectful to Parliament; if they do, we want them as well.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have already explained that this is not a point of order for the Chair. The matter has been dealt with, and the issues have been raised. We must now continue with the debate.

8.14 pm

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): I greatly enjoyed the wander through the history of past Budgets that was the speech of the hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney). I wish that it had been a little swifter, but it was very enjoyable.

I want to take up two points made by the hon. Gentleman. Halfway through his remarks—after his Budget history—he made a statement with which I must take issue: he suggested that it was as though the Chancellor had invented a strong economy. I put it to the hon. Gentleman—in fact, I am certain of this—that we are talking about a Chancellor who has taxed a strong economy. He did not invent it. He is one of the fortunate Chancellors who managed to inherit a strong economy from a previous Administration.

Towards the end of his speech, the hon. Gentleman spoke of a war on poverty. I agree that a war on poverty is important—it is important to deal with poverty abroad and at home—but let me make a point to the hon. Gentleman that I trust he will make to his colleagues. It is likely that, at the end of the current Parliament, the amount of foreign aid that we provide from this country as a percentage of gross domestic product per person will be less today than it was under the last Conservative Government.

My other point is this. We can say all the nice things about war on poverty at home, but if we have—as I intend to demonstrate that we do have—a thoroughly inefficient tax and benefits regime, we cannot send help to where it is really needed.

One of the benefits of being in opposition—and there are very few—is that it provides an opportunity for radical thinking about policy. In no area is that more necessary than in the area of taxation. The intrusiveness, the complexity and the counter-productive nature of the current tax regime, and the failure of many tax proposals to do what they are designed to do, should have persuaded this Chancellor and earlier Governments to rethink the fundamentals of taxation. Successive Governments have failed to do so.

The evidence is clear. Tax legislation, even prior to this Budget, occupied more than 6,000 pages. In four years, the number of basic tax rates has risen from 15 to 38. Tolley's "Standard Tax Manual", the bible of tax accountants, has grown by more than 30 per cent. in the last three years. More tellingly, despite computerisation and companies' now being unpaid tax collectors, it costs £6 billion a year to run the Inland Revenue and the Benefits Agency. In 1950-51, when we did not have computers and companies were not unpaid tax collectors, it cost less than £1 billion in today's money to run the Inland Revenue and the equivalent of the Benefits Agency.

Things continue to get worse. Last year's Finance Act was the longest ever. Even before this Budget, a bewildering array of different rates, credits, tapers, allowances, rebates, reliefs, means tests and adjustments led us to a point at which even those with a fair degree of financial knowledge have not a clue about the true extent of their tax liabilities. An estimated 1 million people failed to return their self-assessment forms by the 31 January deadline. Because of the complexity and the weight of bureaucracy, there is clear evidence that those who are most in need are not receiving the help that they urgently require. Here I return to the point I made previously to the hon. Member for Stafford.

Government figures show that, although 750,000 pensioners inquired about their minimum income guarantee entitlement, only 62,000 entitled non-recipients made a successful claim. Additionally, only 2.9 million children's tax credit forms had been returned by February 2001. Consequently, 2.1 million eligible families have not applied for the tax credit. Moreover, although Ministers have repeatedly claimed that 1.5 million families would receive the working families tax credit, Department of Social Security figures show that, currently, it is going to only 1.1 million.

That situation is not right: it is the most needy who are being hurt. Yet it is a direct and unavoidable consequence of a labyrinthine tax system. It was wrong that many amendments to last year's Finance Bill became law without time for scrutiny. It is of no benefit to the nation's long-term prosperity that the cost to business of red tape and taxes introduced since May 1997 is £32.3 billion. Nor is it in anyone's interest to stifle the growth of small and micro-businesses. Yet figures from the Institute of Chartered Accountants show that, for micro-businesses, the average cost per business of implementing new legislation increased from £1,700 in 1999 to £3,600, in 2000. For small businesses, the average cost per business increased from £4,700, in 1999, to more than £8,000, in 2000.

I therefore hope that, whatever our political perspectives, we can all agree that the tax system that we have is not the tax system that we want or need, and that no amount of tinkering will remedy it. Consequently, I am drawn to the conclusion that radical reform of the tax and benefit system is necessary. However, before we can undertake such reform, we shall have to define our objectives.

I suggest that the first and over-arching objective of any tax system is that it is simple and transparent. Such a tax system is clearly preferable to a complex and opaque

one. A tax system should be easy to understand. Individuals with normal numerical skills should be able, roughly and quickly, to calculate their tax bills and to make an informed decision about the effect on them of each party's fiscal policy. I also believe that entrepreneurs and companies, especially small and micro-businesses, should not have to waste considerable time and money in administering their tax and regulatory affairs. I should also think that it is clearly desirable that the transition between the tax and benefit system should be seamless and promote economic activity.

More contentiously, I believe that wealth and job creators should make their expansion or diversification plans solely on the basis of business factors. Their decisions should not be skewed by tax considerations. I would hope that we can all agree that our tax system should attract inward investment. One thing that we know about large international companies is that, increasingly, they are basing themselves—and paying the majority of their taxes—in the most tax and regulation-friendly environment. Therefore, our tax regime should encourage multinational companies and individuals with skills that are easily portable to base themselves here.

The consequence of the IR35 legislation was that thousands of our brightest information technology entrepreneurs moved to countries where their efforts are better rewarded. Last year's row about so-called mixer taxes showed just how quickly multinationals can rework their investment strategy.

The final objective of our tax system should be to make tax avoidance unnecessary and tax evasion easier to detect and not worth the risk. The more complex and burdensome the tax regime, the more people will avoid or evade tax. Each year, from the homeowner who pays a workman in cash to large-scale international smuggling, billions of pounds worth of potential revenue is lost.

Today, my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) rightly raised the issue of tobacco smuggling. The Treasury itself estimates that, between 1997 and 1999, it lost £5 billion of revenue because of smuggled tobacco products. The Treasury's forecast total, just for 2000, is £4 billion. The size of the black economy has been estimated at between 7 and 10 per cent. of recorded GDP. In money terms, that is between £66.5 billion and £95 billion. It represents an annual loss to the Treasury of between £25 billion and £35.5 billion.

So much for the deficiencies of what we have and the principles that I believe should define what we need. The question that follows is whether we can construct a system of taxation and benefits that fulfils those objectives. I believe that we not only can but must build such a system. I suggest that a flat-rate tax on income, sales and businesses is one way of constructing that system.

On personal taxation, I would argue for the abolition of all income tax allowances and the imposition of a single tax rate on all forms of income. I believe that we should aim for a flat rate of tax of 10p. All other taxes on income and savings, including inheritance tax and capital gains tax, should be abolished.

I asked the Library to compute the revenue effects of moving to such a system. Imposition of a flat 10p tax rate on all income would produce a revenue gain for the Treasury of approximately £9.6 billion per annum, which could be used to reduce national insurance contributions. In time, administrative savings, reduction in the black economy and increased revenue flow may result in the elimination of NICs.

For indirect taxes, we should restructure the current VAT system to charge one universal rate. Again, the Library estimates that a flat 10 per cent. rate on all goods and services would be revenue neutral. However, the behavioural changes that would flow from a flat-rate tax would mean that the figure could be substantially lower—or, as I would prefer, that the extra revenue could be used to reduce excise duties.

The third and final tranche of these tax-simplification proposals is for companies. We should abolish all capital allowances and different rates of corporation tax and reliefs and establish a single, flat rate of corporation tax, which again should be set at 10 per cent. Unlike the two earlier proposals, this would lead to an initial loss of revenue of around £6 billion, but I believe that the economic fillip that would follow from such a simplification—and from the reduction in the overall tax burden—would mean that we could set a 10 per cent. rate with no net loss to long-term Treasury revenues.

However, it is clear that these figures have been calculated on the basis of a static snapshot of current revenues from current economic behaviour. I am convinced that if we simplified the tax system we would increase the revenues available to Government and thus be able to lower the rates still further.

Reducing the tax and benefit system administration costs by £5 billion, and cutting the black economy by £35 billion, would produce £40 billion. This additional money could reduce significantly, without impact on spending plans, the projected tax receipts for the current year of £150 billion from income tax and corporation tax and the £100 billion from VAT and other Customs and Excise duties.

The gains, however, would not stop there. The fact that businesses would not be wasting so much of their time, strategy and resources on tax concerns would produce a boost to our economy and attract inward investment. That, in turn, would generate extra tax revenues. Moreover, a reduction in Customs and Excise duties would add another revenue gain when the incentive for legally or illegally buying alcohol, tobacco and even fuel products abroad was reduced.

Mr. Bercow: I have no desire to distract attention from the agenda of big-ticket items on which my hon. Friend is rightly focusing his attention, but would he agree that a modest additional point might be that increasing public information about the taxes that we pay would act as an incentive for their simplification and reduction by the Government of the day?

Mr. Sayeed: I understand what my hon. Friend says, but the system is so complex that I doubt that we could persuade many electors or constituents to read the detail necessary to understand the range of taxes that are levied these days, let alone the new taxes added to them. I believe that we must go for root-and-branch surgery of the tax system, for the reasons that I have suggested.

There is clear evidence that a reduction in tax rates leads to greater tax revenues for the Treasury. That effect is called the Laffer curve effect, and it happened in this

[Mr. Sayeed]

country, the United States and New Zealand when the top rates of taxation were substantially reduced during the 1980s.

My proposals would clearly create winners and losers. Winners would not complain, so we would not have to worry about them, but we would have to worry about the losers. Unless ameliorating action were taken, those at the lower end of the income scale—who either pay very little tax or no tax at all—would face a significant reduction in purchasing power. However, I believe that we also need to simplify the benefits system radically. We should do so in a way that would have the overall effect of making nobody worse off than under the current system, but would also ensure the improved take-up of benefits.

My initial thoughts—and I stress that they are initial thoughts—are that we should replace all current social security benefits and state pensions. The state would then pay to each household receiving benefit a sum of money that ensured that the poorest families did not lose out because of the increased income and sales taxes that they would be liable to pay under a flat-rate tax proposal.

That payment would be tapered. It would start from a point that equals the purchasing power received from the current benefit. The next point is somewhat complicated—it is easier to draw it out on a graph than to describe it in words, but I will try. The payment would end at a "break even" point, at which losses from a flat-rate tax on currently untaxed earnings and spending equal the gains from a lower tax on already taxed earnings and spending. I assure right hon. and hon. Members that if they draw that graph, they will see that it provides a taper that gives the incentive for people to climb out of poverty.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I am fascinated by the hon. Gentleman's analysis. Will he acknowledge that the introduction of a taper would create bureaucracy and difficulties not unlike those associated with the present, relatively progressive, forms of taxation in the income tax sector of the economy? Is the hon. Gentleman flagging up his first Budget in the Administration led by the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) in about 2025 or 2030?

Mr. Sayeed: I am rather too old even to contemplate taking part in my hon. Friend's first Administration.

The hon. Gentleman has got it wrong. The proposal would reduce bureaucracy. I suggest that he gets a piece of graph paper, takes some figures and works it out—that will make my point easier to see. Clearly, bureaucracy would still exist but there would be less of it and it would be less complicated. We would not be in our current position, in which 5 million families are eligible for children's tax credit but only 2.9 million take it up.

Although the exact level of payments would be a political decision, such a transparent system would unlock wasted and uncollected resources. Administration costs would be cut and the annual social security fraud bill of £7 billion a year would also be reduced.

I do not underestimate the enormity of the task of devising or moving to a new system. However, I firmly believe that we cannot afford to lose sight of the huge opportunities that such a radical shift would offer and, most importantly of all, the threats to the United Kingdom's long-term prosperity that may arise if we do not make such a move.

Let me conclude with a quotation from Adam Smith:

"Little else is requisite to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism, but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice; all the rest being brought about by the natural course of things."

I commend to the Chancellor the words of his compatriot.

8.38 pm

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): There has been some lamentable opposition to the Budget, not least from the Leader of the Opposition. We have seen what a mess the Conservative party is. The conference at the weekend set the style and showed the difference that exists between the two parties. That was confirmed today—the Conservative party wants to be a tax-cutting party for the rich, whereas we want prosperity and stability and to ensure that public services are invested in and developed.

This is a Budget for stability—we can see that in the investment in public services. It is also a Budget for families. Importantly, it is a redistributive Budget. "Redistribution" is a word that we should use more. The Budget will contribute to the continuation of the redistribution for which the Government have been responsible over the past few years.

The Budget is a further attack on poverty, of which there is a great deal in areas such as Halton. Many families suffered for many years under the Tory Government. We are at last seeing money going to the poorest, who will also receive help in terms of jobs and education.

It is clear that the Conservatives do not have a thought-out policy. Today, *The Sun* published an interesting editorial stating:

"We fear shadow chancellor Michael Portillo's economics do not stack up, however. First he scraps plans to guarantee lower taxes. Then he says his is the party of lower taxes . . . Then he promises more on schools, more camps for asylum seekers and more on hospitals."

That sums up the Conservative party; it does not have a clue about running the economy or about paying for its so-called tax cuts. The Conservatives would be able to find that money only from education, health and other public services.

The Sun also discusses the issue of giving the country back to the people. It states:

"No matter what Hague says, he was allowing his new speechwriter to flirt with extremism."

We have come to something when even *The Sun* says that the Conservative party is extreme.

Today's Budget will set the scene for the next few years. People will see that it will benefit them and improve their lives. It is clear that people do not want the Tories to get their hands on public services—they know what would happen.

Today, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced that the rate of inflation is the lowest since 1963. We have the lowest mortgage rates for some time. My right hon. Friend said that, between 1979 and 1997, the average mortgage rate was about 11 per cent., but that it is 6.3 per cent. at present. That figure is important. During the late 1980s and the early 1990s, people were paying

tremendous mortgage rates—for many ordinary families that meant an extra £200 or £300 a month from their earnings. The rates have come down considerably, which will help and benefit families. We shall reap that benefit at election time.

Inflation is down. It is important that the Chancellor set the figure for next year at about 2.5 per cent. If the inflation rate is too low, the danger is that interest rates may be affected. I do not want interest rates to stay as they are or to rise; I want them to come down so that they benefit manufacturing industry in my area.

I especially want to refer to the Chancellor's important announcements about the regions and about help for the older industrial areas in the cities. Runcorn has a long-established chemical industry; it is very much an industrial area. The measures on tax and the help for regeneration are most welcome.

I welcome the greater flexibility in the powers of regional development agencies. That is clearly needed, because the Treasury held the reins of the RDAs too tightly. That flexibility will ensure greater investment and prosperity in the regions, and more jobs will result. However, more can and will be done to ensure such investment. Regions such as the north-west must receive a bigger slice of the cake. London and the south-east are overheating—there are jobs by the thousand and prosperity is growing much faster than elsewhere. We need that regeneration.

The Chancellor mentioned City institutions. It is time that they looked beyond London and the south-east to ensure that investment is made in the regions. Yesterday, a report on banks noted that they do not appear to support small business start-ups or to help existing businesses to continue and to avoid bankruptcy. It is important to tackle the way that banks support business development.

I welcome the Chancellor's comments and the announcements he made on the regional agenda and about regeneration. That is especially important. I welcome the extra help for youth unemployment, especially for those young people who have difficulties in getting work because of social problems, drug problems and so on. In areas such as mine, where there is a large drug problem, the extra resources announced by the Chancellor can be used to deal with that situation. Young people can get back into the labour market only if they receive support and specialist advice on a one-to-one basis. Again, it is a Labour Government who are delivering that.

I am delighted that the Chancellor is doing more for lone parents. My constituency has a high ratio of lone-parent families, and it is good to see that my right hon. Friend is delivering for them. On the working families tax credit and the children's tax credit, I agree with my right hon. Friend that we must ensure that money gets to the families who need it most. Of course, most pressure is put on family earnings and expenditure when the children are younger, so it is right that he is targeting those families. I am especially pleased with the increases that he has mentioned today, because I reckon that, on a rough estimate, they will benefit more than 50 per cent. of the families in my constituency. That is a phenomenal figure. Thousands of families will receive extra resources, helping parents and their children. It is clear that this is a Budget for the family—we are seeing that investment.

I welcome what my right hon. Friend said about cars and the fact that more cars, especially new ones, will qualify for the reduced rate of vehicle excise duty. That will be most welcome for people in my constituency.

I want briefly to return to the children's tax credit. We can help families in many ways, but there is no perfect way to do so. There have been large increases in child benefit, but the children's tax credit will be especially helpful. I hope that it will be implemented as soon as possible and that it will run smoothly.

I welcome the point made today on drugs. As I have said, my constituency has a particularly difficult drug problem. There may be several reasons for that problem, but it causes crime, nuisance and concern to my constituents. It is not uncommon or irregular for constituents to visit me to complain about drug dealing, its effects and the people who tear into the houses where drugs are being sold. It is sometimes difficult for the resources to be put in place, but they clearly have an important part to play in attacking that problem. I am sure that my constituents will welcome the fact that that is happening. I am pleased that the money will go directly to the crime partnerships and police commanders in the area. That will certainly produce a more co-ordinated approach and more resources will be put into tackling the drug problem in areas such as mine. I also welcome that part of the Budget.

We have talked a great deal about savings. I asked the Library to produce a document on savings. Even with TESSAs—tax-exempt special savings accounts—new savings did not increase massively under the Conservatives. Often, with tax benefits and ways of earning better rates of return, people who tend to save anyway put their money into such schemes. I am not sure whether, in recent years, there has been a significant amount of savings. The drop in savings has gone on for a considerable time. There is no easy answer to that problem, but it would be silly to suggest that it is any worse under this Government; it is a social issue. People want to save, but they need an incentive, and my right hon. Friend has dealt with that in his Budget statement.

The Chancellor announced new expenditure for schools and hospitals. Those specific areas mark the dividing line between Labour and Conservative Members. He announced massive extra expenditure on hospitals, especially for acute services, which will be most welcome to my constituents. It is interesting that the Labour Government want to invest in and improve the health service so that it provides a better service, but the Conservative party wants to privatise the health service.

As we heard earlier, some Conservative Members think that they must go some way down the privatisation route. The leader of the Conservative party, the shadow Chancellor and the shadow health spokesman talk about extending private insurance and giving people incentives, but they do not come out and say that they want a more privatised health service, with less public provision. That is what Conservatives Members want, given the way in which they react when they talk about the issue. We all know that the poorest, the least well-off, will suffer badly as a result. The Tories are actually saying that they are abandoning any hope of providing a publicly funded health service that is free at the point of use. The electorate will not wear that; they want a party that is committed to investing in and providing a quality service, ensuring that people get the health care that they deserve.

[Mr. Derek Twigg]

It is no use pretending that changes will happen overnight, but some people might have thought that they would take place quickly. However, the investment is now being made and we are beginning to see the results. We need more nurses, so I welcome my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's decision to put more money into recruitment. It takes about three years to train nurses, so we shall see the benefits of that decision in a year or two.

The dividing line is clear: one either wants a publicly funded health service with the Labour party or a service that will gradually be privatised by stealth under the Conservatives. They should be open and honest about their policy and say exactly what they want to do. They should not hide behind their current remarks on the extension of private health insurance.

I welcome the fact that money will go directly to schools. When the money comes from bureaucracies, such as Whitehall or councils, money can be lost on the costs of administration. Schools want to use the money in whatever way they wish. They should be able to decide whether to spend it on new teachers, books, new equipment or investment in the school's infrastructure, which are all crucial.

I have spoken to head teachers recently and they have told me that never has so much money come through to the education service as has happened in the past year or two. They have been able to spend that money and, in my area, some of it has gone on two new classrooms. In addition, the building of a brand new primary school, for which we have waited 11 years, is just about to finish. It has been built under a Labour Government.

Education standards have risen. In the primary sector, Halton has had some of the best improvements in the key stage 2 results, whereas 40 or 50 per cent. of children were written off under the Conservatives. The Labour Government are willing to invest in education and to develop the service.

What is the Conservatives' panacea? They merely want to reintroduce grammar schools as a means of dealing with educational standards. However, we all know that standards are raised by having resources, quality teachers and quality leadership in schools. It is pleasing that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is devoting more money to the recruitment of teachers. Anyone who has spoken to head teachers will know that recruitment has been a problem.

Mr. David Taylor: I acknowledge the warm welcome that will be given to the sums that will go directly to each school in the country. However, does my hon. Friend agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor), who asked my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister about the urgent need to tackle the funding formula, which is so capricious in the way in which it distributes resources? My county of Leicestershire is at the bottom of the league table under the standard spending assessment for primary and secondary school pupils. Should not the formula be a priority for the incoming Administration, whom we hope will be elected on 3 May, 7 June or whenever it might be?

Mr. Twigg: My hon. Friend makes an important point. However, to focus on my backyard, Halton schools have done particularly well under the education SSA funding formula. In fact, people like me predicted that they would benefit when the borough broke away from Cheshire and became a unitary authority. Our predictions were borne out in a parliamentary answer that I received only last week, which shows that expenditure per head on the pre-school, primary and secondary sectors is much better than in Cheshire. The Government are ensuring that resources go to areas such as mine, which is among the top 20 most deprived boroughs in England and Wales. For years, we were neglected by both the Tory Government and the county council, but we are now seeing the benefit of the extra resources.

However, I understand my hon. Friend's point. We had a similar problem with our SSA for highways. Changes resulted in the council losing quite a lot of money. Clearly, there is a case for a fairer and better targeted SSA formula and the Government are committed to considering that. We should not forget that the formula was used under the Conservative Government, so it ill behoves Conservatives Members to attack us on that issue. We cannot do everything at once, but the Government are committed to considering the issue. There are problems, but good results have been achieved under the Government's policy.

To return to the issue of schools, I want to comment on my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's policy for better skills. People will have better skills only if they receive a good primary and secondary education. They also need to receive high-quality post-16 further education. I am pleased that more resources will go into further education. That will improve the skills and abilities of people so that they go into the work force and attract the industries that we need into areas such as mine. It is important to put education, skills and investment together.

Manufacturing has been mentioned. The regional development agencies and the improvements to the tax system will help businesses, especially small businesses. Ineos took over ICI's operations in Runcorn and employs more than 2,000 people. Last week, it announced 450 job losses. That is one of a number of similar announcements that have been made over the past few years in the manufacturing sector of my constituency. It is clear that we need a manufacturing industry because the skills that it provides are important for the nation's economic wealth. However, there is not much that a company can do on its own to provide the climate for a thriving manufacturing industry, because of the global markets and so on. It is important to keep interest rates low. There is a problem with the exchange rate with the euro and the ability of, for example, the chemical industry, which is a commodity-based industry, to sell its goods abroad.

One of the biggest problems at the Runcorn site is that ICI did not invest in the industry at Daresbury for 10 years or more. The Government have to address the lack of investment in research and development, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor mentioned. Many of our companies have not invested in new machinery, either because the banks are too short-sighted to lend or because the management is too short-sighted. British management, certainly in our top industries, is lacking. Although there are many good people, the ability and talent of management needs to improve. We must register that. The bloke or woman on the shop floor is, of course, part of an industry's productivity, but we also need good leadership

and investment. Management needs to bring about productivity changes by investing and making their companies more efficient.

Last year, the Government decided not to locate the synchrotron at Daresbury. I am pleased that last week they agreed to make a large investment of possibly £180 million to secure the excellent work force of scientists, technicians and so on at Daresbury. That will become an important beacon for the north-west, especially because of the way in which the Government intend to fund it. It could involve the regional development agency, the university and others. Instead of just sustaining jobs, it could create thousands of new ones because the RDA wants to develop a science or technology park there. That is a great development and is a sign that the Government have listened to what has been a long campaign.

I want to congratulate my right hon. Friend on the Budget. He has again got it right. It is not perfect, but it hits the right buttons. It is important that we get public services right. It is not easy to introduce change overnight, but it takes a Labour Government to deliver that. People want security for their families, security of employment, security against crime and a secure environment. The Government want to provide that. It takes investment and good management, and we must bring that about. I am pleased to support the Budget tonight. It clearly puts dividing lines between us and the Tory party.

8.59 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): The hon. Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) took exception to the expression "the Chancellor's war chest", which Liberal Democrat Members have often used. The war chest is a reality; it has been boasted about by the Chancellor today and by other Ministers in recent weeks. We can disagree about its provenance—whether it is due to good management, good fortune or just parsimony—but it undoubtedly exists. In this Budget the Chancellor had at his disposal a substantial amount of money to do whatever he felt was right.

Although it is difficult to judge a Budget on first hearing, and often a few days must elapse before everyone understands its complexities, many people will find this Budget a rather dull affair. There were certainly very few surprises in it. This morning's *Financial Times* listed almost every one of the Chancellor's proposals in black and pink.

Mr. Kidney: The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) asked earlier for three more spending commitments: money for the consequences of foot and mouth, money to fund the abolition of tuition fees for students and more money for long-term care. His argument was "spend, spend, spend". Has the hon. Gentleman read Viv Nicholson's biography, called "spend, spend, spend"? She won a lot of money on the pools, spent the lot and went broke. Should we expect a Liberal Democrat Government to feel as if they had won the lottery and to spend, spend, spend until the country went broke?

Mr. Heath: I say in the gentlest of ways that that intervention was not worthy of the hon. Gentleman. He was at pains to advise the House of the top rate of tax under various Labour Administrations. He did not get as far as the Administration led by Baroness Thatcher, but had he done so he might have pointed out that the top rate of tax then was 50 per cent. He might then have told us whether he thought that an excessive rate for those earning over £100,000. I believe that it is not excessive, and it is entirely appropriate that the revenue raised from a top rate for those earning over £100,000 should be spent on dealing with deficiencies in our public services. I turn to that subject now.

We are used to hearing recurrent announcements of Government expenditure. That is to say that the announcement is made, repeated a few months later by the Department concerned, repeated yet again in the pre-Budget report and then again in the Budget. Eventually, a few years later, when everybody has forgotten it, it appears as new money. The Government have excelled at that practice. We had not previously witnessed to the same extent a practice that was evident today—a restatement of money that has already been spent. I refer to the continuing use of underspends in previous Budgets—so-called committed, new money at the time—for a different purpose in the following Budget, as if the Chancellor were plucking a rabbit from a hat, when he has merely failed to meet the commitment that he made the previous year. That unfortunate practice is to be regretted.

We assume that this is a pre-election Budget, perhaps intended to reassure the readers of the *Daily Mail* or to encourage others to swim into the new Labour net. When we analyse it, the only conclusion that we can draw is that there is a huge disparity between the tax-cutting measures and the so-called additional expenditure. A rough analysis shows that one figure is six times the other. That shows the Chancellor's priorities, if not for ever then at least for the moment, with electoral purposes in mind.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) said, our criticism of the Government, and that levelled by many people in the country, is that it shows a poverty of ambition. I think that Nye Bevan's phrase "a poverty of aspiration" is more apt when one considers what could be achieved with this uniquely advantageous financial and economic situation. We could put right some of the problems in the public services which have been allowed to decay for so long. The indictment is that, four years into this Government, class sizes at the top end of primary schools and in secondary schools are not smaller, but larger, and that is not what a Labour Government were elected to achieve. We still have fewer police officers on our streets than there were in 1997. A Labour Government were not elected for that, either. We still have people waiting yet longer for their hospital operations. We still have a transport system that is worse than appalling, and is in complete disintegration.

Problems have ensued as a result of adopting the Conservative Government's spending plans. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) described them as "eye-wateringly right", yet the incoming Labour Government not only adopted them but underspent them. They are now running hard to catch up with what Labour promised before and during the election. The Government have clearly failed to deliver since the election.

That is why we have failed to make good. There are problems with student tuition fees in England, but progress has been made in Scotland. We have failed to come to terms with the needs of long-term care in

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England, but again progress has been made in Scotland. We have failed to give pensioners the sort of deal that they wished for.

The hon. Member for Stafford will perhaps give a warmer welcome to my bringing to the attention of the House yet again another problem that is associated with the Government's expenditure plans, which is the uneven distribution of the funds that have been made available. Some areas have not seen the great benefit, or certainly not to an equal extent, of increased education or health spending over the past year. Much of that is to do with wretched formulae that are biased against some areas compared with others.

The hon. Gentleman knows that I agree entirely with what he has to say on the issue. We have crusaded on an entitlement for children, irrespective of where they live. He mentioned disparities between one shire county and another. I go further and draw attention to the disparity between children in Somerset—my children, attending a local education authority school—and a child who is being educated, as are the Prime Minister's children, at a publicly funded school in Hillingdon, where funding is £1,500 per child per year more as a result of Government formulae. That cannot be right.

That sort of disparity is extraordinary and wrong. It creates many other distortions, because if the local authority has decency and a commitment to education, it will move funds from other areas of spending to ensure that its schools are well provided for. That means that road maintenance will be reduced, spending on social services reduced or the council tax increased. Council tax is increasing disproportionately because of the shift from direct taxation—that is, the progressive taxation that is income tax—to the much less progressive taxation that is council tax. That shift took place under the previous Government and it continues to take place under the present Government.

It is time the Government got to grips with the basic problems of area cost adjustment and standard spending assessment and the iniquities that flow from them. It is not good enough to pretend that eventually there will be consensus among local authorities on the road ahead. Of course there will not be. Rightly, every local authority will be arguing for the needs of its own areas and will get the best possible deal for children and council tax payers in those areas.

It is impossible to reach consensus. It is important that the Government accept that there is an injustice, and deal with it. One approach, which the Government are using, is the direct funding of schools. That has merit because at least it gets some money into the schools that need it. There are also demerits. One of the difficulties is a threshold system. There are sudden, quantum shifts in funding. A family left a village in my constituency, and a school that had always had 102 pupils on its roll found overnight that it had only 99. As a result, it lost substantial moneys through the Government's distribution formula.

Mr. David Taylor: I certainly endorse the hon. Gentleman's point. It is not beyond the wit of civil servants in the Department for Education and Employment to create a model that will provide a per capita sum of direct payment for each child on the roll. One would think that they were unaware of the existence of even simple spreadsheets to allocate the sums that the Chancellor has available to him. I agree that the situation is grossly inequitable, especially for small schools that may be one pupil short of the band width.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He and I are as one on this; we represent broadly similar areas and know the true state of affairs in them.

Finally on education, it is rich to hear the Chancellor talk again about the paramount need to recruit more teachers. Of course there is a desperate need to recruit more teachers; there are fewer applications now than in 1997, and there are 11,000 empty places. However, the right incentives are needed, and teachers do not believe that the Government have yet found the incentives to encourage people into the teaching profession. It is a little tardy of the Government to wait until there are 11,000 vacancies before starting to address a problem that people have identified for several years.

Moving on to small businesses, I congratulate the Chancellor on introducing measures of advantage to them in the Budget. However, measures still need to be taken, the most important of which, according to businesses with which I have dealings in my constituency, especially retail businesses, concerns the uniform business rate. That monstrous imposition by the previous Government has continued virtually unchanged under this Government; it actively militates against small shopkeepers and benefits large supermarkets on the outskirts of town. It desperately needs reform or, better still, replacement by a fairer system of business taxation; at least its effects could be mitigated in the short term if the Treasury felt it appropriate to use funds to produce an allowances system for businesses with a small turnover.

The Government do not seem to have engaged with that issue—I wish that they would. I wish that they would also engage with the cost to small businesses of administering an increasingly complicated tax system. A lot of personal taxation measures have implications for small businesses and the way in which they operate. A lot more should be done by civil servants, rather than by people who are trying to run a business and administer the Government's tax system at the same time: that cannot be a sensible way to proceed.

I am worried that a Government who proclaim that the tax system needs to be simplified are constantly complicating it. There was a stretch in the Chancellor's address when I thought to myself, "Every single mother who is trying to work will need a resident chartered accountant to find her way through a system that is being devised to provide her with support." I urge the Chancellor to look at that again.

I shall briefly mention a couple of specific areas. First, the aggregates levy is of great importance to my constituency, which is one of the country's primary producers of limestone aggregates. Everyone accepts that there are arguments both way on that levy. However, there is a consensus that a crude levy which does not reward companies that have made the effort to put in infrastructure to do the right environmental thing, as compared with those who have done no such thing, is a bad environmental instrument. Unfortunately, that is what we have at the moment. Prolonged discussions between the Department of the Environment, Transport and the

Regions, the Treasury and the quarry companies have not yet reached any conclusion. I regret the fact that the levy is to be introduced and that a rebate system to encourage good environmental practice is still wishful thinking. That is however a priority if the levy is to work as we hope that it will.

With regard to rural areas more broadly, I notice that the pesticides tax has still not been removed from the agenda, despite the firmly expressed views of the Minister of Agriculture in many forums, and of the Prime Minister on at least one occasion. The rubric in the documents before us suggests that matters are proceeding on a voluntary basis, with the threat of an enforced pesticides tax on the industry. That could not happen at a less opportune time for agriculture.

There is a growing view that agrimonetary compensation is the Government's response to foot and mouth. It is not. Agrimonetary compensation is intended to deal with the difficulties of currency exchange and to provide farmers with the sum that they should have received in the first place. It is not an adequate substitute for doing what needs to be done to deal with the foot and mouth epidemic.

Of course, I welcome the fact that agrimonetary compensation has been drawn down. Of course, too, I recognise the difficulties caused by the Fontainebleau rebate and the way in which it operates; but agrimonetary compensation is not a substitute for other Treasury action, in conjunction with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, nor does it answer the question of what is to happen next year, when there will be no agrimonetary compensation mechanism and nothing to replace it.

I know that other hon. Members wish to speak and I do not want to take their time. I conclude by quoting paragraph 5.87 of the Budget document, which is headed "Strengthening rural communities" and which states:

> "The Government's vision for the countryside, as set out in the Rural White Paper in November 2000, is of thriving rural communities with access to high quality public services, a diverse rural economy providing high and sustainable levels of employment, an enhanced and sustainable environment which all can enjoy, and a countryside which can shape its own future with its voice heard by Government at all levels."

We could all sign up to that aspiration, but the reality in Somerset and the south-west generally is far from that. I should like to have seen genuine measures in the Budget to deal with many of the problems that rural areas face. I did not find such measures in the Chancellor's statement. In that respect, if in no other, the Budget has failed the people of rural Britain.

9.17 pm

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Economists make a fairly straightforward distinction between macro-economics and micro-economics and the problems with which they deal. A Budget deals with the macro issues, but we all analyse its micro-economic implications for our constituencies.

The hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) made a purely macro-economic speech. He spoke of what he wanted from a Budget and about the developments that would take place. It was a strange speech, as it seemed to start from a socialist position, in which the hon. Gentleman argued for universal benefits, but as the speech developed, other peculiar ideas appeared in it, and by the end it sounded poujadist, with tax rates all at 10 per cent. It was difficult to see where the revenue would come from for the provision of universal benefits.

My speech will focus on the other end of the spectrum. It will be a micro-economic speech about my constituency and its problems, and how they could be affected by one particular aspect of the Budget. Before Christmas, I spoke at length in the House about a problem at the southern end of my constituency, with the threatened closure of Biwater pipe works. I wanted the Department of Trade and Industry to refer the matter to the Competition Commission. I believed that we could make a case showing why the takeover that had led to the closure threat should not take place.

Despite the arguments that were advanced, the plant has now been closed and 700 jobs have gone. Many other jobs in scrapyards and community services have also been lost because of the closure. In Clay Cross, 8.5 per cent. of males were unemployed before the closure of Biwater. Since then, although one or two of those made redundant have found jobs, unemployment among men has risen to 15 per cent. That is a fairly reasonable estimate, as the people involved in scrapyards and other services connected with the plant are obviously not finding alternative employment.

As we could not save the plant, many people, including me, have had since the closure to turn our attention to the economic and social regeneration of the devastating situation that developed in the Clay Cross area. The Budget statement contained aspects that should be teased out, as they could have great relevance to the developments that are needed. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor said that throughout Britain, whether in new towns, traditional inner cities or former coal, textile and steel communities, the way forward for regeneration is to harness both new public and private investment and to introduce new fiscal incentives to extend the opportunities for enterprise from some of the country to all of it.

Obviously, such issues worry us very much. I shall not deal with all the points made by my right hon. Friend, but I want to mention his six-point programme, which involved policies such as community investment tax credits, development of empty flats above shops, reclamation of contaminated land and so on, all of which are relevant to Clay Cross. What are the parameters of the six points contained in the Budget speech? Does my area automatically qualify, and if we do not, why not? I believe that we have the strongest case imaginable for being included. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry recognised at the Labour party conference the particular problems of the steel, coal and textile industries and others, and referred specifically to the problems that arose in the Clay Cross area because of Biwater.

That is why we need the matters to be fully tied together. The now derelict plant was established by George Stephenson in 1837. The site is contaminated and many difficulties are associated with it, but we want to know what will happen to it. Although it was taken over and then quickly closed by Saint-Gobain, a multinational company, Biwater still owns the land and buildings.

Adrian White is the major mover in this respect, but we do not know about his plans for the area. Indeed, I know of no Government Department or local government department that knows about them. Speculation is rife and

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people are worried that the site will be used for an environmentally unacceptable purpose. They are anxious about the possibility that it will be used for incinerators or other disposal facilities. When nothing is said, the rumour develops and as it is not contradicted, we have reason to begin to worry that that might be on the cards.

We do not want more developments such as those that have taken place in our area in the past, which would harm any future work force and the local communities. For example, before I became a Member of Parliament in 1987, the Vinatex plant at Staveley in my constituency was closed. The Vinatex research group has now been established. Serious medical problems have arisen from the plastics that Vinatex produced.

The Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999 codifies many European Union measures, but it was also influenced by other considerations, such as a visit by the Minister for the Environment to Killamarsh, another problem area in my constituency, where two escapes of acid gas had occurred. He said that powers would be made available under the 1999 Act to make directions. Therefore, if an application is made to use the Biwater site for proposals that we perceive as environmentally dangerous, there are more measures nowadays whereby we can tackle the problem. Perhaps the position could be improved further. Some of the information that has become available through research by De Montfort university into Vinatex might help to strengthen the health and safety aspects of the legislation in future.

We must be constantly on our guard against developments being foisted upon us, and the attitude "jobs at any price", even when they could be dangerous. We want growth, and co-ordinated action by the Government to provide the necessary improvements to prosperity in an area that has been shattered by a specific development.

Some aspects of the Budget will affect Clay Cross and the surrounding areas because of their general impact throughout the country. For example, we will get our share of the money for education and health. That will have some knock-on consequences. However, perhaps it is only in the long run that they will help such a deprived area. John Maynard Keynes said:

"In the long run we are all dead."

Many capitalists adopted that attitude to the operation of economic structures. Co-ordinated activity that brings together the different resources that begin to become available is important.

I cited the part of the Chancellor's speech that referred to new public-private investment and fiscal incentives. If I was running things, I would not necessarily propound and advocate such measures. I would press for public provision and funding, and the use of Government resources to achieve results. However, I live in the world as it is, and I am trying to fight for a large corner of my constituency that has been hammered. Public-private investment and incentive schemes will exist, and I want to ensure that we get our fair whack and are not overlooked.

Although there are many different schemes for which we can apply, sometimes in competition with other areas, we need to ensure that Government bodies, with local people, help to produce ideas for growth in the whole area. One particular body that does that is the Government office of the east midlands. Another body that is responsible for co-ordination in Government—in addition to the Cabinet Office—is the Prime Minister's Office. There are connections to the Prime Minister's Office in relation to this matter, because we need to ensure that it is not only matters that have been in the pipeline for a while that are covered. For example, there are developments at Clay Cross, new business provisions at Coney Green and the Markham employment growth zone, from which there will be some feed-in. Clay Cross has assisted area status, which gives it access to regional selective assistance and enterprise grants.

However, it must be realised that wider problems affect the area of north-east Derbyshire. Its unemployment difficulties make it less easy to handle the situation, and that needs to be taken into account. Some special funding arrangements, and some central planning, need to be put in place to try to address our problems.

One such problem is an issue that other hon. Members have already mentioned: the problem of poor local government funding. In the North-East Derbyshire district and within Derbyshire county council area, ever since the Local Government Act 1988, which introduced the poll tax—the only element of that Act that was ever shifted was the change from the poll tax to the council tax—we have had ghastly funding provision in the county.

Funding has picked up recently, and there have been specific grants from the Department for Education and Employment and others in connection with education, but generally we have been at the bottom of the list for funding provision. Before the introduction of the 1988 Act, the schools in Derbyshire had the smallest class sizes in any shire county in England. By 1997, their classes were among the largest. That was the function of the formula that was being operated.

Two particular fiddles are involved. One is the area cost adjustment, which takes a great deal out of our money not only in terms of education but in other areas of funding. The effect was multiplied to cover other elements of provision in county council services. A lot of people in the county travel to work in neighbouring areas such as Chesterfield and Sheffield, and we lose massive amounts of money as a result. I think that we are the third worst area in the country in that regard. According to something called the enhanced population figures, the daytime population figure is taken into account in an exaggerated way, rather than the resident population figure.

That problem will not be put right until the proposals in the Green Paper take effect—despite the pressures that have been brought to bear—which could mean waiting another three years for it to be corrected. Account has to be taken in the meantime, therefore, of those who have suffered seriously over the years that the problem has existed.

We also suffer from having lost objective 2 funding, as we were near an area with objective 1 funding, which is pulling in provisions that we find it difficult to obtain. The fact that the Department of Trade and Industry did not get the position that was put to the European Union right must also be taken into account in the context of our funding provision. In certain parts of my constituency, we even do very badly in terms of lottery funding, although Killamarsh in the north has done slightly better. When the district council tries to put that right by appointing a lottery officer, it is hamstrung by not readily having the resources to run that kind of activity.

My constituency has specific difficulties, and the Budget contains an opening—apart from the general provisions from which everyone will benefit in the long run—for specific provision for areas that have suffered from bouts of loss of industry, particularly in manufacturing. I hope that our claims will be heard and fully considered, and that Ministers will elaborate on the measures that have been outlined briefly to us, so that we are fully involved. We need some central co-ordination to ensure that we get the type of provision required.

9.35 pm

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Although Members on both sides of the Chamber hope that the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) will have many other opportunities to address the House, it is right to pay tribute to the service that he has given to his constituents over the years. If I may, I shall add to his name that of his helper, Gary Kent, who, in many of the activities in which the hon. Gentleman has been involved, has contributed much for the public service that is offered through politics, whether in a party sense or otherwise.

As on other occasions, it was interesting to hear the hon. Gentleman speak about his constituency, and the House will be sympathetic over the Biwater closure. He talked positively about the need to recognise the resources within areas, which should not be taken for granted when people are considering what can be done through partnership arrangements, lottery funding or other activities, and he will agree that what appear to be less well-regarded areas containing less well-regarded people have provided, for example, the founders of the co-operative movement, the trade unions and small businesses.

Such people also helped to create political parties and used the extension of the franchise to found mass political organisations. We ought to learn from our forefathers and, for that matter, our foremothers.

Mr. Forth: Is one not enough?

Mr. Bottomley: I am trying to be politically correct for the benefit of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth).

On mass membership, the political parties probably have fewer members than they have had for a long time, although I suspect that the drop in membership of the new Labour party is even greater than that in the membership of the Conservative party.

I pay tribute to a point made by the hon. Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg), who was right to say that we need to bring the family perspective into our analysis of Budget measures and social and economic policy. That is the only nice thing that I shall say about the hon. Gentleman. He is not here, so I should not say that the rest of his speech was pretty snide and hardly worth listening to.

We must acknowledge the important point that, at times, people have family responsibilities, and I pay tribute to the Chancellor for recognising that. The right hon. Gentleman has been able to do so because he has taken advice, which I have offered after a number of Budget speeches over a number of years, that the Department of Social Security should not be involved in setting income support or benefit levels for children.

In the traditional system, under which the Secretary of State for Social Security is supposed to get involved in negotiations with the Chief Secretary and, thereafter, the Chancellor and probably the Prime Minister, the question can arise each year, "Do you seriously want flat rate increases in child benefit or would you prefer to get more of the available money to those below the poverty line?" The sensible answer each year is, apparently, "Help the poorest." However, if we help only the poorest, the value of child benefit may hold steady in absolute terms, one year against another, but it certainly will not rise in line with average earnings.

I am glad that the Chancellor has got rid of the fiction that the Secretary of State for Social Security in effect takes responsibility for the child benefit level. That responsibility has always, and properly, been in the hands of the Chancellor. This Chancellor has shown that to be the case and there have been significant increases, which matter. No one can claim that everyone in full-time work can earn enough to support a spouse and children. They cannot.

If ever we try to return to raising pay so that people can achieve that, we shall end up in an inflationary spiral and pensioners and those with children will be worse off. If we want to have any kind of equity in this country, we must ensure that those who look after children or who are past working age do not suffer as those of us of working age go on an illusory chase after money that is not there.

I shall refer briefly to the Chancellor giving himself a pat on the back about the level of public debt. He misleads himself, but not any Member who has bothered to study the figures, when he talks as though the previous Conservative Government did bad things with the national debt. They did not. In fact, during their 18 years in office, public debt as a proportion of gross national product roughly doubled in other European countries, rising from 37 per cent.—I think—to 74 per cent. In this country, meanwhile, it fell—depending on which years we choose as the starting and finishing points—from about 44 or 45 per cent. by about 10 per cent., to 41 per cent. or less.

The Chancellor cannot really claim credit for the first year in which he held his office, as he was carrying forward Conservative spending policies. Before his 24 stealth taxes and his 20 business stealth taxes were introduced, debt as a proportion of gross national product had dropped to 35, 36 or 37 per cent. If the right hon. Gentleman claims that national debt doubled under the Conservatives, he may be right if he is merely counting the number of pound notes, but in terms of gross national product, or gross domestic product—which is the only sensible comparison, even for someone as clever as the Chancellor—he is simply wrong, and he should stop saying things that are misleading. Indeed, I wish the whole Government would stop saying things that are misleading.

Mr. David Taylor: It is not clear to me whether the hon. Gentleman is about to commend or criticise the Chancellor's track record over the past four years, and his stated aim in relation to debt repayment over the next five years. Does he not agree that one of the strengths of the Chancellor's activities over the past four years has been his driving down of public debt, thus enabling interest payments to be diverted for more profitable and effective purposes?

Mr. Bottomley: Perhaps; but if the Chancellor continues to maintain that people must turn their pensions

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savings into annuities, and if the repayment of Government debt means that their return from buying Government stock goes down, he will be kicking the pensioners yet again. We should remember that the biggest stealth tax introduced by the Chancellor was the £5,000 million--probably adding up to £20-odd billion over the lifetime of the Parliament—that he obtained by withdrawing dividend tax credit from pension funds and individuals. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman's intervention has helped him much.

The hon. Gentleman should look at table C23 on page 212 of the Red Book. He will see that in the last year of the last Labour Government public sector net debt was 47.3 per cent. of GDP, and that in the first year of the present Labour Government it was 39.6 per cent. That is a significant drop.

It is also worth noting that when the Chancellor and the Prime Minister make comparisons with the last Conservative Government, they are often unclear about whether they are referring to the period from 1979 onwards, when we had to sort out Labour's mess, or to the period following 1992 when, as we all remember, Labour was fortunate enough not to be elected. That enabled Labour to go into the 1997 election saying, "We are glad that you did not vote for us in 1992: we were wrong on virtually every significant policy". Labour paid the greatest possible tribute to its Conservative predecessors by adopting their spending plans during its first two years in office.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): What does the hon. Gentleman consider to be the purpose of public debt? He will note that when a Conservative Government last had a similar debt ratio, public assets amounted to around £80 billion. They are now down to £17 billion. What is the purpose of public debt and public investment?

Mr. Bottomley: If the hon. Lady wants me to use the last 17 minutes of the debate to give a lecture in economics, I shall be happy to do so. I may be a third-rate economist, but I could certainly fill in 17 minutes. I think, however, that the Minister would prefer me not to do so.

Let me give another example of the Chancellor's not quite achieving what he was after. This is at the opposite end of the spectrum. It has been estimated that one cigarette in three smoked in this country carries no tax. The stealth tax on smoking—which does not feature much in Budgets—hurts lower socio-economic groups most, both because they tend to smoke more and because their incomes are lower: they are hit by a double whammy. The Chancellor increased the tax by £500 million a couple of times when he raised duty by more than the escalator.

I am not arguing for low taxation on tobacco. However, another consequence of very high taxation on tobacco is the type of e-mail that I saw today, which states:

> "Hi, are you interested in making a saving of nearly 66 per cent. on your next purchase of cigarettes and handrolling tobacco? From only 17.50 Pounds per carton of 10 packs of 20 cigs each . . . Minimum order 3 cartons . . . delivery is fully guaranteed."

It also lists three internet locations, which are in the Netherlands, Italy and Spain.

That e-mail is a good example of how excessive taxation can be counter-productive. I strongly support the conclusion that the Centre for Policy Studies reached in a paper which it will publish in two weeks. The centre analyses the Chancellor's tax increases, including the ones that he does not deal with in his Budget statement and—I am sorry to say this in front of the Paymaster General—those that are not dealt with in the press notices that are made available to Members of Parliament.

As I said in an earlier point of order, officials serving Ministers may not have those press notices available now, but they should be available. If they are available, they should be provided to hon. Members. The Paymaster General said that, if we want them, they will be available later. I hope that, in future, everyone understands that we want them on the day of the Budget.

Dawn Primarolo: The hon. Gentleman made two points, the first of which was on internet cigarette sales. Although I am sure that he will already appreciate this, we should make it clear to everyone who hears or reads our proceedings that those purchases are liable to United Kingdom tax. Consequently, people will save nothing on such purchases—which work out to be more expensive than regular purchases.

Secondly, no Budget press releases are not available to hon. Members. Earlier, the hon. Gentleman asked for technical Budget notes. Customs and Excise has always made notes available on the day of the Budget, and the Inland Revenue has made those technical Budget notes—not press releases—available. As I said, if it will assist the House, I shall certainly ensure that they are in the Vote Office tomorrow morning, before we start our debate.

Mr. Bottomley: I am not absolutely sure that they are all technical notes. Some of them are called Budget notes and some are called Budget notices. I think that the hon. Lady may want to re-examine the expression that she has used. All I am saying to her, in the nicest possible way, is to make sure that they are in the House and in the Library and available to hon. Members. We are here to scrutinise such matters. The Government should stop treating the House with contempt. Hon. Members want to know what is going on.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer—who managed to hide IR35 and not draw any attention to it, although it has affected the United Kingdom's economic development—has shown that he cannot be trusted on these matters. Let us just put down what is gently called a marker and say, "Produce those documents in the House. Make them available to hon. Members." That is not a courtesy; Ministers should regard it as a requirement.

I pay tribute to the public servants, from many Departments, who must have worked very hard this year, as they have in previous years, in bringing together information, working through the options, discussing the options with Ministers and—as the Chancellor and other Ministers make decisions—presenting the measures in a coherent and sensible manner. If Ministers would like a suggestion on how life could be made slightly easier, it would be that they include an index in the Red Book. In the old days, it was far easier to find specific matters in the Red Book. Now, although it is more informative, it is not very easy to find specific information. I challenge any Labour Member, within two minutes, to find, for example, where the savings ratio is dealt with in the Red Book. To save time, I shall tell them that the information is on page 170.

A table on that page, however, contains a curious feature that I hope will not be repeated in future Red Books. It is headed "Percentage changes on previous year", and includes three items: household consumption, which lists percentage changes; real household disposable income, with percentage changes; and the savings ratio, which an accompanying note specifies as "level, per cent". Although that information has been provided, it might be missed by those who read the Red Book casually.

I also suspect that, although it might be embarrassing for the Chancellor, it would be better if the savings ratio could be dealt with separately, under a separate heading. The savings ratio does matter. A savings ratio of 3.35 per cent. is almost as low as that pertaining in the United States. I do not think that that is healthy. The Government inherited a savings ratio of about 10 or 11 per cent. Even if, in two or three years, it returns to more than 5 per cent., that would not be very comfortable.

Besides emphasising what my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said in response to the Budget announcement, I also wanted to state that the illustration of the children's tax credit does not make obvious sense to those who do not know much about it. If that credit is worth £520 a year, why does the press notice put the value at £5,200? It may be that 10 per cent. of £5,200 is £520, but anyone reading the notice for the first time ought to be able to understand how one figure translates to the other.

The underlying point is that we must take into account the need of people of working age who are capable of working to be in work. I acknowledge that what happened in the final Parliament of the previous Government has continued under this Government, and that many more people on benefit who want to become taxpayers have been able to do so. To get work, they have overcome personal disabilities, or disabilities of location, or the disabilities associated with the changing industrial nature of their local environment. Most of them will have put in a great deal of effort to obtain work; I know very few people who want to remain on benefit.

We need to widen the gap between people on benefit and those who pay tax, so that there can be a neutral position in between. However, that becomes more difficult when poverty is defined as being on benefit. Much of what the Chancellor calls taking people out of poverty means putting them on tax benefits rather than cash benefits. That is a rather odd use of language.

I have spoken about the needs of people of working age who are in work, but I return briefly to the matter of people who are above working age. I mentioned the importance of helping people with children, but my constituency of Worthing, West has the highest proportion in the country of people above retirement age, many of whom are healthy and self-reliant. When they turn to the national health service, they find that they have to wait more than a year for a 20-minute hearing test. That may be a local curiosity, but when their hearing aids are available they have to wait three and a half months for them to be fitted, and for instructions about the location of the on-off switch. That is not acceptable. Whatever the arguments are in favour of the way in which the NHS is funded and organised at present, people should not have to wait a year for hearing tests.

I deeply regret that the proportion of people waiting more than a year for in-patient treatment in Surrey and Sussex is more than one in eight. The postcode lottery is unjustifiable, given that in the Prime Minister's health service area the proportion is only one in 78. In almost every health authority area around the country, more people are waiting more than a year for in-patient treatment than was the case in May 1997.

If I do not blame the Government totally for that, I blame them for it in large part. We must find a way to take queueing out of health care. It is all right to expect people to wait for many consumer goods, and to tell them that they cannot have what they want straight away, but people must be able to have the serious health treatments that they need when they need them, and without paying at the time of need. I do not believe that we can meet that requirement without a surplus of capacity and important quality improvements. However, the extra money promised in the Budget is welcome.

My final remarks deal with savings. Unless we encourage people to save and put money by, and reward them for doing so, we cannot expect them to be more self-reliant when they retire. If we do not encourage saving, we cannot expect more people to have control over their own housing on retirement. That is true of retired people who own their houses and are economically active, and also of those who live in communities. The latter is increasingly the case for people in their late retirement years.

That is why I welcome the alternative Budget proposals made by Conservative Front-Bench Members, which matter a lot. I believe that, like every Tory leader since the 1920s, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) will become Prime Minister. His speech in response to the Budget embarrassed the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. The Conservatives have more to offer than the complacency and occasional arrogance of the present Government.

I do not say that everything that the Government have done is wrong, because they have implemented many of the ideas that I have put forward. However, the cross-party consensus is to give more support to people with children and those above retirement age. Unless that happens, we will not make this country what it should be for people of all ages and conditions.

9.54 pm

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): I declare an interest in relation to one or two of the points that I will make in my brief contribution. I am a governor of two schools in north-west Leicestershire—Ashby grammar school which, despite its name, is a comprehensive, and Ibstock community college. In the four years that I have been in this place, I have remained a member of their governing bodies and have seen the pressures that schools in Leicestershire have had to endure. Most of the problems relate to the standard spending assessment formula.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) and my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) and for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) have referred to the difficulties that exist in education funding in certain parts of the country. Leicestershire is at the bottom of the county league table when one expresses the SSA per primary school pupil and also per secondary school pupil. We are about 6 per cent. adrift of the average county and 13 per cent. adrift of Hertfordshire. Those are substantial sums.

[Mr. David Taylor]

We are immensely grateful for the extra investment put into education over the past four years and for that which is planned for the next three or four years. However, the relative position for Leicestershire, as for Derbyshire, Staffordshire and the F40 group of authorities, remains much as it was. It needs to be addressed and I am sure that it will be.

The bigger direct payment that the Chancellor announced will be most welcome. I have visited all 52 schools in north-west Leicestershire and I know how welcome they have found the extra payments and direct payments when they have been available. I endorse what the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome said. I think that the banding system is capable of significant improvement and these sums of money should be expressed on a per capita basis.

One of the greatest improvements in education in north-west Leicestershire since 1 May 1997 has been in the infrastructure of some of our older schools. At Ibstock community college, where my children were students until relatively recently, the laboratories were in a dire condition. Despite pressure over many years, through the local education authority to the then Government, little or nothing was done about them. Like every other Member of Parliament, I receive a summary of the planning applications made to the local authority and I was very pleased to see on the planning list a week or so ago the early commencement of work on the laboratories of a school that has been waiting for improved laboratories for decades. What the Government are doing for education is warmly to be welcomed.

One specific to which the Chancellor referred during his speech was the fight against crime and drugs. I have four daughters. Every parent worries about their children and wants to see them growing up safe from the scourge of drugs. My right hon. Friend's reference to the extra £300 million that will be spent in this area over the next three years was very heartening. That money will go direct to local crime and safety partnerships—a hallmark of the Budget and of recent Government decisions.

I declare an interest in that I was closely involved with the creation of the north-west Leicestershire safer communities forum. I chaired it for a number of years until 1 May 1997. I know that whatever proportion of that money is available to that organisation will be wisely and effectively used in partnership with local agencies, the police, the local authority and other groups.

This has been a positive and helpful Budget. At one end of the age spectrum, the scourge of child poverty has been addressed in a substantial way. At the other end, pensioner poverty has been tackled. Labour Members welcome that.

There are 5 million couples who have no dependent children, either because their children have left home or because they never had any. Those 5 million couples—that is about 8,000 couples in an average constituency—are pre-retirement age, and will have lost the married couples allowance, which ceased on 5 April 2001 and which in the previous tax year was worth £195. Many of those people still feel a little sore about the loss of the allowance because they see nothing to replace it. Yes, they will in many cases have had lower mortgage interest rates, a benefit that can be worth as much as £1,200 a year. That, of course, is to be welcomed. However, many of those married couples will have nearly paid off their mortgages, and I think that we need to do something to compensate them for the loss of the married couples allowance almost a year ago.

In relation to pensioners—

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [28 February],

That the Motions in the name of Mr. Secretary Straw relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if they related to instruments subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) in respect of which notice has been given that the instruments be approved.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Customs and Excise

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

10 pm

Mr. Peter Kilfoyle (Liverpool, Walton): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to hold this debate on a subject whose history goes back nearly 10 years. That may lead hon. Members to ask why I should raise the matter now. It has been precipitated by a recent court case in Liverpool, which came to an end two weeks ago last Monday, and by the press comments and speculation on that case and its history.

In July 1993, 50 kg of high-grade heroin, with a street value of £18 million, were seized in my constituency. That led to the arrest and conviction of eight men for their part in the smuggling ring that had brought that heroin into the country. In July 1996, two of those criminals, John Haase and Paul Bennett, were given a royal pardon by the then Home Secretary—10 months after they had been jailed for 18 years on those charges.

Having heard that those criminals were back on the street, I was about to leave my home to talk about the matter on Sky News when I was telephoned by the then Home Secretary. He asked me not to comment as it would imperil their lives and they had provided significant information to the authorities. Since then, I have discovered that only two people in the witness protection programme were involved in the case—to my knowledge. One was a woman informant who was a friend of one of the Turkish people convicted. The other person was a Customs officer, who had helped to penetrate the ring.

The two villains were on the streets, bold as brass, and back up to their old tricks almost straight away. I deferred, nevertheless, to the privileged information and advice of the then Home Secretary and did not publicise what was happening. However, I took the precaution of telephoning the then shadow Home Secretary to tell him what had eventuated. Sky, *The Observer* and the *Sunday Mirror* all came under heavy Government pressure not to run the story, but eventually it came out.

The intervention of the then Home Secretary came at the instigation of the trial judge—David Lynch—who had sentenced Haase and Bennett. He, in turn, was reliant upon information from Customs and Excise. That was the key to the release of those two criminals. A self-styled tough Home Secretary extraordinarily pardoned truly vicious, serious criminals, at the behest of the judge who had handed down 18-year sentences in the first place.

I have heard all the sophistry and the reasoning behind those decisions, but the matter is not easy to explain to people on the street. All that was to protect two Customs and Excise informants—the two criminals concerned. What was their valuable information? In effect, it fell into two areas, according to their Customs and Excise handler, Paul Cook. I have in my hand his witness statement, which is the key to what eventually happened.

One area was primarily concerned with the seizure of more than 150 weapons, including Armalites, Kalashnikovs and Uzis. The second area concerns an

[Mr. Peter Kilfoyle]

alleged potential hostage taking in Strangeways prison. During the intervening years, I have examined the matter in great detail.

In Liverpool, it was, and is, generally thought that the gun caches that were given up to Customs and Excise through the handler were an insurance policy for Haase and Bennett—something that they could trade with the authorities. A senior source in Merseyside police had confirmed that view. After all, no arrests took place in connection with those weapons seizures. It has been further alleged that all those weapons were bought for £82,000 from decommissioned stock held in a west midlands police depository and a north Wales police store, allegedly somewhere in Liverpool. I am cautious about those allegations because so many have been made. I am not interested in unsubstantiated allegations, some of which are very bizarre. However, an issue that, in my view, requires further investigation is being raised in this debate.

The second critical area in Mr. Cook's statement to the judge involves a gun that was smuggled into Strangeways prison. Again, there is a strong case to be made that Haase and Bennett were behind that, to curry favour with the authorities. Such new arrangements were certainly recognised by Metropolitan police as having set a precedent for a new type of bargaining between the law and criminals. The behaviour of Haase and Bennett in that case was later aped in the south-east, leading Scotland Yard's directorate of intelligence to alert all the agencies—the prisons, the police and Customs and Excise—to that plea-bargaining scam.

It is my belief that Haase and Bennett set up the arms caches in Liverpool and the smuggling of a gun into Strangeways prison. I ask the Paymaster General whether her Department, for example, has interviewed Paul Ferris about Haase and Bennett's attempts at weapons purchases. Does she know whether John Lally, Dominic Donnelly or Roger Jordan have been interviewed in connection with the smuggled guns?

I ask that question because there is deep concern that Customs and Excise has been gravely misled by two practised liars—Haase and Bennett—who have manipulated their handlers. The evidence is there for all to see. In particular, John Haase, who went down for another 13 years in the recent case, had a long history of doing deals to extricate himself from legal problems. As I say, happily, he was sent down two weeks ago, revealing him to be the recidivist that we all knew him to be. His confederate, Bennett, is on the run, facing drugs importation charges.

Yet Mr. Cook told the judge:

"It is my considered opinion that such is the impact of this case on the defendants that, for differing reasons, it is highly unlikely that they would revert to a life of crime upon their ultimate release."

How wrong he was. Since his pardon, Haase has been arraigned on firearms, drugs and money-laundering charges. He cut Peter Flanagan's throat in the view of surveillance officers and he has intimidated witnesses, but he was accepted as a credible informer.

Everything to do with Haase, in particular, remains suspect. From the original arrests in the Turkish connection drugs case onwards, there are urgent questions to be asked. I do not expect the Paymaster General to answer my questions, but the Government should. What should we make of the role of Detective Sergeant Williams—the only person retired from the south-east regional crime squad on ill-health grounds, according to an answer that I received to a parliamentary question, who had been charged with stealing seized heroin, corruptly demanding money and rape? He was suspended for more than four years on full pay, before being dismissed. None of the 34 original charges against him ever went to court.

What of the serious allegation that Haase planted a gun on Thomas Burke in Strangeways prison? The allegedly planted gun was a critical determinant in that man's conviction for murder. Although those matters are the responsibilities of other Departments, they stem directly from the handling of Haase and Bennett as informers. I specifically ask the Paymaster General whether she can tell me when John Haase ceased to be an informant.

I have a copy of a memo—written as late as 3 August 1998—that the assistant chief investigation officer, Steve Rowton, sent to Paul Cook, his subordinate, in which he tells him to cease contact with Haase and Bennett because of on-going political interest in the case. I shall, of course, place the documents in the Library. That happened after I had expressed an interest and had been afforded the opportunity to meet senior Customs officers to tell them about my disquiet about what was going on.

Has the Paymaster General been shown a report into the gun-smuggling incident at Strangeways? I understand that there was a report, but it has never been published. I wonder whether it will ever be published. If it is not published, why not? I appreciate security considerations, but major matters of public interest are involved. I also ask why there was no liaison with Merseyside police over the arms caches. Is it because they might have been seen as a set-up, which was the eventually expressed view?

The vast majority of our law enforcement personnel, across all the agencies, do a good job in difficult circumstances, but there have been some faux pas involving Customs and Excise. I may be wrong, but I believe that officers are still suspended both in the north-east and in Yorkshire because of cases that went spectacularly wrong. The Charrington case remains fresh in my memory and, in many ways, it overlaps with the case of Haase and Bennett.

It is interesting that the Dutch found themselves in a similar situation some years ago, with informers running their handlers rather than the other way round. A root-and-branch reform of procedures ensured that that did not happen again. Indeed, the Dutch succeeded in locking up a major league drug dealer, Curtis Warren from Liverpool, when Customs and Excise had failed to do so. However, when the case against Warren and others failed, he was able openly to boast to the investigating officers that he had made £87 million out of the deal and that there was not a thing they could do about it.

The changes in Holland came about only after a full inquiry. I would go a lot further than having an inquiry. I propose two inquiries: one into the procedures for dealing with informers; the other into all the cases touched upon by Haase and Bennett. It is important to put on the record that many of the cases involve villains. "None of them are guilty, they are all innocent" is the clarion call that Members regularly hear in our constituency surgeries. It is never easy to divine who is telling the truth in these matters and I do not underestimate the mendacity of some of the people involved. However, even villains are entitled to justice. Such an inquiry would obviously need to be independent and transparent, so that justice might at last be lifted from the mire in which it has found itself in this sorry saga.

Although I was not to know, it is entirely appropriate that this issue has been raised on the day that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced a bold and brave initiative and lots more new funding for the fight against drugs in our towns and cities. It is appropriate that we start off with a clear idea of where we are going. Every Member in the House knows of the damage that is done by these people. I just ask us to consider the damage that was done by allowing Haase and Bennett back on the street, on the basis on which they got out. Could anything usefully have been achieved by pretending that one could handle such people?

10.12 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Mr. Kilfoyle) for raising this important subject, but he will appreciate that I have heard for the first time much of the information that he has put before the House. It will therefore be extremely difficult to respond in detail this evening. I am sure that he will also be aware that he is protected by parliamentary privilege. As a Minister, I have certain obligations and I have to balance them with my duty to provide full and frank information to the House.

Most of my hon. Friend's allegations are against Customs and Excise, but there may be wider considerations, because he has placed much information on the record. However, I want to make it clear that the case involved all the law enforcement agencies. Whatever the rumours and allegations that are made as one agency might try to absolve itself from involvement in the case, we must recognise that all of them were involved.

It is important that I point out that it is well established in policy and practice that, when it comes to law enforcement by the police and Customs, one does not comment publicly on whether any individual has or has not given information in confidence to the authorities. It would certainly be wrong to comment on specific allegations of confidential information that was supposedly given to the authorities. None the less, before I address the particular issues that my hon. Friend raised, I want to set out the events that led up to the release from prison of Haase and Bennett on 4 July 1996, and to say who was involved.

As my hon. Friend said, John Haase and Paul Bennett were among nine people who were indicted in 1993 on a charge of conspiracy to supply 50 kg of heroin. The prosecution was undertaken by Customs and Excise and was initially in relation to an alleged conspiracy to import heroin. Subsequently, on legal advice, the charge was confined to conspiracy to supply the drug. Although supply offences are not normally prosecuted by Customs, this case was, with the agreement of the Crown Prosecution Service.

At their trial at Liverpool Crown court in August 1995, Haase and Bennett offered guilty pleas to conspiracy to supply, as did six other defendants; the ninth was acquitted. On 22 August 1995, all those convicted received sentences ranging from eight to 18 years, according to the extent of their involvement in the offence. Haase and Bennett each received sentences of 18 years.

Prior to sentencing, the trial judge, Judge Lynch, received representations from counsel for Haase and Bennett, in accordance with normal practice. Prosecuting and investigating authorities have a clear duty to provide to the judge material, accurate and fair, that may be relevant to the trial, including matters that the judge may wish to take into account in determining sentence. It is for the judge to decide what credence and weight he or she should give to that material. In this case, the National Criminal Intelligence Service, the police, Customs and Excise and the Crown Prosecution Service provided material to Judge Lynch that confirmed the extent to which Haase and Bennett had co-operated with the police and Customs in the investigation.

As a result of the information that Judge Lynch received, he approached the Home Office and stated that he was of the opinion that, in line with the precedent set by the Court of Appeal in the case of Regina *v.* Sinfield in 1981, consideration should be given to the appropriate remission of the 18-year sentences that had been imposed on Haase and Bennett. He thought that that might be effected by exercising the royal prerogative of mercy. In making his representations to the Home Office, he set out why he had not felt able to impose a reduced sentence in court. Following his approach—I emphasise that this was a judicial initiative—the then Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), agreed to seek the royal prerogative for remission of the sentences, broadly in line with the Sinfield precedent.

The House should be in no doubt that the impetus for the reduction in sentence came entirely and properly from the trial judge. The material was supplied to the judge by Customs and the police, who had jointly investigated all the matters. Those authorities were properly fulfilling their obligation to the court. Indeed, in the Sinfield case, the Court of Appeal laid great emphasis on the public interest in ensuring remission of sentencing in the circumstances. It also said that, notwithstanding the fact that the defendant in that case was a major criminal, the reduction in sentence remained appropriate.

My hon. Friend put many matters on the record this evening. I would like to study the documents that he holds and to ensure that I have all the information. I freely admit that this is the first time that I have heard much of the information to which he referred.

As the Minister responsible for Customs, I have been assured that in this case all our officers acted entirely

[Dawn Primarolo]

appropriately throughout. The commissioners have indicated that they would certainly welcome any new information that may have a bearing on this case or related cases which may cause my hon. Friend concern. My hon. Friend has certainly provided that information this evening, and the matter is clearly causing him concern.

I apologise to my hon. Friend for the fact that I am not in a position to give him a fuller reply this evening. I hope that he will accept that I will ensure that his points are properly scrutinised. I shall ensure that he, as the local MP and the Member who secured the debate, is kept fully apprised of action that is taken and information that is available. I thank him again for drawing these serious matters to my attention. I assure him once more that, in pursuing the prosecution, Customs did not act alone, but properly within requirements, and jointly with the enforcement authorities. I entirely accept that he is making available additional information that requires a response, and I will ensure that he gets one.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-two minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 8 March 2001

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL (*BY ORDER*)

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Thursday 15 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Veterinary Surveillance

1. **Mr. Tim Boswell** (Daventry): What steps he is taking to maintain a national veterinary surveillance structure. [R] [151384]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): Effective veterinary surveillance is a key element of public and animal health protection. A thorough review of current veterinary surveillance measures was issued for consultation last year. We are currently developing strategy proposals that will draw on responses to the consultation, the findings of the BSE report and any lessons to be learned from recent disease outbreaks.

Mr. Boswell: The Minister will appreciate that the question was tabled before the foot and mouth outbreak, in which both his and private vets are doing a splendid job.

First, will he consider the specific issue of the importance of using modern information technology in veterinary surveillance, both in reporting and exchanging information and, possibly, through imaging, in diagnosis? Secondly, more widely, will he take seriously the concerns that have been expressed by the British Veterinary Association, which are also relevant to the present problem—that there must be adequate continuing resources for a system to work effectively?

Mr. Brown: The issue of resources is at the forefront of my mind, but I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman the unqualified assurances that he seeks in response to both parts of his question. I thank him for his kind words about the state veterinary service and the veterinarians who have come from private practice and from abroad to help us with the current foot and mouth outbreak.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): Will such resources as will be available in the next few months be sufficient to tackle the current crisis, and what plans does the Minister have to ensure that services continue beyond that? It seems clear from the Phillips report that one of the real problems was the run-down of the state veterinary service over many years, which needs to be reversed. What will happen when the vets who have come from abroad depart, resulting in a huge gap in the professional advice that is available to us?

Mr. Brown: The state veterinary service is about to employ almost twice as many veterinarians as it usually would, and some are employed in specialist capacities rather than as general veterinarians. The service is ably led by the chief veterinary officer, Jim Scudamore, on whose advice I rely in managing the current foot and mouth outbreak. I have told him that he is to have the resources that he needs to control the outbreak, and we will argue about where they come from afterwards. Of course, the issue of resources will have to be kept under review, and that and the findings of the Phillips report will form part of our consideration of what has happened once we have the disease under control. At the minute, however, all efforts must be focused on getting the disease under control. That is our priority.

Horticulture (Packaging)

2. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): What recent meetings he has had with the Horticultural Trades Association to discuss the impact of rules on packaging on the horticulture industry. [151385]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I last met representatives of the Horticultural Trades Association on 1 February. The meeting covered a range of issues of interest to the horticulture industry, including the question of plant pots as packaging.

Mr. Chope: Does the Minister agree that the decision of the Lord Chief Justice in the plant pot case on 29 January was potty, and that it would be much better for the Government now to introduce emergency legislation to change the regulations so that they have the same impact on our horticulture industry as the equivalent regulations introduced in Holland, France and Italy under the same EU directive? Does she further agree that the court has misinterpreted the intentions of the House when it passed the regulations, and will she take urgent action because, apart from anything else, the Government are already imposing a substantial burden on the horticulture industry through the climate change levy?

Ms Quin: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the prime responsibility for the packaging regulations lies with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. In my discussions with the Horticultural Trades Association and others, I have made representations to my colleagues in the DETR, as well as to the European Commission. One of the aspects that the hon. Gentleman

raises is the important one of how the regulations are being implemented throughout the EU. A number of countries have taken the same view as the British court, but a number of others have not. This is such an important matter for the horticulture industry that we need to move forward on the basis of a common approach to the regulations.

Agrimonetary Compensation

3. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If he will make a statement on future payments of agrimonetary compensation. [151386]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): Last week, my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture announced that he intends to draw down £171 million in agrimonetary compensation for the beef, sheep and dairy sectors, including all of the £156 million in optional compensation. The cost of that to the United Kingdom taxpayer is £129 million. This latest allocation of agrimonetary compensation is in addition to the £629 million already paid since 1997.

Mr. Heath: May I wholly welcome the drawing down of agrimonetary compensation? I observe, however, that the spin that suggests that it is a response to foot and mouth disease is unhelpful. The money was already necessary and was asked for long before the foot and mouth outbreak.

I have two particular questions. First, in respect of the distribution of agrimonetary compensation this year, what is the qualifying date for payments made on a headage basis, and will it be affected by any slaughter policy for foot and mouth? Secondly, and more difficult, will the money be provided for dairying according to quota held or quota used, and will that delay the process?

Finally, what will replace the current agrimonetary compensation system when it runs out this year? What moves have the Government made to establish an alternative process within the European Union?

Ms Quin: The hon. Gentleman asks about five questions in his so-called supplementary question. We are informing farmers about a number of issues. Entitlement relates to the current holding and to the current circumstances of farmers in the different sectors concerned. I hope that he will welcome the fact that my right hon. Friend the Minister secured European Commission agreement to make the payments to farmers much earlier than they would usually have been made. Of course, the foot and mouth disease informed our decision on the allocation of the money. Every time we have decided whether to pay out such money, we have had to consider conditions in agriculture and in the sectors that are entitled to such payments. For that reason, foot and mouth disease is an important part of the background to the compensation, especially as so much of the bill for agrimonetary payments is paid by the British taxpayer, despite the fact that they are called European payments.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): The farmers of Monmouthshire do not often pay compliments to Agriculture Ministers, regardless of their party, but they are currently paying particular compliments to my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture and his colleagues for the way in which they have drawn down agrimonetary compensation and handled the foot and mouth epidemic. Will my right hon. Friend consider other measures that would help the movement of ewes in lamb, including those that are on tack, to enable such sheep to be brought back home in order to lamb at this difficult time?

Ms Quin: I very much welcome my hon. Friend's comments, which accord with those made to us by farmers and farmers' organisations throughout the country.

On his final point, we are trying to consider the matter as sympathetically as possible while ensuring the strictest controls to prevent the movement of the disease. He will know that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture plans to say something further about that later today.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The Minister might be aware that some sections of the livestock industry have not been able to benefit from agrimonetary compensation. Their problems are typified by the call that I received from Mr. Tom Fare, a pig farmer in my constituency. He told me that although the licensing scheme introduced by the Minister of Agriculture thankfully ensures that he is now able to market some of his pigs, he is at the mercy of a marketplace that he feels is not working to the advantage of pig farmers. He also worries about the additional costs associated with slaughter at this difficult time. Will she and the Minister of Agriculture consider those circumstances, especially with regard to those who do not benefit from agrimonetary compensation?

Ms Quin: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point about which Ministers have obviously been concerned. He knows the European system well and is aware that agrimonetary compensation is available to some livestock producers, but not all of them. That is why we have brought forward money that was available under the pig industry restructuring scheme to try to help pig farmers. He made the important point that we have started some movement—albeit limited—of animals to slaughter in order to help farmers, including pig farmers. Obviously, we must keep the situation constantly and sympathetically under review.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Yesterday, the Chancellor referred to a great many people and industries in his Budget speech, but he announced nothing new for farmers or farming. Will the Minister of State confirm that agrimonetary compensation is specifically designed to compensate British farmers for the weakness of the euro? It was needed long before the outbreak of foot and mouth disease was confirmed two weeks ago. Will she also confirm that agrimonetary compensation is an inadequate response to the financial damage caused by foot and mouth disease?

Ms Quin: Agrimonetary payments are part of the response, but the Government are introducing a range of measures on foot and mouth disease. I appreciate that, on the whole, the Opposition have supported them, but they have a short memory about agrimonetary payments. They did not make such payments when in government; perhaps they believe that we have forgotten all the arguments that farmers directed against them in the late

1980s about amounts of compensation and their failure to revalue the green pound in the way in which farmers wanted. We have not forgotten, even if the hon. Gentleman has.

Scientific Advisory Committees

4. **Mrs. Jackie Lawrence** (Preseli Pembrokeshire): What steps he has taken to promote openness and transparency in his Ministry's scientific advisory committees. [151387]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): As I said in last month's debate on Lord Phillips's report, I am fully committed to operating an open and transparent scientific advisory system. Even before the publication of the report, the Government demonstrated that commitment by setting up the Foods Standard Agency, which puts its advice to Ministers in the public domain.

I want to extend that openness to all the Ministry's scientific advisory committees, several of which already include consumer representatives. A new code of practice for the operation of all Government advisory committees is being developed, and we will consult on it shortly.

In the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease, the role of my scientific advisers, principally the chief veterinary officer, has been critical. It has been my policy that Jim Scudamore should make publicly available the professional advice that he gives me; I believe that that openness has been widely welcomed.

Mrs. Lawrence: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, which will be appreciated by Pembrokeshire farmers. Will he confirm—he has done so partly—that he will make available the scientific advice that he receives on the current foot and mouth outbreak? Will he also examine the current practice of feeding commercially produced swill to pigs, and consider whether it is commensurate with the Government's policy on safe, quality food?

Mr. Brown: I give my hon. Friend an unqualified "yes" to both questions. I intend the scientific advice that informs ministerial decisions to be placed in the public domain. As we take stock of the foot and mouth outbreak, I intend to make the Ministry's findings public, and to consult on them. Although it is not up to me to make the assessment, I expect that swill feed for pigs will form part of that consultation.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): When the Minister considers the advice of the scientific advisory body, will he bear in mind the fact that developments in the foot and mouth outbreak are happening incredibly quickly? Farmers look to the Minister to give answers that are more instant than he can sometimes provide. A farmer in my constituency contacted me yesterday. He had a problem with calving heifers that were three miles away from his farm. He needs to get them back to the farm, but he has been told that he cannot do that. There are animal welfare as well as scientific considerations in that case. Has the Minister any hope for him?

Mr. Brown: Yes, I have. The hon. Gentleman is right that developments in controlling foot and mouth disease are happening quickly. I have tried to get information to Members of Parliament and regional officials of the National Farmers Union daily. We inform individual hon. Members if a new outbreak occurs in their constituencies.

Consistent with the overriding need to control the disease, I hope that it will soon be possible to introduce secure, local arrangements to deal with the circumstances that the hon. Gentleman described, partly for the animal welfare reasons that he mentioned.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I welcome the use of officials such as the chief vet alongside Ministers in fielding inquiries from the media, because it helps for them to be part of the debate in the broadcast media. However, a great deal of concern was expressed when the BSE outbreak first started, because dissenting voices were coshed and not heard. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that dissenting voices today are being heard? It is important to reassure not only farmers but the public that a full range of voices is being listened to and that advice is being taken from them.

Mr. Brown: I strongly agree with both the points that my hon. Friend makes. The choice for Ministers is whether to keep information to ourselves and then explain it cautiously in the hope that we will not alarm the public, or to put all the information in the public domain, let the public make up their own mind and take the risk of starting scares when they are not justified by the evidence. I think that the second approach is the right one. We should trust the public, treat our fellow citizens in an adult way, put the information in the public domain and explain things candidly to them.

Lord Phillips made the point strongly in his report that, as my hon. Friend said, at the start of the BSE outbreak dissenting opinions were not listened to. He used an elegant phrase—something like "dispute replaced debate". I am determined that that will not happen in the foot and mouth outbreak, and when we reflect on what has happened I intend to invite critics of the Ministry to listen to the alternative points of view. That in no way disparages the mainstream point of view.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I fully understand the reason for having a slaughter policy in the United Kingdom in respect of foot and mouth disease—such policies have been extremely effective in the past—but the Minister has just said that he wants the public to be treated in an adult way and that he wants advice given to him by the scientists to be transparent and made available to the public. Is he aware that there is growing public concern over inoculating cattle, sheep and pigs against this disease?

What advice is the Minister receiving on a policy of inoculation and on not continuing with the slaughter policy? It would help the public and Members of Parliament to know what the balance is in the argument between slaughter and letting the disease take its course, allowing the animals to recover from it.

Mr. Brown: There is a lot of public interest in that question. The advice being given to me is very clear indeed. The whole industry and the whole veterinary profession are speaking with one voice. They advise against the use of vaccination and against letting the

disease run its course. They firmly support the Government's approach of containing the movement of animals to prevent the disease from spreading, of waiting while the disease incubates and, as we discover what is already incubating, of quarantining it and extinguishing it. There are very sound reasons for that approach.

I have seen it stated that foot and mouth disease is like flu in animals. The strong professional veterinary advice given to me is that it is not. Indeed, the fatalities that it causes in lambs are substantial. In the recent Tunisian outbreak, about 80 per cent. of the lambs born died of foot and mouth disease. It is ruinous to the livestock sector and the correct policy is, therefore, to exterminate it and get back to the disease-free status that we had maintained in this country for so long.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): My right hon. Friend knows the farmers in the north-east of England well. He will know that they are even less prone to throw bouquets than those in Monmouth. However, all the messages that I have had from farmers and, formally, from the National Farmers Union state that they have been enormously pleased with the way in which the Ministry has acted. There has been firm, rapid action, sensitively taken and very well communicated. I particularly want to mention the speed with which the website was updated when it was drawn to my right hon. Friend's attention on Monday that it was slightly out of date. That was very speedy action indeed.

Mr. Brown: I thank my right hon. Friend for those remarks and, considering the importance of the sheep sector in particular to his constituents and to our region generally, they are praise indeed.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Is the Minister worried that the openness and transparency to which he refers is not practised by the German authorities, which reportedly did not respond in a timely manner to a Food Standards Agency request for information about the beef being exported from Germany to Britain?

Mr. Brown: That is a BSE-food safety issue rather than a foot and mouth control issue. I fully support the work that John Krebs has undertaken with the German authorities and the Commission and I can assure the House that, from my dealings with the new German federal Minister, I know that nobody is more angry at the shortcomings of German abattoirs than that Minister.

Mr. Yeo: If Germany continues to export illegal and possibly dangerous cuts of beef to Britain and declines to tell the Government's advisers in Britain what action it is taking to stop such exports, will the British Government protect British consumers by halting imports of German beef?

Mr. Brown: We protect British consumers by checking every consignment. The hon. Gentleman is right that this is a serious matter. If specified risk material is found, it is not allowed into the food chain. We have made our representations to the German federal Government, the Commission and, as I understand it, another European member state to point out that such material is a risk to European citizens. It does not matter whether they live here or in another part of Europe, the risk is the same. Specified risk material must be removed. The Commission is insisting on that and, indeed, my understanding is that it has said that abattoirs that have been found to be repeatedly at fault are to be closed, at least temporarily.

Organic Farming

5. **Mr. David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): How much his Department has allocated to research and development into organic farming methods in the past 12 months. [151389]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): This year's budget for research and development into organic farming methods is currently £2.1 million, nearly twice as much as in 1997–98. In addition, £2.3 million has been allocated to establish the European Centre for Organic Fruit and Nursery Stock at Horticulture Research International in Kent.

Mr. Taylor: Organic farming methods are all about sustainability. Does my hon. Friend believe that any part of the foot and mouth tragedy is linked to unsustainable factory farming? Has not "pile it high, sell it cheap" in the supermarkets led inexorably to the costly piles of burning carcases in the countryside? Will not greater investment in organic farming methods help to curb the excesses of over-intensive food production, which are wreaking such havoc on farming viability in rural Britain?

Mr. Morley: It is understandable that the foot and mouth outbreak has made us focus on farming policy in this country, including intensive farming. It would be wrong, however, to blame intensive farming for the outbreak, which has been caused by a number of factors unrelated to it. Certain developments in modern agricultural practice have occurred, such as the growth in the dealer network and the increase in long-distance movement of animals. There are issues that need to be questioned on the basis of sustainability.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): The Minister will be aware that Herefordshire has more organic farming per hectare than any other county in England and Wales. How much has his Department allocated to research and development? Organic farmers must be told how to protect their crops from contamination by GM trial sites, which another Department has authorised in their locality.

Mr. Morley: Part of the reason for establishing GM trial sites is to examine such issues as pollen spread. Of course that has implications for organic farmers, which is why the organic organisations have been involved in consultations with the supply chain initiative on modified agricultural crops on setting up and monitoring those trials, separation distances and the implications. That is right and proper and makes for a stronger argument for having field scale trials to examine such issues.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): Does my hon. Friend accept that we must be sure that produce labelled "organic" is not seen to be good where produce labelled "ordinary farming" is seen to be bad? Is not it important that research concentrates on which of the

organic methods of farming produce safe food and benefit the environment? Should not the Government encourage outcomes, rather than labels?

Mr. Morley: Any claim made for any food must be substantiated and based on accurate science. There has been detailed research into organic production, especially in connection with environmental benefits. It is clear that environmental benefits arise from organic farming. We expect all food, whether produced by organic or conventional means, to be safe and to meet the standards set by the Government. Those standards are carefully and rigorously enforced.

Fisheries

6. **Mrs. Joan Humble** (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): What assessment he has made of the impact of regulations on economic links of fisheries vessels on the British fisheries sector. [151391]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): A full report on the operation of the economic link licence condition in 1999 was published in November 2000 and placed in the Library of the House. The policy is working well. There was almost total compliance; foreign-owned UK vessels increased their landings and expenditure in the UK, and additional quota was made available to inshore fishermen in the under-10-metre fleet and the non-sector. A further report on compliance in 2000 will be published later this year.

Mrs. Humble: Is my hon. Friend aware that the regulations have been warmly welcomed by my constituents in Fleetwood? They have resulted in more than 30 Anglo-Spanish vessels joining Fleetwood's fish producers organisation, and in a very large increase in landings in the port that otherwise would have gone to foreign ports. However, will my hon. Friend look at the role of designated ports such as Fleetwood in the further application of these very welcome regulations?

Mr. Morley: I am well aware that my hon. Friend has done an awful lot of work with the Fleetwood fish forum to promote Fleetwood and to address issues concerning its fishing industry. The economic link condition has meant that about 300 tonnes of quota have been returned to the UK inshore fleet from foreign-owned UK vessels. Landings in ports are up by 300 per cent., and an additional sum of an estimated £3 million has been spent on goods and services in our fishing ports around the coast.

We believe that that is the right approach to deal with the issue of so-called quota hoppers. The system has brought benefits, although some Conservative Members said that, for legal reasons, we could not make it work. We have made it work, and it is a great deal better than using £55 million of public money to pay compensation for the failed policies of the previous Conservative Government.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): The Minister knows that Liberal Democrats support the economic link measures. Will he say what further compensation is likely to be paid beyond the £55 million that he just mentioned? That compensation arises from the botched fiasco that was the Tory attempt to remove quota hoppers from the UK register. If the Minister had that money available for the UK fleet, would he direct it towards the lay-up problems in Scotland and the rest of the country, or would he use it on a decommissioning programme?

Mr. Morley: I can certainly think of far more constructive uses for that £55 million than using it to pay compensation. That sum is the full and total settlement of the claims made against the UK, although some legal costs remain to be settled. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman that compensation claims have been settled in full, and the total cost is about a quarter of the original claim.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): When my hon. Friend looks at the economic links regulations intended to regulate quota hoppers, will he bear it in mind that there will be many more quota hoppers unless he provides an urgent support package for the British fishing industry? Many British—and especially English—fishing vessels are not financially viable. If they go bust, the licences and quotas will be bought up by fishermen from countries that have provided aid packages to their fishing industry. Nearly every other European country has provided such a package for its industry. When will my hon. Friend be able to announce a generous aid package for the British fishing industry?

Mr. Morley: I can assure my hon. Friend that the economic link measures, and other factors, have caused the number of quota hoppers on the UK register to decline significantly. The number continues to decline. There has been no sign that foreign-owned fishing companies or vessels are interested in buying UK licences.

My hon. Friend makes a serious point, and I accept that the decline of fish stocks and other economic factors have hit the UK fleet. Our preference is to approach these matters on a UK basis, and there is a debate about the most effective way to support our fishing fleet.

What I want are measures that deal with the long-term problems—the structural problems of overcapacity and too many boats chasing too few fish. I accept that we must make it clear where we stand on those issues and I hope to do so in the near future.

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): Does the Minister realise that his trumpeting of his success regarding the economic links regulations for fishing vessels in the British fisheries sector will be exposed as both futile and worthless given the crisis that is facing the British fishing industry? Without his immediate financial intervention to offset the North sea cod closure area, the UK fleet, particularly that in Scotland, faces financial disaster. Is it now the Government's policy to stand idly by and witness a substantial UK fleet reduction, which will make it easier, as has been pointed out, for vessels from southern EU countries to gain access to our northern waters after the common fisheries policy review in 2002?

Mr. Morley: That is a bit rich coming from the party that opened the door to quota hoppers. Under Conservative policies, the number of quota hoppers increased; under ours, the number has decreased.

Of course, there is some difficulty with the availability of fish stocks and the impact of the cod closure area, but I make no apology for introducing that scheme. Indeed, it was introduced with the full support and involvement of representatives of the fishing industry because action had to be taken to deal with the pressure on fish stocks and the dire state that they are in.

There are implications for the entire UK fishing industry. There is also an element of a devolved approach in the structural funds that are available to MAFF and the Scottish Executive, which is an issue in itself. I can assure the House that we recognise the pressures on the industry. The scheme is the best way that we can assist—with assistance that is beneficial in the long, not the short term.

Woodlands

7. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): What action he is taking to increase woodland cover. [151392]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): We give grants for planting more than 5,000 hectares of new woodland in England each year and the Forestry Commission is also planting new woods in the national forest and the community forests. Those initiatives and others, such as challenge funds, are targeted to meet our priorities and programmes for forestry as set out in our England forestry strategy.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful for that reply. Is my hon. Friend aware of announcement by the Woodland Trust that the impact of the Department's farmed woodland premium scheme over the past eight or nine years has been to create new farmed woodlands that are usually small, inaccessible to the public and not linked to other woodland in the vicinity? Given the purposes of the excellent English forestry strategy, will he consider reviewing the workings of the premium scheme to ensure that it more effectively increases woodland cover in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend makes a good point; there are strong arguments in the way in which support is targeted. Larger forests have a wider range of benefits and are much more cost-effective. That fact has been identified by the Forestry Commission and the forestry forum that has been set up as part of the English forestry strategy. I pay tribute to all the organisations that have joined the forum, which represents the private, the public and the voluntary sectors. It has had a tremendous input into forestry policy. It is committed to increasing forest cover in England, and I am glad to say that we have a budget that will increase spending on forestry by 50 per cent. in the next seven years.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Minister will be aware that trees take a long time to grow and so a woodland takes some years to achieve. Therefore, does he share my concern at the number of trees and the amount of woodland cover that will be lost because of the proposed line of pylons from Lakenby to Picton, Shipton and Beningbrough, which goes right through the heart of the vale of York? Will he join me to press the National Grid to take the route of the pylons away from the woodland in question, in particular that part of it that is in an area of special scientific interest?

Mr. Morley: I understand the hon. Lady's concern. Discussions about pylons are often controversial, as I experienced in my constituency some years ago. She will be aware that a planning issue is involved, which is the responsibility of the local authority. It is reasonable for local people to argue that pylons should be kept away from established woodland wherever possible. If it is not possible, it is not unreasonable to ask, as one of the planning conditions, for new woodland to be planted in compensation for any that is lost.

Cattle (Traceability)

9. **Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours** (Workington): How many persons are employed on all forms of contract at the cattle traceability centre in Workington. [151394]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): At the end of February, 618 people were employed on all forms of contract at the British cattle movement service in Workington.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The centre is one of the great success stories of west Cumbria. Will my right hon. Friend scour the whole of MAFF to see whether any more jobs can be transferred to the area? In particular, meat product export licensing work—which will, I suspect, have to be expanded over the coming years—could be transferred, as could sheep, pig and goat movements registration work. As that work expands, will my right hon. Friend look seriously at transferring it to my constituency and also to that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham)? We have the workers and they are keen to take on those tasks.

Ms Quin: My hon. Friend is second to no one in his determination to look for job opportunities for his constituents in Workington and I very much applaud his work. I hope that he will feel that, as regards work that is already available in the area, we have responded to some of the representations made by him and his constituents. As he knows, following a better quality service review it was decided that the work of the BCMS should remain in the public sector and that there was certainly no case for moving that work away from his constituency.

My hon. Friend mentioned traceability, which is so important for all parts of the livestock sector at present. He identified aspects where work will have to be done in future. I assure him that building on the existing expertise in his area is an important option for us.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): While, like the Minister, I am glad that there is that traceability expertise in Workington, does she agree that traceability in this country is of precious little use unless we know precisely where imported beef comes from? Recently, there were worrying reports about beef imported with the spinal cord

left in. Which European Union countries have traceability standards that match the excellence of those at Workington?

Ms Quin: On the point about imports, I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join me in applauding the vigilance of the Food Standards Agency. It has rigorously checked imported meat in order to detect traces of specified risk material and any trace spinal column still attached to the meat. The agency's efforts should be applauded; they are extremely important for safeguarding consumer health in this country.

A number of EU countries already have well-advanced traceability systems. The reason for that is that we are required to have such systems according to EU regulations and requirements. Indeed, recent events on the continent and in all our countries reinforce the case for that increased traceability. We want to be at the forefront—along with the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours)—and ensure that we play our part in that process.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the work of the Ministry's civil servants is very much valued? She knows that in my constituency we are most anxious that none of the jobs should be lost. When she is considering the employment and the extension of MAFF services, I am sure that she will understand that any attempt to move the work of the Ministry into the private sector without extremely wide consultation—or worse, any attempt to concentrate such jobs outside the existing regional offices—will be met if not with vigorous responses, certainly with a lack of amusement.

Ms Quin: I know that my hon. Friend has had meetings with my right hon. Friend the Minister to express her concerns, quite rightly, about the future of employment in MAFF in her constituency. I also know that a good amount of work has been done on identifying the services that will be retained in her area. It is important that the Ministry plays its full part in the regionalised system of government that we have in the United Kingdom. It is also important that, especially through the England rural development programme, we deliver many services effectively at regional level, and that allows us to identify employment opportunities.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

The Solicitor-General was asked—

CPS (Berkshire)

28. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What his assessment is of the performance of the Crown Prosecution Service in Berkshire. [151415]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): The Crown Prosecution Service has been working with the police and the East Berkshire magistrates court to introduce the Narey proposals. All defendants charged with a criminal offence in East Berkshire should now make their first appearance before Slough magistrates court within 72 hours of arrest. The agencies have also been working together to speed up youth justice.

The CPS, as a member of the Thames valley area criminal justice strategy committee, is determined to improve the way in which racially aggravated cases are handled. The CPS has played an active role in promoting the work undertaken by the committee's sub-group on race. Other initiatives in the area include the introduction of the Glidewell proposals to ensure that greater emphasis at Reading Crown court is placed on more serious crime.

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for his reply. I am glad to hear about those initiatives, but I want to draw his attention to my concern about basic inefficiency in the CPS in Berkshire: I shall cite just one of a number of examples involving constituents who have come to me about crimes that have not been properly prosecuted, not because of a decision not to prosecute, but because witnesses or the police were not informed of the date of the prosecution.

The case that I am most concerned about involves a victim of domestic violence, whose attacker was not prosecuted because she and the police were misinformed about the date of the case. She wrote to me:

"I am twenty-four years old. I have the whole of my life in front of me. I feel like what should be my best years have been blighted. Jason committed a crime for which at the very least he should have been made aware he did wrong. What is to stop him doing this to his next girlfriend . . . ?"

Will my hon. and learned Friend take action to ensure that the CPS in my area delivers on our pledge to be tough on crime, rather than failing to do so through inefficiency?

The Solicitor-General: My hon. Friend is second to none in tenaciously pursuing cases raised by her constituents. There is no doubt that something went horribly wrong in that case, and the CPS has apologised to her and, in particular, to the victim. I understand that assistance has been given so that she might be able to bring a civil injunction in that case. Things did go wrong, but given the substantial increase in the budget for the CPS, there will be more lawyers and caseworkers in the Thames valley. The increase for next year's budget in my hon. Friend's area is about 11 per cent.

There is a problem in the Thames valley, and also in London, in attracting and retaining staff, simply because lawyers can be paid substantial sums elsewhere. The chief Crown prosecutor in that area is trying part-time and term-time working, and so on, which is having some success.

There was a problem in the case cited by my hon. Friend, and she has raised other cases that give rise to concern. I can assure her that I am taking a personal interest in the matter. The inspectorate will be involved later this year, and I will be keeping an eye on the area.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): If there was an outbreak in Berkshire of a virulently contagious animal disease, the CPS presumably would have a role in assisting the trading standards officers and the Meat Hygiene Service. Is the Solicitor-General satisfied that

there is sufficient preparation and liaison between the CPS and those agencies to enable the activities of rogue traders and operators to be closed down without delay?

The Solicitor-General: There is no doubt that, as a result of the measures that we have taken over the last couple of years, the CPS is working much more closely with other agencies. That has been one of the great benefits of the youth justice pledge. Now, the CPS meets regularly with the police, social services and others. In the hypothetical case that the hon. Gentleman raised, the CPS would liaise with other agencies. I should emphasise, however, that the CPS only gets cases that are brought to it by other agencies. It can and does give advice to the police and other agencies when that is asked for, but it is up to agencies to initiate cases and for the CPS then to take them forward.

CPS (North Wales)

29. **Mrs. Betty Williams** (Conwy): What the impact on the Crown Prosecution Service in north Wales will be of the extra funding recently announced. [151417]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): The budget for the CPS in north Wales for the year 2001–02 shows an increase on the previous year's budget by £147,000. It will allow the area to recruit staff to fill posts kept vacant during the current year and to continue to push ahead with its proposals to implement the Glidewell reforms. In addition, installation of the new CPS IT system, Connect 42, into north Wales will be completed during April 2001.

These additional funds will also allow the area to make permanent arrangements to provide an enhanced service to victims. It will be the first CPS area to make this provision available to all victims within its area.

Mrs. Williams: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that answer. I welcome the content of his reply. My local CPS seems to have long-term lawyer vacancies, which puts pressures on other staff members. Will this extra money solve the problem and help them to meet Government targets?

The Solicitor-General: Certainly, additional staff will be employed as a result of the increase in the budget. I assure my hon. Friend that north Wales is an area with few problems. It was almost a joy to visit the area recently because it is meeting the youth justice pledge and is a pilot for a number of projects, such as the Narey project. As I said in my written reply, it is also the first area to introduce the new system for informing victims. When I visited I saw that in operation and I was most impressed.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): No doubt the £147,000 increase in the CPS budget in north Wales will be welcome, but will not CPS work be hindered by the closure of courts in Wales? Is the Solicitor-General aware that the other day a defendant in Wales had to walk 50 miles to the nearest court, following the closure of his local court? Is he further aware that in Oswestry, right on the borders of north Wales, the Court Service spent £350,000 renovating a school building and converting it into a court five years ago and it is now having to spend a further £197,450 to comply with Human Rights Act 1998 demands, which apparently prevent prisoners in handcuffs from being seen by the public? Is that good use of Government and taxpayers money? Will it not inhibit the work of the CPS which, despite the small increase in its budget in north Wales, is cash strapped?

The Solicitor-General: Unlike the previous Government, we have properly funded the CPS. In the hon. and learned Gentleman's constituency in Leicestershire, the budget has increased substantially by some 25 per cent. It has increased nationwide. There will be more prosecutors and more caseworkers. As for the courts, as I have said previously, there is always a tension between efficiency and providing access locally. In many cases the smaller courts, to which the hon. and learned Gentleman alluded, are too small to work efficiently and the Lord Chancellor's Department, in consultation with local people, has decided to close a number of them.

CPS (Human Rights Act)

30. **Judy Mallaber** (Amber Valley): What impact the Human Rights Act 1998 has had on the work of the Crown Prosecution Service. [151418]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): Crown prosecutors must apply the principles of the European convention on human rights in accordance with the Human Rights Act 1998. Prosecutors have been well trained and prepared for that and are applying convention principles with increasing confidence, both during the prosecution review process and when meeting convention challenges in court.

Judy Mallaber: I thank my hon. and learned Friend for that reply. I visited my local magistrates courts on the day that the Human Rights Act came into force. Lawyers and magistrates had received training, but were slightly apprehensive about the Act's impact. Will my hon. and learned Friend tell the House how extensive the impact of the Act has been and whether the dire warnings that were issued by the Opposition that there would be chaos in the courts and that the Act would be a criminals charter have, in fact, materialised?

The Solicitor-General: The sky has certainly not fallen in as the Opposition suggested it would. The Human Rights Act is now operating, points are being raised and argued. It is interesting that the number of cases going to the Court of Appeal criminal division has fallen overall. In the magistrates courts, human rights points are occasionally raised, but magistrates deal with them efficiently. My hon. Friend has taken an interest in these matters and in equal opportunities for a long time. She knows that it is a question not simply of what the courts do, but of changing the culture in organisations so that public agencies appreciate the human rights of the citizens with whom they deal.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I am grateful for this opportunity to question the hon. and learned Gentleman, who gives every impression, in the provision of his answers, that he is paid by the word. What has been the cost of the training provided to prepare prosecutors for the advent of the Human Rights Act? How many people

have been involved in its delivery? Does he intend to conduct a continuing assessment of the number of staff who opt for early retirement?

The Solicitor-General: As I have said, the Act is bedding down well. It is not as though cases are taking longer in court. Occasionally, human rights issues are raised, but they are dealt with efficiently and speedily. The fast-track procedure that we established to get contentious cases on appeal into the Court of Appeal has worked very well.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of finance. He has asked questions about that, so he knows that money was set aside for courts. However, it has not been necessary to use it.

Victims (Information)

31. **Mr. Barry Gardiner** (Brent, North): What arrangements exist between the Crown Prosecution Service and the police to ensure that victims are kept informed as to the progress of criminal proceedings in which they are involved. [151419]

32. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): What role the Crown Prosecution Service has in assisting victims in providing victim impact statements; and when these will be introduced. [151420]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): Those two initiatives are part of a range of measures designed to improve the service provided to victims of crime and to enable victims, if they wish, to have a greater involvement in the criminal justice process.

On the first initiative, the Government accepted the recommendations in the Glidewell and Macpherson reports that the CPS should assume responsibility from the police for informing victims of decisions to drop or downgrade charges. The CPS has been piloting arrangements for communicating such decisions directly to victims since November 1999.

Victim personal statements enable victims, if they so wish, to inform the prosecutor, the courts and other criminal justice agencies of the effects of the crime upon them. Such statements will be taken by the police and sent to the CPS with the case papers. The CPS will take the statement into account when making decisions relating to the prosecution, and it will be responsible for ensuring that the victim's personal statement is drawn to the attention of the court that sentences an offender.

Mr. Gardiner: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for that answer. I am sure that he is well aware that one of the most frustrating things for victims of crime is when they feel that they have not been informed of the process of the trial and, often, of its outcome. Victims feel that there are representatives for everybody else, but that no one represents them. Will he assure the House that the responsibility to notify victims of what is happening will not fall between the stools of the police force and the CPS, and that there will be effective communication with victims about what is happening?

The Solicitor-General: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. That concern was first mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart). In the case to which she referred, the victim was not informed of what had happened. The procedure that we are introducing will enable the CPS to take on that responsibility, and I saw that happening in north Wales during my recent visit there. The victim will be informed directly by letter. If the victim then wants to see the prosecutor or, in important cases, the chief Crown prosecutor, that will happen.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend. There is no doubt that many victims often believe that not only are they not kept informed about what is going on, but the crime's impact on them is not taken into account by the courts in passing sentence. Although I am satisfied with the way in which my local police service deals with victims of racially aggravated crime, is there not a case for statements on offences such as race hate crimes to be taken by the CPS when a more detailed statement is often required to get to all the facts?

The Solicitor-General: The victim personal statement will enable a victim of a racially aggravated crime to set out its consequences, including the distress that it has caused. On racist crime, my hon. Friend might have seen that last week the CPS published figures that show that the number of prosecutions of racist crimes has increased significantly. In addition, the police are identifying racist crimes to a much greater extent. Much work has to be done, but our approach is bearing fruit.

Foot and Mouth

12.31 pm

Mr. Speaker: We now come to written question No. 1.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): If he will make a statement on the latest developments in the foot and mouth epidemic. [152671]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): At 12 o'clock this morning, there were 104 confirmed cases in the United Kingdom—103 in Great Britain and still just one in Northern Ireland, with a number of cases under investigation. The pattern is consistent with Heddon-on-the-Wall as the oldest known outbreak, with the subsequent spread mainly through the movement of animals, especially sheep. About 90,000 animals have been identified for slaughter, of which 61,000 have been killed. Plans are in hand to render some of the carcases as an alternative to burning on farm.

The Meat Hygiene Service has approved more than 260 abattoirs for the licence to slaughter scheme. Of those, 168 were operating yesterday. The Meat and Livestock Commission estimated yesterday that British pork production was back to 50 per cent. of normal, with beef at 40 per cent. and lamb at 30 per cent.

To relieve emerging animal welfare problems, officials are urgently working on arrangements to allow licensed local movement of animals within farms in unaffected areas, but only where that will not increase disease risk. We hope to have proposals prepared shortly.

The European Union Standing Veterinary Committee met on 6 March. The ban on UK exports of animals and products has been extended to Tuesday 27 March, but from 9 March the UK will be able to export unpasteurised cheeses to some countries. The SVC also imposed a ban on all livestock markets and assembly points in the EU for two weeks and a ban on animal movements except to slaughter or from farm to farm, authorised by the competent authority. All vehicles leaving the UK will have to pass over a disinfectant bath.

The Commission remains supportive of the action taken by the UK to contain and eliminate the disease.

Mr. Atkinson: On behalf of the farmers in my constituency, I thank the state veterinary service for its work in helping to contain the outbreak. It began in my constituency and has, of course, hit it very hard. The question of how it started is under investigation and I believe that ultimately there will be prosecutions.

Is the Minister aware that allegations are being made that the amount of illegally imported meat into the country is far greater than was first supposed? It is not simply a matter of people bringing in a few steaks from a holiday abroad. It appears that there is now a regular supply of illegal meat—especially beef and goatmeat—which goes to unscrupulous suppliers in the catering trade. It may well be that that was the cause of the outbreak that struck Heddon-on-the-wall.

Mr. Brown: Of course, I cannot comment on individual cases, particularly if they may come before the courts, although I can confirm that it is still the Government's view that the first outbreak was at the farm at Heddon-on-the-Wall, and that that is the primary source of everything that has happened since.

The Ministry is taking a hard look at the importation of meat for personal use in our review of all the possible causes of the current outbreak. We were already considering the issue in the context of the classical swine fever outbreak. I confirm the commitment that I gave to the House earlier that the views that the Ministry forms on all the slightly longer-term issues will be put into the public domain. There will be full consultation with all those interested. I intend personally to listen to a wide range of views, not just the mainstream ones.

Dr. Jack Cunningham (Copeland): On behalf of Cumbrian farmers in the Lake district and on the fells, may I thank my right hon. Friend and his officials at national and local level for the work that they have done to contain this terrible outbreak of foot and mouth disease? Will he consider specifically the position of hill farmers, as lambing is approaching? They often have large flocks of breeding ewes on unfenced fell land, with unfenced roads across it. There are particular difficulties for those farmers. Will he consider urgently and sympathetically how his officials may be able to bring such farmers more help in the dilemma that they face?

Mr. Brown: I thank my right hon. Friend for the praise that he has given to the state veterinary service. I am sure that his remarks are endorsed by the whole House. The Ministry has the question of continuing support for hill farmers under review anyway. An industry working group is considering how we can make the common agricultural policy support work better to support the incomes of hard-pressed hill farmers.

I am treating the question of lambing and the movement of sheep from their winter grazing quarters back to their home farm as a matter of urgency. It is an incredibly complex problem, as I think I may have said last week, but I hope to have something more to say in a matter of days.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): We are grateful to the Minister for answering this question.

The Opposition continue to support fully the measures already taken to contain the spread of foot and mouth disease. I endorse the appreciation of vets both inside and outside the state veterinary service, and everyone else who is working hard in the front line of this struggle. The next few days are clearly crucial in determining whether the outbreak is coming under control. I welcome the decision announced yesterday to postpone the Cheltenham festival and the announcement that no risks will be taken, even if the situation is improving, with the handling of the crisis.

It is just over two weeks since the crisis began. People will be disappointed that the Minister is still not able to say anything more about compensation. Will the Government now accept in principle that compensation

should be paid to those farmers suffering unrecoverable losses directly as a result of foot and mouth disease? If compensation remains limited to those farmers whose livestock is slaughtered, many others will simply be driven out of business for all time.

Does the Minister agree that the need to find out how the disease came to Britain is extremely urgent, not least to reassure those who are afraid that it may return, after all the agony of overcoming it this time? The Minister will be aware of the difficulties of farmers who cannot move their ewes that are about to start lambing and of dairy farmers who need to carry out milking. Licensing movement within farms will obviously help considerably, but it will not entirely overcome those difficulties. I hope that the licences will be available soon.

Will the European Union ban on livestock markets prevent the use of markets in Britain as collection centres—an avenue that was going to be important for a number of smaller farmers? Is the Minister aware of reports in some areas about continuing difficulties in obtaining disinfectant and concern about the prices paid to farmers sending their animals for slaughter under licence? Will he consider absorbing the inspection charges payable by slaughterhouses while they are operating under licence? Has he requested help from other Government Departments to ensure timely burning of carcases? Does he agree that all those practical, micro-issues will remain highly important to farmers and others in the industry even after the outbreak is brought under control?

Mr. Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his tone and his words of support for the state veterinary service and others who are helping to contain the disease outbreak. He is right about the micromanagement of some of the issues involved. The disease has now emerged in several different parts of the United Kingdom, largely as a result of animal movements, especially in the sheep sector, through livestock markets.

To take the hon. Gentleman's questions in reverse order, I am able to call on other Government Departments for help if we need it; the issue is kept under daily review. Charges are now a matter for the Meat Hygiene Service and the Secretary of State for Health, not me, so I cannot announce some new relief or extra payment today.

As for prices in the supply chain, the hon. Gentleman will have heard me yesterday when I urged everybody in the supply chain to treat each other fairly when trade is not carried out in normal circumstances because of the necessary licensing arrangements. The issue is complex, but if people realise that the supply chain must endure—that it cannot be short term, but that relationships have to be bedded in over time—they will see the wisdom of behaving fairly and working together to get through the current disease outbreak.

I have asked officials to check the availability of disinfectant. My understanding is that, although there is no shortage of disinfectant, there is a distribution problem. There is no problem with the manufactured product, but the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that demand has, of course, increased substantially.

The hon. Gentleman asks a good question about whether the European Union temporary ban on markets will affect our proposals to use markets as collection centres. We are exploring that issue with the Commission, but the main difficulty with my desire to establish collection centres, if that can be done without compromising disease control, is the far greater number of outbreaks of the disease with which we now have to contend.

Although the movement of animals can be licensed under special conditions, I, as the Minister responsible, have to be risk averse throughout. We are proceeding with our proposals on collection centres, but there might be some delay in our establishing them. For the avoidance of any doubt, let me emphasise that we need to be risk averse in everything that we do.

The hon. Gentleman asks about lambing, dairy herds and localised licensing. We have been able to get under way a localised licensing scheme within farms, but he is right to say that that does not solve all the problems. A substantial issue remains involving breeding sheep that are in winter quarters and would normally return some distance to their home farm where they might mix with other sheep that are potentially infected during lambing. The Government are carefully considering the best course of action. I explained the problem when I last addressed the House on the subject and it remains intractable, but to do nothing is not an answer.

The current difficulties give rise to serious animal welfare consequences as well as to consequences for the trade. After our meeting tomorrow with the trade to discuss different ways in which to proceed and once we have a proposal—I think that it will only be a matter of days—I shall ensure that the House is informed.

I have no new announcement to make about compensation. The outbreak of foot and mouth disease informed the Government's decision to draw down agrimonetary compensation for the livestock sector, but I accept that such compensation is not compensation for foot and mouth disease. I do not want to engage in political argument now, so I should be grateful if the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) wrote to me to set out precisely his views on what should be paid in terms of consequential loss and how widely the Government should provide coverage in that respect. Of course, consequential loss could, in these circumstances, be very wide indeed. Are we talking about the cancellation of rural visits and the loss to the betting industry as a result of the cancellation of race meetings? I should be grateful if the hon. Gentleman would oblige by setting out his exact request.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the next few days will be crucial. Of course, the fact that there have been many outbreaks is unwelcome; it makes the job of the state veterinary service harder. However, the good news is that each and every one of those cases has been, or is being, traced back to the original outbreak. It appears that the Government's timely imposition of movement controls throughout Great Britain has worked, and that we have been able to contain the disease to what was already incubating in the national herd and the national flock. That is how it seems today, but the situation may change. I promise to keep right hon. and hon. Members informed.

Dr. Gavin Strang (Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh): My right hon. Friend will not want to prejudge the findings of the inquiry into the initial cause of the outbreak. However, will he address the issue of feeding swill to pigs? Most pig farmers do not feed swill to their

[Dr. Gavin Strang]

pigs, and it may not always be possible to ensure that it is properly treated. At the appropriate time, will the Minister consider ending the feeding of swill to pigs?

Mr. Brown: The small proportion of the pig industry that still uses swill—about 1.5 per cent. of the total United Kingdom pig sector—is allowed to do so under licensed conditions. Of course, heat treatment of swill is crucial in making sure that foot and mouth disease does not spread in the sector and more widely. Clearly, we will look at the question of swill feed very thoroughly once we come to review the disease outbreak.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): The Minister and the Ministry were rightly congratulated on the speed and decisiveness of their original decision. To some extent, we seem to be learning a little more as we go along. For instance, the strategic distribution of disinfectant and even disinfectant baths at ports for all vehicles have now been introduced, although they were not in place last week. When did the Ministry last formally review foot and mouth emergency procedures and when were they updated? How often does the Ministry review the exclusion zones so that farms caught within the restrictions but which may be able to come out of them can do so as soon as possible and move their animals? Is the Minister perfectly satisfied that burning animals, as opposed to burial, represents the best means of not spreading of the disease?

Mr. Brown: The alternative to burning that we are considering is rendering. In other words, animals would be killed on the farm, taken away in sealed vehicles and rendered in the normal way.

I do not think that burial on the farm is the right way forward; issues involving watercourses make that a less desirable way of proceeding. Frankly, each method has things to be said against it, as well as for it. I am certain that burning does not spread the virus, which is the question most often put to me. The hon. Gentleman said that we are learning more as we go along. That is a fair point: we do not know where the disease will emerge or how far it had spread before we put the movement restrictions in place.

I promise to examine the hon. Gentleman's point about emergency procedures. Clearly, we shall want to take stock of all that, partly in the light of the classical swine fever outbreak and partly, of course, in the light of the foot and mouth outbreak as well.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments about animal welfare, but I stress the urgency with which he must deal with the issue of ewes in lamb. I have local farmers, Mr. and Mrs. Bailey of Rushton Spencer, who need to move their ewes up to 15 miles back to the farm, and who are extremely concerned about the effect on the ewes' condition if they are not returned to the farm.

I take this opportunity to pass on the personal thanks of Clive Langford Mycock, the chair of the NFU in Staffordshire, who believes that my right hon. Friend has done everything possible to deal with the crisis, and that everyone should back my right hon. Friend 100 per cent. in the work that he is doing.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful for the support of the local chairman of the NFU. I had an opportunity yesterday to discuss all these issues in some detail with the president of the NFU, Mr. Ben Gill. Perhaps the most intractable problem, although by no means the only one that we face, involves the ewes that are in winter quarters and that are breeding animals, due to give birth shortly. The question is whether they should be moved back to their home farm and, if so, in what conditions, and what animals they would be mixing with if they moved back. It is possible that they would move the disease through their own movement, or catch the disease when they arrive. That has to be thought about very carefully.

I want to do the right thing, not least because of the obvious animal welfare implications, which are clear to all hon. Members. I intend to make an announcement about the matter shortly. Because of the intractable nature of the problem, I cannot make a statement to the House today.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): On the subject of sheep, I draw attention to the case of Mr. B. Robinson, who farms at Shipton Oliffe and has sheep lambing now on the top of Cleeve hill, which is unfenced. He cannot move the sheep off that hill, he cannot get to them to supervise the lambing and he feels that there is a welfare issue involved. Will the Minister urgently look into the problem of sheep?

All farmers support movement restrictions. Nobody wants to spread the disease. Will the Minister also look into the question of holding race meetings? He will be aware of the reports about Mr. Richard Mathews, who farms next to Lingfield race course. All race meetings were banned in 1967. Will the right hon. Gentleman consider that aspect as well?

Mr. Brown: On the hon. Gentleman's first question, he will have heard what I said about lambing. Yes, it is a serious issue. Yes, we are focusing on it firmly, and I shall shortly have something to say. The hon. Gentleman's description of his constituent's problem shows how varied the specific problems are, and underpins the point made by the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), who speaks for the Opposition, that the micromanagement of the situation is at the heart of finding workable solutions that are risk averse.

On the question about race meetings, I am guided by the professional advice of the state veterinary service, which has advised me that on veterinary grounds there is no reason at present for the Ministry to insist on the cancellation of race meetings, so I am leaving the decision, perfectly properly, to the racing authorities.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I greatly welcome my right hon. Friend's remarks in his statement and earlier today, and what he is doing on welfare grounds.

I have been approached by two of my dairy farmers, Mr. Andrew Cozens of Alkerton farm in Eastington, and Mr. John Shipp of Kingshill farm, near Berkeley. They have explained to me in graphic detail how difficult it is to drive the cows off and then to allow them to calve.

when the farmer cannot move even short distances to carry that through. I look forward to my right hon. Friend's proposals.

I also make a plea on behalf of the trading standards department of Gloucestershire county council and environmental health officers. When the crisis is over, will my right hon. Friend, together with our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, examine the way we organise those departments, which are under incredible stress because they are the missing link in the operation that is under way?

Mr. Brown: There are issues that arise out of the Phillips report relating to the competences of national and local government. I express my thanks to the trading standards officers employed by local authorities, who have responded wholeheartedly and well to the current difficult situation, and are working well with officials in the Ministry of Agriculture. The issues are intractable. We have a partial solution, allowing carefully regulated localised movements of animals, which I hope will be of help to my hon. Friend's constituents, but there is a further problem with animals—mostly, but not solely, sheep—that need to move longer distances. As I told the House, I hope to have something more to say about that soon.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I have just faxed the right hon. Gentleman details of two cases and I should be grateful if I could re-emphasise them. First, Mr. Cragg of Allington has 85 ewes in lamb and needs to move them as soon as they have lambed to a field about half a mile away. Secondly, Mr. and Mrs. Markham of Billinghay are in the business of producing weaners. They do not have fattening facilities, and usually they move the weaners to a fattening unit. There are now 350 weaners on their farm and they are increasing in number day by day, or, at least, week by week, and there is a serious welfare problem. Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore consider possibilities for limited movement so as to enable Mr. and Mrs. Markham to send their weaners to a fattening unit?

Mr. Brown: Both of the cases that the right hon. and learned Gentleman perfectly properly raises are typical of the problems that we are now trying to address. It is always dangerous to pronounce on individual cases without knowing the full facts, but, with regard to the first case that he raised, I believe that localised movement under strict licensing conditions, on which we are working, will help his constituent, and I certainly hope that that is the case.

On the second case that the right hon. and learned Gentleman raises, I am familiar with the layered nature of the modern pig industry and the need for movement within holdings. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman will know, pigs are incredibly vulnerable to foot and mouth disease. They are probably the most vulnerable farm species. We do not have much of it in the pig herd at the moment—say I, touching wood, as everyone will notice—and that is a good thing as pigs pump out the virus more readily than other farmed livestock. The right hon. and learned Gentleman quotes an individual constituency case. I have the question of principle under close review, but I must act, first, on a precautionary basis and, secondly, on professional veterinary advice.

Mr. Nick Ainger (West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire): I echo the thanks of many hon. Members for the work that my right hon. Friend and his Department have done so far. I want to raise a couple of issues which could be discussed at tomorrow's meeting. First, Pembrokeshire county council has a number of problems with strays that are being collected by farmers who then do not know what to do with them. Unfortunately, if they cannot identify the owner, despite being healthy the animals are being put down.

Secondly, I welcome, as do the farmers, my right hon. Friend's proposal for localised licensed movement, which will address a range of problems. However, tack sheep, which exist in large numbers in my constituency and have come considerable distances—in some cases more than 100 miles—are now starting to lamb. Could a crash training course be delivered by the Department and through the National Assembly, so that farmers with tack sheep can handle lambing?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is on to a strong point. There is no way of stopping animals lambing, so if they cannot move, they will have to be lambed with specialist assistance in their location, and that has a knock-on effect for the dairy industry, where a farmer running a dairy business may well have been planning to use facilities on the farm for the purposes of his dairy business. This is not a simple question, but we are considering my hon. Friend's suggestion as well as licensed movement.

I will ensure that advice to farmers on dealing with stray animals is placed on the internet and in the advice sheets that we are sending out, if that has not already been done. However, a stray animal that is taken into a specific herd has, whether voluntarily or not, joined that herd.

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South-West Norfolk): All of us understand the Minister's difficulties in balancing disease control and the animal welfare problems that have been raised time and again this morning. I know that he is aware of the gross problems of ewes that cannot be moved, which can die of septicaemia where they stand, and which might have to abort their lambs or be shot. Of course, the lambs too can die where they lie.

I do not think that we can coax the right hon. Gentleman to say any more about the possibility of a localised licensing scheme, but will he accept that it is a matter of extreme urgency? I recognise that it is also a matter of micromanagement and I understand the problems in making exceptions, but I believe that the more locally a decision is taken, the more effective it will be. I wish him godspeed with the decisions that he is going to take, and I hope that he can make a very early announcement.

Mr. Brown: I thank the right hon. Lady for those words of encouragement. I think that we will be able to proceed with a localised licensing scheme to deal with very localised movements. We will do so as soon as such an arrangement is consistent with disease control advice. That is only a matter of days away. However, my hon. Friend the Member for West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire (Mr. Ainger) referred to the more intractable problem of animals that are effectively in winter grazing quarters and would, in the normal flow of the industry, move back to their home farms for lambing. I keep the animal welfare consequences closely under

[Mr. Brown]

review, as well as the disease control issues. However, it is a fact that the disease can be a killer to newborn lambs. That is another point that I have to keep at the forefront of my mind.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): When the time is appropriate, will my right hon. Friend pick up on a suggestion recently canvassed at the British-Irish interparliamentary body, where it was proposed that there should be a single veterinary regime for the island of Ireland? I should like to ask another question on behalf both of myself and of my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer). Will he ensure that his Department considers sheep, cattle and horses on the Thames marshes, whose ownership, control and welfare are obscure, to say the least? Those animals could pose an additional problem in combating the spread of the disease.

Mr. Brown: Of course, the Department is keeping under review the position of wild animals, including boar, deer and Dartmoor ponies, as well as that of animals that are grazed on common land. Our current view is that those animals will have to form part of a common herd, except where it is subdivided. The disease is not infectious to horses, but sheep and cattle are at risk. As for the veterinary regime, co-operation between the different veterinary authorities within the European Union works at a professional level. The respect in which our veterinary authorities are held has helped us to convey our point of view to the rest of the European Union.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): The Minister will know that 15 of these appalling cases have arisen in my constituency. I must tell him that this morning's reports from the Carlisle and Longtown area are very disturbing. They suggest that the situation in that area is verging on becoming out of control. We have waited five days for some carcases to be burned and sometimes seven days for tests to come through. Everyone praises MAFF's staff on the ground—there is no criticism of them at all—but people in the area are pleading with the Minister to rush in more resources urgently so that the testing can be done more quickly. There are reports that the killing has stopped today because there are so many carcases to destroy. I see that the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) is agreeing with me. Please can we have more resources to help with the emergency? If necessary, for example, specialist units from the Army engineers could be used to help with the pyres.

Mr. Brown: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, it is a logistical problem not only to kill the animals, but then to destroy their carcases. I do not need any extra resources to do that; it is just a matter of managing the problem. I express my full sympathy to him and to his constituents, as it has now emerged that Longtown market was at the centre of the spread of the outbreak. Unfortunately, a large number of contacts were traceable back to that market, and thence to the Heddon-on-the-Wall farm. The comfort that I can offer is that the chief vet has been told that he must draw upon whatever veterinary resources are needed. There is no other constraint within Government: we are giving priority to control of the disease.

Secondly, all the cases that have emerged so far, excluding the most recent cases on which work is currently being done, are traceable to the original outbreak. The movement controls that we introduced last Friday seem to have prevented the further spread of the disease. However, it had already spread far more widely than anyone could have forecast or wanted.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): I greatly welcome my right hon. Friend's comments about urging those in the supply chain to treat each other fairly. He will be aware of reports of shoppers paying higher prices for meat without any benefit to farmers or those who work in the industry. Will he assure us that everything is being done and will continue to be done to ensure that consumers are not paying unjustifiably high prices?

Mr. Brown: That is quite a complex question, because the supply chain has been substantially disrupted. I can only repeat my appeal to all the players in the supply chain to treat everybody fairly. That includes the industry's customers.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): I appreciate the Ministry's efforts to deal with the terrible disease. The single case of foot and mouth in Northern Ireland was due to an illegal trade in sheep that were bought in Carlisle, imported to Northern Ireland and transferred to the Republic of Ireland.

It has come to light that, under EU regulations, it is not possible to stop the transport of sheep at the ports; they can be checked only at the point of arrival. That means that sheep cannot be checked at the ports. If they are diverted, they cannot be checked at the frontier. There appears to be a loophole in EU legislation. When the Minister has an opportunity, perhaps he will discuss that serious matter with the European Commission so that the loophole can be closed.

Mr. Brown: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman is right; I shall check the law and write to him. It is my understanding that I have all the powers necessary to prevent the movement of animals and thereby the spread of the disease in Great Britain. As the hon. Gentleman knows, Northern Ireland has a separate veterinary regime. It is not for me to interpret the law, but I believe that the veterinary authorities there have all the powers that they need to restrict the movements of animals. There is no importation of live animals for movement into Great Britain; just as the domestic herd and flock cannot move, neither can any imported animal. I imagine that the position is the same in Northern Ireland under the strict licensing arrangements that pertain there.

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): I, too, wish to thank my right hon. Friend and his colleagues for the way in which they have handled the terrible epidemic and for the Ministry's detailed consultation with the National Assembly for Wales. We greatly appreciate that.

Does my right hon. Friend accept that foot and mouth disease has wide-ranging consequences beyond the livestock industry? Crops and horticulture, and the tourism and outdoor pursuits industries are also affected. They are essential to the economy in my constituency.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he and his colleagues will seriously consider that threat to jobs and incomes in my constituency?

Mr. Brown: The consequences of the disease control measures for other parts of the United Kingdom economy are under careful review not only by the Ministry, but by other interested Departments. Our strategy to contain and eliminate the disease is right, but the longer the measures continue, the more they will affect people who earn their living from activities that are unrelated to the livestock sector but conducted adjacent to it.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Although I have received today representations from farmers who believe that there should be no livestock movement because of the danger of spreading the disease, I have also received powerful representations from sheep farmers about ewes. The Minister rightly dealt with that in earlier answers. I want to push him on several specific matters.

On licensed local movements to a farm, what constitutes "farm"? Will the definition apply, for example, to ownership or to adjacent fields? If the farm is divided by a highway, will crossing it be acceptable? That affects one farmer in my constituency. Also, what constitutes "localised"? Another sheep farmer in my constituency has ewes waiting to lamb five or six miles from his farm, and he has to make a round journey to inspect them, see to their welfare and feed them. That risks spreading disease. What constitutes "localised" and what constitutes a "farm"?

Mr. Brown: The localised movement scheme will have to be a matter for local judgment, but it will operate within guidelines issued by the Ministry. The question of ownership is not of paramount importance. What is of paramount importance is the movement of animals, whether they would normally mix together, whether they are disease-free, and what the risk of spreading the disease is. Those are, ultimately, matters for local decision under what will be a permissive licensing arrangement for restricted, localised movement.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My right hon. Friend will know that my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) and I have been discussing with Ministers almost daily the developing problems in Cumbria. Will my right hon. Friend tell us when we are going to be given the model roll-out programme for de-restriction that will apply once the last case of foot and mouth disease has been notified? That is what people all over the country want.

Secondly, I refer my right hon. Friend to the remarks of the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) and support his suggestion that there is a major problem in Cumbria of not being able to dispose of carcases. In the light of that, will traditional forms of disposal now be reconsidered by the Ministry to get over this crisis?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right to point out the representations made to me and other Ministers by Members of Parliament representing Cumbria. There are serious issues to be addressed, both on carcase disposal and on what my hon. Friend rightly says might be quite a long tail to the control of the disease. The antibodies—in sheep, in particular—may well be present long after the virus has been eliminated, and we shall need to protect the national flock, and the national cattle and pig herds, from an outbreak occurring after we think it is over. Serious consideration has been given to those important issues. The management of the period when we think that the disease is over will be of enormous importance, and there are huge lessons for us all to learn from what happened in 1967.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): The plight of farmers in my constituency, as elsewhere, is very urgent. Mr. Robert Watkins of Kentchurch, for example, has 2,000 ewes in holdings. They are now lambing at the rate of 100 a day. The animal welfare concerns, the feed costs and the risk of smothering are vast, yet a mile down the road he has some 400 acres that he could use for them.

Further to the points raised by the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) and the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), I want to press the Minister on the use of the Army. I was told earlier this week by members of the Royal Logistic Corps and the Royal Engineers that they were surprised that they had not yet been asked to intervene and assist. What discussions has the Minister had with the Ministry of Defence about getting the Army involved? That could certainly speed up the disposal of these creatures.

Mr. Brown: There is proper communication across Government as to the use of the uniformed services and, indeed, any other resources of Government that we need to call on to control the disease. However, in all of this, I am professionally advised and would not want to assert a political judgment of my own over the professional advice that I am given.

On the hon. Gentleman's first point, the localised scheme that we hope to be able to bring in very soon will address the problem of his constituents. I hope that it will, although I cannot give a definitive answer because I do not know their circumstances, and that will be a matter for local judgment. However, there is still the rather more intractable problem of the animals that are miles away from their normal location in winter.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Does my right hon. Friend agree that a factor in the outbreak has been the considerable distance over which much livestock is being transported for slaughter? Is there not a case for more local abattoirs? He knows that the farmers fresh initiative has recently opened a new abattoir in Kenilworth. Does not that provide a model of co-operative working? When he meets the Welsh Minister for Rural Affairs, Carwyn Jones, will he discuss the need for more investment in agriculture infrastructure in south-east Wales, especially in Monmouthshire, which can serve the whole of south-east Wales and beyond?

Mr. Brown: The Agriculture Minister for Wales and I discussed abattoir provision when we last met and it is one of the issues that we keep under review, not least because there are compelling and perfectly justifiable reasons to support low-throughput abattoirs. The Government have tried to do that by underpinning the costs of veterinary inspections with public funds. Indeed, the money is being transferred from my Department's budget to that of the Department of Health precisely for

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that purpose. However, it is not the abattoirs or the trading practices of retailers that are at the heart of the foot and mouth outbreak.

The two issues that ought to be of concern to us all in reflecting on the matter are how the outbreak happened in the first place—inquiries on that continue, but we know the point of origin, or at least the farm where the disease first appeared—and how it spread so quickly. The issues involved in the spread are clearly livestock markets, sheep and the movement of sheep.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): Farmers in Warwickshire will be pleased to hear that the Minister is considering closely the possibility of introducing a local movements scheme. I first wrote to him about that matter at the end of last week and it is becoming increasingly urgent by the day. He is right that there are serious animal welfare considerations—lamb losses will be very high—but I hope that he will take another issue into account as well.

Farmers whose sheep are a mile or two, or even less than that, from their farms have to make several road journeys each day to look after them, feed them and perhaps take care of the lambs. That involves a risk of spreading infection. Perhaps undertaking one journey to bring sheep back to the farm would be less of a risk. I realise that the Minister has to protect against any possibility of the disease spreading, but I hope that he will take those factors into account in making his decision.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman makes a shrewd point. On each journey, it is necessary to disinfect the vehicles being used and to do so thoroughly. It might be better, even for disease control measures, to have a localised movement scheme; and the case that he advances is one reason why we are closely considering such a scheme.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Can the Minister say with confidence that his Department has learned all the crisis management lessons of BSE, as set out in the Phillips report, and of classical swine fever? We all appreciate the work being done in his Department, from top to bottom, and the difficulty of co-ordinating the activities of its various parts with those of other agencies. However, may I draw his attention to the case in Cornwall of an abattoir that was given a special licence to slaughter £40,000 worth of cows on Monday, only to have that licence withdrawn within 24 hours? No information was given as to what would happen to the meat, and total confusion resulted.

We understand that co-ordination, though extremely important, is hard to achieve in a crisis. We also understand the Minister's difficulties in that respect. However, can he give an absolute assurance that all the lessons about the co-ordination of all activities that were not learned during the BSE crisis have now been learned?

Mr. Brown: I am making sure that the way in which I handle the situation as a Minister is informed by the Phillips report. When reporting on the Government's response to Phillips, I promised the House that the lessons would be learned by the Government and that, specifically where they applied to Ministers, they would be learned by me. I am therefore considering questions of transparency, putting the scientific advice in the public domain and listening to dissenting voices. I am encouraging the Department to do the same.

Again, I place on record my wholehearted support and the wholehearted support of the Government for the officials who have to tackle this difficult and complex situation, not just at veterinary level, but at administrative level and between national Government and local government. I am sorry that I cannot comment on the specific constituency case that the hon. Gentleman raised.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): I echo the remarks made from both sides of the House by Members representing Cumbria and thank the Minister and his team for all the efforts they are making in the county. In the past hour, I have spoken to Gordon Capstick, the chairman of Cumbria's NFU and one of my constituents. He spoke yesterday to Mr. Andrew Hayward, the MAFF vet in the area, who is seriously concerned about the lack of manpower resources. As the Minister may know, he is responsible for an area that comprises both Cumbria and Tyne and Wear. He is dealing with 32 confirmed cases of the disease, which is very nearly one third of the entire national outbreak. He has 34 premises to investigate, and 30 dangerous contacts to inspect, yet there are only 11 full-time professionals on his team.

It is clear that Cumbria and the north-east are especially badly affected. Given the overall resources available in the UK, will the Minister see whether he can concentrate some additional manpower resources in the area?

The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) mentioned the specific issue of livestock destruction. In at least one case, the undestroyed carcases of sheep remain close to a field by a road six days after the animals were put down.

Mr. Brown: I understand how distressing such circumstances are to farmers, and to members of the public who come across them. I will make sure that the hon. Gentleman's remarks are drawn to the attention of the chief vet. The extent of the role of the Longtown market in the spread of the disease before the movement restrictions were put in place has become clear only recently. If it is necessary to divert extra resources to Cumbria, I assure the hon. Gentleman that the only constraint on those resources will be veterinary advice.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Beef farmers in exclusion zones cannot move or sell their cattle, which are increasingly becoming over age. The farmers are having to spend more on inputs, and are getting into a pretty desperate financial plight. The Minister rather sought to tease my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), who speaks for the Opposition on these matters, on the question of compensation. However, will he give the House an undertaking that, if the NFU and the Country Landowners Association come forward with suggestions for further financial aid for farmers in difficulties as a result of foot and mouth, he and the Chancellor of the Exchequer will give them serious consideration?

The question of financial aid and compensation will not disappear, and it cannot be batted away by saying that it is impossible to work out where the boundaries should drawn. More and more farmers are going to be in a severe financial plight as a consequence of foot and mouth.

Mr. Brown: The request that I made to the Opposition spokesman was meant seriously. Of course, an assessment of all consequential losses as they applied to farmers could be made, but would one then move further down the supply chain and talk about the losses already incurred by those who operate markets that are closed? Would one include people employed at abattoirs, where business has been disrupted and which are only in part getting back to working normally? Would one go on to look at the impact on the tourist industry? There has been loss of trade in small towns that are not receiving the visitors that they expect, and the Forestry Commission has had to close its visitor attractions.

The issue could run very wide. It is a serious question: what do the Opposition believe that the Government should do? However, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I have discussed the matter with the president of the National Farmers Union, and I have a clear view of his organisation's priorities.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. We must move on. I am sure that the Minister will be coming back to report to the House, and I will remember which hon. Members were not called today.

Business of the House

1.25 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Would the Leader of the House tell us the business for next week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for next week will be as follows:

MONDAY 12 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget Debate.

TUESDAY 13 MARCH—Conclusion of the Budget Debate.

Motion on the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2001.

WEDNESDAY 14 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill.

Motion on the Weights and Measures (Metrication Amendments) Regulations 2001.

THURSDAY 15 MARCH—Estimates Day [2nd Allotted Day].

There will be a debate on the Eighth Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee on Weapons of Mass Destruction.

At 7 o'clock the House will be asked to agree the Spring Supplementary Estimates, Votes on Account, Excess Votes and Defence Votes A.

FRIDAY 16 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the following week will be as follows:

MONDAY 19 MARCH—Proceedings on the Consolidated Fund (No.2) Bill.

Second Reading of Regulatory Reform Bill *[Lords]*.

TUESDAY 20 MARCH—Second Reading of Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill *[Lords]*.

WEDNESDAY 21 MARCH—Opposition day [7th Allotted Day]. There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 22 MARCH—The House will be asked to consider motions arising from the Second Report from the Procedure Committee: Election of a Speaker.

The Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration at 4 o'clock.

FRIDAY 23 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

Mrs. Browning: The Leader of the House has just announced that next Wednesday we are to deal with the remaining stages of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill—which is not the only debate scheduled for that day. For the third time, may I raise with the right hon. Lady the way in which that Bill has been dealt with in Committee?

The new programming rules have meant that the Committee will conclude at 7 o'clock this evening, with much of the Bill still not having been properly scrutinised. After Second Reading, the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), announced that there would be about 16 sittings in Committee, despite the fact that the official Opposition asked for 18 as we realised that the Bill was important and dealt with many aspects of criminal justice. When the

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Minister brought the programme motion to the Programming Sub-Committee, we found that it provided for 14 sittings.

I have raised with the Leader of the House our concern about programming in general and the programme for this Bill in particular. It is now a matter of great concern that the Committee stage will end today and we will deal with remaining stages next week, given that this afternoon the Committee will have to deal with no fewer than 56 clauses, six schedules and 42 amendments.

The matters to be considered this afternoon include the disposal of information held by tax authorities; powers of seizure; safeguards of legal privilege—a matter that has been raised by the Bar Association—police training; and DNA testing and police discipline, about which the Police Federation and the Association of Police Authorities have expressed concern.

It is unacceptable for a Bill of this magnitude, whose content had cross-party support in many areas, to be curtailed in this way. This is the last opportunity that I will have to draw this matter to the right hon. Lady's attention from the Dispatch Box before the business is taken next Wednesday. In Committee, the Minister made it clear that, contrary to what the Advocate-General for Scotland said, the Opposition have not prolonged debates unnecessarily. In fact the Minister said clearly at column 567 of the *Official Report* of the Standing Committee that the Opposition had not filibustered. They have behaved properly in this matter.

The right hon. Lady's roles are now incompatible: she chairs the Modernisation Committee, yet she is expected to do her duty to the House. For the third time running at business questions, I have drawn her attention to the problems associated with the Bill, and the Home Office Minister, no less, informed the Committee that he had written to the right hon. Lady describing his concerns about the Bill. If all that means nothing, the right hon. Lady should consider her position as Chairman of the Modernisation Committee. Clearly, she cannot discharge her duties to this House regarding Bill Committees while she is Chairman.

We will not take this matter lightly. It is an affront to democracy. Previous Governments have allowed more than 200 hours in Committee for similar Home Office Bills. It is a mockery to call this a justice Bill when it has not been properly scrutinised by the House.

Also—[Hon. Members: "Where's the question?"] I do not think that we need frivolous remarks from below the Gangway. I also ask the Leader of the House—for the second time, as I requested this last week—how the Hammond report is to be conveyed to the House. After all, one can read extracts from it on BBC Online, yet the right hon. Lady has still not identified how the Government intend to convey its contents to the House so that hon. Members on both sides can scrutinise it and ask the Government about it. Will she tell us when, during next week's business, the House will have an opportunity to deal with the Hammond inquiry?

My final request is somewhat small in comparison with the weightier matters to which I hope the Leader of the House will give her attention. Yet again, I ask for the annual small business debate promised by new Labour when they came to office. Such a debate has been promised by successive Ministers, but there is no sign of it.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Lady says, correctly, that she has previously raised with me the handling of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. However, although she has repeatedly said that she frequently raises the many problems that have arisen as regards programming, she has in fact repeatedly raised the problems that she identifies in respect of that one Bill. She repeatedly makes the same point, as she is, of course, perfectly entitled to do.

As she has done in the past, the hon. Lady refers in particular to the question whether there were 14 or 16 sittings—it is news to me that the Opposition had requested 18 sittings. Perhaps there is a little too much focus on sittings; as the House will readily appreciate, the number of sittings is not the same as the amount of time spent on a Bill. The hon. Lady says that there was no undue delay in scrutinising the Bill in Committee. However, it is my understanding that additional sittings were offered by the Government—and indeed, that longer sittings were offered on some occasions when the Committee was already meeting—in order to meet requests for extra time. Although the number of sittings is 15—in itself more than the number proposed originally—the time spent on the Bill amounts to about 16 sittings' worth—[Hon. Members: "That is not right."] Well, it is a matter of simple arithmetic. I do not suppose for a second that hon. Members know anything about it.

There is certainly a point of view on the way that the Committee is being handled that is different from the one frequently expressed by the hon. Lady. As for how that relates to my responsibilities, that does not strike me as a matter on which the House would necessarily want to spend much debating time—which is what the hon. Lady is asking me for. May I remind her of something that she seems—not for the first time—to have forgotten? There is nothing unprecedented about the Leader of the House chairing a Select Committee: the Leader of the House always used to chair the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges, for example. Although I understand that the hon. Lady objects to the position as regards my chairmanship of the Modernisation Committee, such chairmanship is not new—it happens from time to time.

The hon. Lady makes a general point about the amount of time available for the Bill. Although there has been some amendment of content and some addition to the Bill, it is nothing like the amount that was needed on Bills introduced by the Conservatives in the past. That means that it is possible to scrutinise the measure without taking up the same amount of time as has been needed in the past. Obviously, the handling of the remainder of the Committee stage and Report will be a matter for those concerned.

As the hon. Lady knows, we have briefly discussed such issues in the Modernisation Committee. A matter that the House genuinely has to take seriously and balance in its own mind, and in its workings, is the degree to which we try to structure our time to ensure that we look at all aspects of legislation. There are some Members—as the hon. Lady knows, there are some in her party—who believe strongly that the House should be prepared to exercise a discipline over itself in order to ensure the scrutiny of all parts of legislation; others find the matter

of less importance. However, it is one on which the House will, ultimately, have to come—one way or another—to a collective view and approach.

The hon. Lady refers to the Hammond report. She says that its contents can be read on BBC Online, as if to suggest that the Government have in some way withheld them from the House. I take it that what she is referring to is what the BBC said were the contents of the report.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): How did it get there?

Mrs. Beckett: I have no idea, because the Government were not in possession of the report when those documents were published. It is nothing to do with Ministers that some parts of what may ultimately be in the report are actually in the public domain. As for how the matter will be reported to the House, hon. Members will, of course, be kept properly informed by the usual means. I believe that I am right in saying that we expect the Hammond report to be published tomorrow, and it may be for the convenience of the House to know that. Finally, I am conscious of the hon. Lady's reminder about the small business debate, and will remain conscious of it.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My right hon. Friend will know that last year we in the United Kingdom imported 12,500 tonnes of fireworks, worth £22 million. Does she share my incredulity that there are no official statistics on the number of commercial fireworks that are imported? They are monster explosives, which can kill and maim. Is my right hon. Friend aware that the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* has been documenting the havoc caused by those monster explosives in east Lancashire? Phone boxes and two cars have been blown up. Last month, a van was blown up outside the house of an 86-year-old woman. A park pavilion has been blown up. Last October, a man died. May I urge my right hon. Friend to hold an early debate on the importation of commercial fireworks and their end use, because it is clear that those lethal devices are leaching into the market and that many people who buy them use them with scant regard to their impact on the general public?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. I admit that I was not familiar with the scale of the events that he describes in his part of the country. I understand his anxiety and concern. Equally, I was not aware—although I can perhaps understand why—that commercial fireworks are not differentiated from others in the statistics. I am not 100 per cent. sure, but from memory, I think that this is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. I will certainly draw it to the relevant Minister's attention. I fear that I cannot offer to hold a debate on the Floor of the House, but it seems to be exactly the kind of subject that my hon. Friend might raise with profit in Westminster Hall.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The Leader of the House will recall that, last week, I asked her to get a statement to us on the practical implications of the continuing foot and mouth epidemic on the census and the May county council elections. Since then, the media have been briefed extensively on those issues, although the information has been peculiarly confusing. Having been given a week's notice, will she at least give us some guidance? For example, would the postponement of the census require the House to consider any legislative change, or would it simply be an administrative matter? How soon would either of those announcements have to be made? I understand that they would have to be made in the next 10 days or so if a postponement were planned.

The right hon. Lady will be aware from the statements that have been made and the oral answers just given by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food that it would seem that we have not yet reached the peak of the current outbreak of foot and mouth. We can therefore expect several weeks yet of restrictions in many rural areas, including mine in Cornwall. In those circumstances, what contingency plan has she in place to deal with the county council elections on 3 May—and any other possible election that may be planned for that day? Will she please ensure that the House is kept fully informed of those arrangements, which are crucial to the practical application of our democratic procedures? Not only should the House be informed, but those who are campaigning on behalf of the various parties should know what the situation is.

Mrs. Beckett: First, I apologise to the hon. Gentleman; I am afraid that I do not have the answers that he seeks. He is right to say that questions concerning the legislative handling of any such decision are strictly factual. One of the reasons why I do not have those details is that no decision of any kind has been made as to whether we need to contemplate such steps. In that light, people have not pursued the detail of how those issues would be handled. If I may, I shall write to the hon. Gentleman.

Although I am not an expert on such matters, my recollection and understanding is that the incubation period for foot and mouth disease is about two weeks, which is why we are not yet clear whether we have reached the peak. It is also not yet clear whether there is any more than one source. As my right hon. Friend the Minister has said, until now—we must all hope that this continues to be the case—we are talking about one source. Again, that seems potentially to make something of a difference. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern and the wish of all hon. Members to know where they stand on campaigning. The Government are not yet taking a view and a position on these matters, but we will keep the House informed.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I know that my right hon. Friend is a great supporter of the Executive providing free and open information to Parliament. I know that she will therefore be prepared to consider holding a debate urgently on whether Members are receiving full information. I tabled a question to every Department about Serco and the contracts that it has won and lost throughout the Government system. I have received full information from all the Departments, except the Ministry of Defence, which has chosen to give me details of the number of individual contracts, with no information about the contracts concerned. I find that worrying.

[Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody]

On a related matter, if the Hammond report is to be released tomorrow, is there to be an inquiry into the source of the many highly specialised and partial leaks of the apparent contents of the report that have appeared in the press over the past week?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend raises the issue of Serco contracts and I am glad to learn that she has had information generally. I was not aware of the particular difficulty that she identifies with the MOD and, of course, I will draw her remarks to the attention of Ministers there. She may like to bear in mind that it is Defence questions on Monday week, when there may be an opportunity to raise the matter. On a cautionary note, since it has recently become apparent that hitherto there has been no central record of the great range of Government procurement, it is always possible that some of these matters are ones of error as much as of design. But, naturally, I entirely take my hon. Friend's point.

My hon. Friend asked whether a further inquiry is intended into the circumstances surrounding the work of Sir Anthony Hammond. Obviously, that is not a matter for me. No doubt someone may give it consideration somewhere. There has been a long history of inquiries into how information is leaked and I am only thankful that on this occasion it was information that was not even in the possession of the Government.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I warmly thank the Leader of the House for arranging a debate on the second report of the Procedure Committee relating to the procedures governing the election of a Speaker, and for tabling the necessary amendments to Standing Orders. In responding as she has, the right hon. Lady has met the wishes of the majority of Members on both sides of the House. Will she join me in thanking the Committee Members for their dedicated hard work in producing the report?

Bearing in mind the visit over the last few days of Mr. Robert Mugabe, the President of Zimbabwe, to Europe and, in particular, to France, and the fact that he is behaving in the most tyrannical and despotic way in his country and is directly responsible for the deaths of people, will the Leader of the House get the Foreign Secretary to come to the House to make a statement on the apparent red-carpet treatment that the French have meted out to him? We should be giving thought to removing his country from the Commonwealth for the foreseeable future until his behaviour and that of his Government improve.

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his thanks. I am glad that we have been able to arrange a debate on the Procedure Committee report. I cannot always grant these requests as readily as I have been able to on this occasion. I am pleased to have been able to do so. It is my hope that the motions on the Standing Order changes that will allow the House to reach conclusions on this matter will be on the Order Paper as soon as possible. That is certainly our wish and intention. I entirely endorse the hon. Gentleman's remarks about the hard work of the Committee Members. I hope that they will be able to take part in the discussions, although, obviously that is a matter for the Chair.

The hon. Gentleman also raised the issue of Zimbabwe and the concern that exists on both sides of the House about the behaviour of the Government of Zimbabwe. Certainly, anxiety has been expressed about some of the problems that have arisen in that unhappy country. How others deal with the issues is a matter for them, but we all hope that they have raised with President Mugabe the great concern that is felt across the European Union. I assure the hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary intends to raise the issue at the forthcoming meeting of Commonwealth Ministers.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Will my right hon. Friend consider making time for a debate on United States-United Kingdom relations, with particular reference to the proposal to build a reservoir in Virginia that will result in the destruction of 437 acres of wetlands and the loss of the livelihood and the homeland of the native American Mataponi tribe? Is she aware of the importance of this issue to my constituents in Gravesham, because the Mataponi are the direct descendants of Pocahontas, who died in 1617 off Gravesend and who is at rest in the churchyard of St. George's church?

As my right hon. Friend will know, the borough of Gravesham is rich in history and heritage, of which Pocahontas is an important part. My constituents would like to show their support for her descendants, the Mataponi, so will my right hon. Friend give us an opportunity to consider this matter in the House?

Mrs. Beckett: The whole House is clearly lost in admiration at the creativity of that link. It is certainly a different concern from those that are usually raised at business questions. The whole House endorses my hon. Friend's remarks about the importance of Gravesham and acknowledges the concern that he has expressed on behalf of his constituents. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time on the Floor of the House for the debate that he seeks, but Westminster Hall might relish it.

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): Last month, the Government signed the treaty of Nice. Have the parliamentary draftsmen completed the necessary work for the ratification Bill to be presented to the House? When it is presented to the House, can we be assured that there will be no guillotine attached to it, since it is a constitutional measure that must receive very full consideration?

Mrs. Beckett: I cannot, off hand, recall the answer to the hon. Gentleman's questions. He is right: the treaty of Nice has now been signed. On the questions of when and how it might come before the House, I shall, of course, bear his remarks in mind.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order that is to be the subject of a debate under the affirmative resolution procedure next Tuesday evening? I am sure that she will recall that I raised this question with her last Thursday and asked her to consider how sensible it was to put such an order through in a one-and-a-half-hour debate under the affirmative resolution procedure, with no opportunity for amendment.

Twenty-one organisations are due to be banned from operating in this country, causing a great deal of disquiet in the Islamic, Turkish and Tamil communities. That is not because people support terrorism, but because they want to encourage a peace process. They recognise that some of the organisations are currently engaged in ceasefires in their own countries, and are actively engaged in the search for long-lasting peace that will bring about the resolution to conflicts. Does my right hon. Friend not accept that a one-and-a-half-hour debate, with no possibility of amendment, is not a sensible way to deal with such a serious issue?

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern, but he will know that this order represents the inauguration of the process. If the list were to be amended in the future, that might be done on a one-off basis to add or to remove organisations from it. A number of organisations are covered, but my hon. Friend will also know that there has long been discussion about many of them, so the issues that will be aired in the debate are not, in that sense, completely new.

My hon. Friend will also know that statutory instruments are not amendable; that is not the way in which the House proceeds. I understand his concern, and I assure him that the issue has been given careful consideration. However, it remains the case that the Government are giving the order the normal amount of time for debate.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): The right hon. Lady will remember that the Broadcasting Committee's report was published several months ago and that before Christmas I raised on the Floor of the House the possibility of debating it. I understand that the appointment of a new contractor for broadcasting the House of Commons is imminent. Will she assure us that the report will be debated before the contract is signed?

Mrs. Beckett: I recall the hon. Gentleman raising that report. I fear that I cannot give him the undertaking that he wants, but I will bear his point it mind.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Surprisingly, the Opposition have not pressed my right hon. Friend on the election. Does she agree that when there is election fever and a great deal of speculation, there is much to be said, as there was in the 1980s, for getting it over and done with? *[Interruption.]*

Mrs. Beckett: I note with some amusement—as, I am sure, does my hon. Friend—that Opposition Members refer to panic. There is no sign of panic on the part of the Government, but I thought that those Members were a bit gloomy yesterday.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): The consequences of foot and mouth disease are often unpredictable and widespread, as was made clear earlier this afternoon. For example, the people of Chippenham and Malmesbury are disappointed by Her Majesty the Queen's correct decision to cancel the visit to my constituency a week on Friday. None the less, that highlights the necessity for the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to come to the House as often as he can to answer questions on what is a difficult issue. Of his two most recent appearances, one was for an Opposition debate and the other was today in response to a written question tabled by a Conservative Member of Parliament. Is it not time to put a procedure in place so that the right hon. Gentleman comes to the House—perhaps once a week—to update Members on the epidemic?

Mrs. Beckett: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman. When Lord Biffen was Leader of the House, he said that business questions is when Members deliver themselves of the point or speech that they have been nurturing in their bosom undelivered all week. I know that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) was present throughout my right hon. Friend's statement and subsequent questions, and was not successful in being called. He can congratulate himself on the fact that his constituents' concerns are on the record.

The hon. Gentleman will know that one of his hon. Friend's suggestions in business questions last week led to the specific arrangement that allowed the Minister to answer questions today. I am not sure that we need to make a formal decision about what particular mechanism is adopted, but I can assure him that my right hon. Friend has every intention of keeping the House informed. The hon. Gentleman will know, and no doubt has benefited from, the arrangements that my right hon. Friend and his Department have established to make information available to MPs, which I also mentioned last week.

Valerie Davey (Bristol, West): The centre for the deaf at Bristol university has recently pioneered a video link system for the deaf, which uses British sign language to enable them to communicate via screen. Will my right hon. Friend consider how the system might be used to enhance the involvement of the deaf in parliamentary democracy, perhaps by using an interpreter to ensure that their questions reach Members and/or enabling them to see an edited version of what happens in the House, possibly similar to "Yesterday in Parliament", again via screen?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an extremely interesting point. I was not aware of that work and I join her in paying tribute to her constituents and those who are engaged in such matters. My initial thought is that she should consider taking the issue up with the Information Committee. The nature of electronic communication in the House is, at least in part, a matter for it. She might also like to write to the Speaker and the Clerk of the House. However, I suspect that it will be difficult to resolve how we can make use of such facilities, but it should certainly be considered.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Can the Leader of the House be a bit more helpful about the Hammond report? She has been very coy about it so far. Does she accept that we need to know whether what the BBC is reporting is accurate—in the cause strictly of open government and transparency, which the Government of course espouse? Can she guarantee that the report will be properly presented to the House so that we are able to ask questions about it, not least about the role of the shadowy figure of Alastair Campbell, who, unless the report corrects the record, apparently runs the Government, sacks Cabinet Ministers and unapologetically seeks to sidestep the whole issue?

[Mr. Eric Forth]

Can the Leader of the House give a specific undertaking that everything will be done to tell us whether what the BBC is saying is accurate and, more important, that the House will have a proper opportunity to hear all about the report and ask lots of questions about it?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not being coy. I think that the report was received only this morning. I believe that it is the intention that it will be published tomorrow, so I am not in a position to say anything more to the right hon. Gentleman. I am certainly not in a position to tell him whether what the BBC says is accurate. When the report is published—probably tomorrow—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): What about the leaks?

Mrs. Beckett: That is a very good question. Do not ask me. They are nothing to do with me.

Mr. Bercow: Not me, guv.

Mrs. Beckett: Very much, "Not me, guv." I have already said that the matter will of course be properly reported to the House. As for the notion that Mr. Campbell is a shadowy figure, I would have thought that that was a less-than-apt description. He is certainly an effective servant of the Government and of the public service, and that is very much to be welcomed.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is perhaps slightly losing sight of the fact that, if I recall correctly—indeed, I must check for myself—Sir Anthony Hammond was looking into whether there was any impropriety in the award of a passport.

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): In the light of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) yesterday about local government finance, will the Leader of the House consider again the need for a debate on that subject? I say that in the light of the numerous responses to the Green Paper, to which the Prime Minister referred, and the short amount of time that hon. Members were given to debate this year's rate support grant. It was the subject of a truncated debate, and many hon. Members who wished to contribute were not able to do so. I also say that in the light of the experience in my local authority, which has raised a series of issues that we have not had the opportunity to debate on the Floor of the House. It would be good to have a debate so that the Government can consider the views of all hon. Members before the White Paper is drafted.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern and his dismay that we did not have as extensive a debate as usual on the local government settlement. He may recall that at that time the Opposition were going through one of their phases of objecting to everything, and one of the things to which they objected was an extended debate. Whether they imagined that the Government would keep hon. Members here late at night to discuss whether we should extend the debate, I do not know. The Government simply accepted their decision.

I fear that I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for a specialist debate on local government finance. My hon. Friend can perhaps look for a general debate on the issue in Westminster Hall. It sounds to me like a good subject for an extended debate there, but I am sure that there will be other opportunities for my hon. Friend and others who are anxious to discuss it.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): In response to my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House, the Leader of the House confirmed that the Hammond report would be reported to the House in the usual way. Given that most of us have read its contents in the newspapers or seen them on the broadcast media already, we could be forgiven for thinking that it had already been reported to us. In response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), the right hon. Lady confirmed that the matter would be reported to the House properly. Given that the report is apparently to be published tomorrow, will there be a statement in the House tomorrow, or will it be next week?

Mrs. Beckett: As the report has only just been received, it is yet to be decided how it will be properly reported to the House. The hon. Gentleman will be perfectly well aware, and successive occupants of the Speaker's Chair have confirmed, that there is a variety of ways in which information can properly be laid before the House. A written question is one of them.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): My right hon. Friend will know that the final decision on Corus jobs has not yet been made. Is it not important that we have a debate before it is made, so that we can discuss that foolish proposal, which will lead to the closure of some of the most efficient steel plants in the world? Corus has confirmed that the works in Newport that the company plans to close down are far more productive and efficient than its plants in the Netherlands and other countries. Can we not emphasise that the reasons behind the decision are in part to do with differences in payments for redundancies in the different countries, with Dutch steel workers getting up to five times the redundancy payments that British workers receive; and with the parity of currencies, which means that the price on the continent of production from Llanwern is artificially high, whereas imports from the continent are artificially cheap here? Is not Newport's plight a case of "euro, or your job"?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an important and powerful point. I think that I am right in saying that he has some years' direct experience of the steel industry. He knows that we have discussed that issue in the House and that further discussions are continuing. He will also be aware that, fortunately, owing to pressure from the Government and others, Corus is now discussing its proposals and plans with the trade unions. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for a further special debate on the issue, but my hon. Friend, too, might consider the advantages of Westminster Hall. In addition, he will know that today's Budget debate is likely to concentrate on industrial matters, so he might find an opportunity to raise the matter during that debate.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): The Government's published standards on care homes are

vastly more prescriptive than those produced by the National Assembly for Wales, despite the fact that both arise from the same piece of legislation. May we have a debate on the Government's standards? Many of us believe that they will have a perverse effect, deny many elderly residents the en-suite facilities that they currently enjoy and, more important, deny many elderly and vulnerable people a place in a residential care home, as developers all over the south queue up to build new houses on the sites of care homes that have gone out of business.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to find time in the near future for a special debate on that issue, but the hon. Gentleman will recall that Health questions take place on Tuesday, so he might find an opportunity to raise it then. He will know that debate continues on how to handle the availability of places in care homes. In addition, there is extensive discussion about how we can get the balance right between people who need health care and those who can be properly cared for in their own home, which also has an impact on the care homes sector. I cannot arrange a special debate, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will find other ways in which to raise the issue.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): May we have a debate on the west's treatment of Iraq? The British and American Governments appear to be determined to bomb Iraq back into the stone age, despite the widespread opprobrium with which our policy has been met. The recent bombing appears to have been motivated by the fact that there is a new American president who is viciously right wing and has a peanut for a brain.

Mrs. Beckett: I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on Iraq. My hon. Friend will know that those concerns have been expressed many times in the House in a variety of different ways, and I am sure that he and others will find other ways of making their points. In the near future, it is not likely that we shall have time for the debate that he requests.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): May we have an urgent debate in Government time on sentencing policy? Given that since January 1999 no fewer than 31,000 serious criminals have been released early after serving less than half of their sentences—including people convicted of manslaughter, attempted murder, actual and grievous bodily harm, drug dealing, cruelty to children, sex offences, violent disorder, burglary, robbery and kidnapping, to name but a few—would not an early debate in the House present the public with the clear choice that they will soon have to make on crime between the Government's institutionalised wimpishness and the robust policy of honesty in sentencing that is commended to the country by the Conservatives?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman's point about people being released early from jail has been made frequently by Opposition Members. Although I speak from memory, I understand that we are talking about people being released perhaps a week or so earlier than they otherwise would be released. Under this Government, there has been no vast change in the approach to the handling of sentences or the period that people serve.

As for the hon. Gentleman's remarks about choice, Opposition Members talked a storm about those things in government, while crime doubled. At the weekend, I read the speech of the Leader of the Opposition, in which he said how different things would be if only the shadow Chancellor was at the Treasury, the shadow Foreign Secretary was at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the shadow Home Secretary was at the Home Office. I cast my mind back and thought, "But the shadow Chancellor was at the Treasury, the shadow Foreign Secretary was at the Foreign Office, and the shadow Home Secretary was at the Home Office—and look what happened then."

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): With her long experience, my right hon. Friend will recall that, just before the 1970 election, the late Enoch Powell made a disgusting xenophobic speech, which was dismissed by the then Conservative leader, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath). The Conservatives went on to win that election.

Last Sunday, the Leader of the Opposition made a disgusting xenophobic speech, so could we have a debate on the problem of xenophobia in politics, with particular reference to the report in today's edition of *Tribune* about Lord Pearson of Rannoch being prepared to pay £2 million to bribe members of another political party to stand down to allow more extreme right-wing, anti-European, xenophobic Conservatives to garner more votes? Surely, that financial interference in our electoral system is unacceptable, even at the cost of Tory xenophobia.

Mrs. Beckett: I have not yet seen this week's edition of *Tribune*, but I am aware of newspaper stories making the suggestion to which my hon. Friend referred with regard to the United Kingdom Independence party. It is certainly interesting to see how assiduously certain members of the Conservative party are working to influence the electorate's decisions.

My hon. Friend made a point about the general content of the speech of the Leader of the Opposition, and there was certainly widespread concern about it. When I read it, what struck me forcefully was the distinct impression that the entire Conservative party had been beamed down from Mars in 1997 and that everything wrong in this country is the result only of the operations of this Government. [HON. MEMBERS: "Quite right."] I hear echoes from Opposition Members; they may think that the world began on 1 May 1997, but the rest of us are conscious of a rather long trail, track record and history.

As my hon. Friend will understand from my remarks, I find attractive his proposition that we should provide an opportunity to air those issues in the House. I fear, however, that the pressures on time are such that it is a pleasure that we shall have to forgo.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): I appreciate that we are in the middle of debating the Budget which, as we know, represents a balanced approach, providing both measured and affordable tax cuts and extra investment, but, surely, there must be a way of debating and scrutinising the Opposition's policies, which are so right-wing, barmy and unbalanced that they pose an enormous risk to the country. The more exposure they get, the better.

[Mrs. Beckett]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand and sympathise with my hon. Friend's concerns. It would be attractive to spend time exposing the Opposition's mistakes, follies and continual U-turns; for example, we never discussed what happened to the tax guarantee, which may be relevant in the context of the Budget debate. I fear however that, no matter how much I might wish to, I cannot undertake to find extra time for such debate.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): The majority of hon. Members would like a general election. May I pick up on the question of the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler)? In reality, it is highly likely that there will be a general election on 3 May—that is agreed ground. Will my right hon. Friend discuss with the Home Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary introducing a short Bill which would allow free delivery of local election addresses during that period, to match the facility for parliamentary candidates? Will she consider bringing forward the Northern Ireland elections, which are scheduled for mid May, to 3 May if appropriate? Finally, what is the expected date of arrival of the International Criminal Court Bill from another place?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend asks a number of questions. He was right to say that the local elections are scheduled to be held on 3 May, but whatever the assumptions, I am not aware that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made a decision, never mind announced it. We can all be confident that there will be a general election within the next 14 months.

My hon. Friend makes a new proposal about free delivery of local election addresses, which may have wide-ranging implications. I shall draw his remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friends, but I cannot undertake at this point that we will be able to make the changes that he seeks. As I said, I shall draw the package of concerns that he identified to the attention of my parliamentary and political colleagues.

With regard to the International Criminal Court Bill, I have slightly lost track of its progress in the Lords, but I believe that it is due to finish there today. We hope to make progress with that important and useful measure.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I return to the need for a debate on modernisation procedures and programme motions. On the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, when the Standing Committee turned its attention to the content of the Bill, the scrutiny—this applies to hon. Members from all parties—was constructive and effective.

When my right hon. Friend considers further representations on the matter, however, particularly in view of the mock, synthetic outrage that we witnessed earlier from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), will my right hon. Friend take time to peruse the *Official Report* of the Committee? Will she look at the volume of time that was devoted to lengthy and gratuitous insults levelled at members of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, deliberate lengthy and misleading misrepresentations of international animal welfare organisations, smug and lengthy eulogies to minor Conservative party researchers, and extraordinarily lengthy comments on the television series "Dangerfield", which might have been more appropriate on the television critics' pages of the *Radio Times*? Does not that demonstrate that far too much time and attention are devoted to trivia by the Opposition, which is why the Committee is not making progress?

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes an interesting and powerful point. I hope that it has been heard and taken on board by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning). My hon. Friend's underlying point is extremely important and we make it repeatedly in the House. The question is not just how much time is available for discussion, but whether that time is used constructively. It has often been a delusion of Oppositions, and we in the Labour party can plead guilty to this in the past, that people admire skill in wasting time. My understanding is that members of the public think that they send us to this place to use our time constructively, and rather despise us if they think that we do not.

Orders of the Day

WAYS AND MEANS

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [7 March].

AMENDMENT OF THE LAW

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That it is expedient to amend the law with respect to the National Debt and the public revenue and to make further provision in connection with finance.

(2) Subject to paragraphs (3) to (6) below, this Resolution does not extend to the making of any amendment with respect to value added tax so as to provide—

(a) for zero-rating or exempting a supply, acquisition or importation;

(b) for refunding an amount of tax;

(c) for varying any rate at which that tax is at any time chargeable;

(d) for any relief, other than a relief which—

(i) so far as it is applicable to goods, applies to goods of every description, and

(ii) so far as it is applicable to services, applies to services of every description.

(3) Paragraph (2) above does not exclude the making of amendments with respect to value added tax—

(a) providing for refunds of the kind specified in paragraph (4) below;

(b) providing for that tax to be charged at a reduced rate of 5 per cent. on supplies of the descriptions specified in paragraph (5) below (and on equivalent acquisitions and importations); or

(c) making provision of the kind authorised by paragraph (6) below.

(4) The refunds mentioned in paragraph (3)(a) above are refunds of value added tax where—

(a) that tax is chargeable on a supply to, or an acquisition or importation by, a museum or gallery, and

(b) the supply, acquisition or importation is attributable to supplies of free rights of admission to the museum or gallery.

(5) The supplies mentioned in paragraph (3)(b) above are—

(a) supplies, in the course of a conversion of a building (or part of a building), of services related to the conversion if after the conversion the building (or part) contains living accommodation;

(b) supplies, in the course of the renovation or alteration (including the extension) of a dwelling that has been unoccupied for at least three years, of services related to the renovation or alteration;

(c) supplies of goods by a person making a supply of services within sub-paragraph (a) or (b) above if—

(i) those services include the incorporation of the goods into the building concerned (or its site), and

(ii) the goods are building materials within the meaning of Group 5 of Schedule 8 to the Value Added Tax Act 1994;

(d) supplies of children's car seats.

(6) The provision authorised by this paragraph is provision re-enacting, without altering any person's liability to value added tax or the amount of any such liability, provisions providing for that tax to be charged at a reduced rate of 5 per cent. on certain supplies, acquisitions and importations.—*[Mr. Gordon Brown.]*

Question again proposed.

Budget Resolutions and Economic Situation

2.13 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): What a difference an approaching election makes to a Budget statement! In some ways, the Budget yesterday was not the worst of the Budgets presented by the Chancellor over the past four years. For instance, it was his shortest statement. The problem for the Government and for the country is that the promises that the Government may make in their last Budget cannot repair what happened as a result of the previous Budgets over their period of office.

Because the Chancellor has squeezed five Budgets into less than four years, we have already had the tax increases of four years, even before the Chancellor made another statement yesterday. Nothing can alter the fact that the Government will go down in history as the largest tax-raising Government of all time. According to their own figures, total tax receipts, which include social security contributions as well as taxes, will have risen over the past four years by a staggering £100 billion, almost exactly.

There were some welcome U-turns in the Budget yesterday—for example, on road fuel taxation—but why did it take a tax revolt, with all the shortages and disruption that accompanied it last autumn, to make the Government listen? If the Prime Minister and the Chancellor spent more time in the House, they would have heard hon. Members making the same points in debate after debate on previous Budgets. They would have been told that the relentless increase in road fuel taxation was not just socially and politically damaging to those in rural areas and others—people who must have cars to get to work—but that it was undermining the competitiveness of the haulage industry, which still faces competitors from the continent delivering goods in this country using fuel that is much cheaper than any available in Britain.

The Government have damaged the haulage industry and manufacturing industry. Although they have repented and although there is a modest cut, we still have the highest petrol prices in Europe. According to some estimates, we have the highest petrol and diesel prices in the world.

Like all Chancellors' statements, this one was better eaten cold. Once the more gullible Labour Members have had a chance to read the small print and the Budget document, as I hope they will, they will see, as we have, a parallel Budget emerging from the mist. For instance, the Chancellor persistently underestimates the tax effect of his measures in successive Budgets. The Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, used to deny that the burden of tax was rising at all.

Even though it was clearly set out in the Government's own documents that the percentage of tax as a proportion of gross domestic product was rising, the Prime Minister used to resort to any circumlocution to deny that fact. It was eventually the Prime Minister's press secretary who came clean and admitted that there was a continuing increase. All he had to do was to read some of the Budget document. In other cases, there have been problems because the Government have difficulty with their own figures. In some cases, by accident or design, they disguise the real truth.

[Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory]

Let us consider the tax burden in the current year—2000-01. In the 1999 Budget, that was predicted at 36.7 per cent. of GDP. In last year's Budget, the figure was revised upwards. In last year's pre-Budget statement in the autumn, it was revised upwards again. Yesterday in the Budget, it was increased yet again to 37.7 per cent. of GDP. That is more than a 3p in the pound increase in income tax. That is what the Government do—they will not admit at the time that they are increasing taxes; that must be discovered retrospectively by examining the documents, which show a continuing increase. The same has already happened to their estimates for the tax burden next year. That, too, has been revised up from previous years to the present level.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): My right hon. Friend eloquently describes the Government's sneaky and deceptive approach to communicating their taxation measures. Does he recall that, for 15 successive years, the previous Conservative Government published an assessment of the impact of direct and indirect taxes on the disposable income of a family on average earnings and on families in other income deciles? Does he further recall that the Chancellor's consistent and calculated failure to continue that practice was most recently denounced in a report of the Select Committee on the Treasury of March 2000 at, if my memory serves me correctly, paragraph 35?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend rightly points to a further example of fiddled figures. I can give him yet another one. He may know that the working families tax credit is presented in the Red Book as a tax reduction, even though, in the small print at the end of the document, the Government have to admit that it should be treated as an addition to expenditure. I refer the House to page 216 where it clearly says:

"income tax credits . . . score as public expenditure under national accounting conventions".

but that is not how they are treated in the document. They are not treated as expenditure; they are treated as negative taxation to flatter the Government's taxation figures. Therefore, the figures that I have just given to the House showing the constant revision upwards underestimate the true position. If, as required under national accounting conventions, we also add in the working families tax credit, the rise becomes even steeper and the tax burden becomes even heavier.

It is no wonder that people are cynical about politics and politicians. The Prime Minister complains about public cynicism about his record, but is it any wonder when the Government fiddle the figures in their own Budget document? Therefore, my first request to the Government is that they come clean and tell the truth about what is happening to people's money and the burden of taxation.

That applies not only to taxation—the same sleight of hand is now apparent on public expenditure. Again, the more impressionable Labour Members cheered the announced increases in public expenditure yesterday. I refer those same hon. Members to page 200 of the Red Book, which shows that there is no increase. There is actually an underspend in public expenditure, and only in the financial year 2003-04 do the Government get back to their originally announced public expenditure profile. The Government are spending less than they have announced in previous years. They tax more than they have announced previously, but they spend less.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): I appreciate that the right hon. Gentleman is now trying to set out his stall and paint an awful picture of the Government, but if the Government are that bad, what did the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) mean when he said that he was in a dilemma?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: We are in no dilemma at all; it is the Government who are in a dilemma, and not just the Government, but their figures. We cannot tell from what the Government say whether they are putting up taxes or expenditure; we have to examine the figures, and that is where the dilemma arises. It is the job of the House to find out what is happening and to tell the truth. If the hon. Gentleman is to have any chance at all of retaining his seat at the general election, which I rather doubt, I urge him to start to tell people the truth; otherwise this pervasive air of cynicism will see the back of him as well as the Government.

Exactly the same subterfuge is apparent over borrowing and debt. Again, the Chancellor made it clear yesterday that he was reducing debt. He made a great deal of that, but it is a pity that he did not describe how it will go up again. I refer hon. Members to page 188 of the Red Book. It shows that the burden of debt will rise by £58 billion during the next four years, but that, too, was not referred to by the Chancellor in his statement.

All that means that the Government are taking a colossal risk. They are vulnerable to any downturn in the world economy, but there is more to it than that: even if there is no hiccup or downturn in world growth, they are eroding the competitiveness—the performance—of the British economy, on which all the expenditure depends. Again, that shows up in the figures. Business investment has pretty well collapsed. *[Interruption.]* These are the Government's own figures. If anyone wishes to dispute them, we have a problem with the Treasury figures.

In the Conservative Government's last year in office, business investment rose by 7.75 per cent. It has now slowed to a crawl—to little more than 2 per cent. a year. The savings ratio, referred to by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition yesterday, was 11 per cent. when we left office, but it has now more than halved to 4.75 per cent. The start of that collapse coincides with the withdrawal of dividend tax credit for pension funds, which is still taking out of the private pension sector more than £5 billion a year. Is it any wonder that almost mortal damage was done to the propensity to save, which is showing up in the savings ratio? That is building up serious problems for the future.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Does it not follow that it is essential to remove all taxation of savings?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: How right my hon. Friend is, and that just happens to be the policy on which he and I will fight the next election. Instead of gimmicky little give-aways, we will remove savings taxation at a stroke below the higher rate.

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): Is the commitment to abolish tax on savings guaranteed, or will that policy be changed tomorrow?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Good Lord, cannot Labour Members do better than that? Yes, it is.

I am glad that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is to speak in the debate. Perhaps he can answer some of the questions about competitiveness and productivity. The Department of Trade and Industry has missed out again. During recent months, we have observed how it is usually ignored or overlooked by the Treasury, and the Budget is yet another example of that. That is not to overlook the welcome modest simplification of the VAT system and the promised—again, jam tomorrow—research and development credits for larger companies. However, set against the incredible increase—layer upon layer—in business taxes and regulation during the past four years, that brings practically no comfort for the business world.

For example, yesterday the Forum of Private Business said:

"On balance, the Budget is likely to make life more difficult for small firms, because of previous stealth taxes . . . and increased complexity in the PAYE regime."

The Institute of Directors said:

"Insufficient has been done to simplify the ever-more complex tax regime or lessen the burden of state interference and regulation in the business environment."

The London Chamber of Commerce said:

"the Chancellor was more interested in delivering a second term for Labour, rather than a Budget for business."

It again drew attention to the problems of tax complexity and the burden that that puts on businesses of all sorts, and their resulting loss of competitiveness in world markets.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Does my right hon. Friend intend to refer in any detail to the climate change levy? Would he be interested to learn from me that a textile company that I know well, which employs some 300 people and has invested more than £1 million in energy saving and in reducing any output of pollution into the environment, is likely to be faced with an annual tax increase from 1 April of £60,000 to £80,000 as a result of the climate change levy? Is that a way to make British manufacturing industry more competitive?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend is spot on. The tax is completely unnecessary and could easily have been withdrawn yesterday. The Finance Act 2000 does not require the Government to introduce it; it merely permits them to do so. They could have announced that they had recognised on mature consideration the damage that the measure would cause, especially to British manufacturing industry, and withdrawn it. Instead, as my hon. Friend said, in four weeks' time, all businesses, whatever their size, will be paying a surcharge on energy bills that are already rising. For example, gas prices have doubled for business in the past year.

For that reason, the new surcharge is likely to be entirely counter-productive in environmental terms. If businesses do not invest here or if they migrate from this country to other tax jurisdictions in countries with lower environmental standards, the global environment, which is supposed to be what the charge is all about, will suffer as a result. The tax is amazingly complicated. Any reductions that are required by international conventions can be met far more easily and cheaply in other ways. That is how the Conservative party has always achieved such reductions. We met the Rio targets and we will meet those set in Kyoto, but we will do it by other means. We take seriously our environmental responsibilities, but we do not agree that it is necessary to create an industrial desert in order to fulfil them.

That is why I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton). Indeed, he is in extremely good company, as the Confederation of British Industry has also drawn attention to this damaging levy. Mr. Digby Jones, its director general, said again in a press release yesterday that it

"is seriously damaging UK competitiveness."

Furthermore, the Engineering Employers Federation said that

"the Climate Change Levy remains one of the most badly designed and ill-conceived economic instruments of recent times, a device for raising revenue rather than a serious attempt to encourage energy efficiency. Manufacturing will be bitterly disappointed the Chancellor has failed to address the anomalies of this tax."

I entirely agree with those points. Any pretence that the Government are pro-productivity or pro-competitiveness is completely contradicted by their persistent introduction of such measures. They did the same with IR35, which, as I think the House will know by now, was the 35th press release issued by the Inland Revenue in respect of the 1999 Budget. It was never referred to in the House or announced by the Chancellor, but the measures that it set out turned out to be among the most damaging ever conceived for the IT sector.

The Government have the gall to publish a leaflet called "Productivity in the UK: Progress towards a productive economy", which contains a section about business skills, when they are driving people abroad with their policies. One of the most lively websites on the internet is called GoAbroad.com. It is used by people who will not put up with these conditions and are taking their skills elsewhere. Consequently, companies telephone the Home Office and say that they are short of skills, and the Government decide to relax immigration controls in respect of IT specialists, thus denuding the third world and poorer countries of skilled people so that they can replace people driven out by this mad measure called IR35. That is not what the Government say that they are doing, but it is what they practise in reality.

The House will remember the fiasco regarding double taxation relief, which was announced in last year's Budget and was another ill-thought-out measure. A prominent accountant from PricewaterhouseCoopers, Mr. Peter Wyman, pointed out that it was not going to work. The Chief Secretary to the Treasury insulted Mr. Wyman in the House, but he turned out to be absolutely right. Indeed, the Government have now admitted that he was right and have withdrawn all the measures. They amended them in the Finance Act 2000 and then announced more amendments in the pre-Budget statement. Now we learn from the Budget statement that there are to be even more amendments. That is three to Mr. Peter Wyman and zero to the Chief Secretary.

A little more humility is required from a Government who have been warned persistently about the damage that is done by such measures, but still they persist with them.

[Mr. Heathcoat-Amory]

The erosion of our competitiveness is now beyond dispute and is doing much damage to our international reputation. On productivity in the United Kingdom, *The Wall Street Journal* reports:

"Real economy-wide output per worker rose at an average annual rate of 2.4% from 1992 to 1997"—

the period of the previous Government—

"but grew by only 1.4% annually over the last three years, only half the rate achieved by the US."

People reading that report in the United States and elsewhere will realise what has happened in this country: the productivity record inherited by the Government has now also collapsed.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): The right hon. Gentleman quotes from various newspapers, but perhaps he should remind the House of the front page of today's edition of *The Sun*, which announces that it is supporting Labour at the next election.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I conclude from that intervention that the hon. Gentleman is simply not interested in what is happening to the United Kingdom's productivity. He has nothing to say about that or about what people abroad who are contemplating investing in this country will now think of the Government, who have practically halved the productivity record of their predecessors. Along with the intervention made by the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw), that is an eloquent testimony to the complete contempt with which the Labour party treats the real problem in this country: the production of wealth before it can be spent.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Clearly, the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) did not read the inside page of *The Sun* in which Trevor Kavanagh points out that the Chancellor enjoys spending other people's money and is a true socialist—a position that is rather different from that set out on the front page.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My right hon. Friend has clearly been as assiduous as ever and has read the inside pages of *The Sun* as well as the headlines. The House will be grateful for that. I never get very far when I read it.

On productivity, I have mentioned the Government document entitled "Productivity in the UK: Progress towards a productive economy". It is a little late to be starting to make progress—the Government should have done so by now. We are grateful for the observations of the Trade and Industry Committee on this subject. During the past four years, a blizzard of White Papers, parliamentary statements and gimmicky measures have been introduced in Budgets, supposedly to try to raise our productivity gain. They have tried hard to do something, but what have they achieved? The Labour-dominated Committee observed that not only has very little been achieved, but we cannot measure what has been done. Its January report states:

"The result is that it cannot be demonstrated that policies pursued over the past three years intended to narrow the productivity gap have had any measurable outcome."

It goes on to state:

"The set of 'enterprise society' objectives, targets and measurements is a dog's breakfast."

That was the Committee's description of such arrangements even before yesterday's Budget statement. In passing, the report notes that the DTI cannot even pay its bills on time. It states:

"It is an indictment of the department's ability to manage its own affairs that, having identified its failure, things should be getting worse rather than better."

The report concludes:

"The bleak truth is that we cannot tell whether some of the department's crucial objectives over the past three years, such as the promotion of enterprise, innovation and increased productivity, have been achieved".

The Department is simply operating in a vacuum; it has no idea whether its actions are doing any good. Meanwhile, figures show the collapse in the savings ratio, business investment and productivity.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I have been generous in giving way and I wish to conclude.

The Government inherited a strong, dynamic and competitive economy, but they undermine it with layer upon layer of new regulations and extra business taxes. They bind themselves to long-term public spending commitments that surpass any conceivable growth rate for the economy. They value spin over substance, and words over deeds. They thus betray the hopes on which they were elected and break the promises that they made to get elected. Such a Government will not survive the scrutiny and verdict of the next general election.

2.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Stephen Byers): Yesterday, the Chancellor presented a Budget for the future, to build a Britain of opportunity and prosperity for all. It combines wealth creation with social justice, and it supports hard-working people and their families. It invests in reform of our public services, but insists on results in return. It is a forward-looking Budget, which presents change as a bringer of opportunity, not a threat. It builds on the great strengths of the British people. The foundation for the Budget is economic stability; it was our first duty in government to establish that.

The Budget strikes a balance between prudent long-term investment and targeted tax cuts for hard-working people, pensioners and savers. It provides new opportunities and incentives for enterprise, and thus helps people with commitment to start and extend businesses. It makes work pay. Our economy is strong because of the decisions and choices that we have made.

For too long, the United Kingdom has suffered from violent swings of the economic cycle. Almost four years ago, we reformed the whole basis of economic policy making. We took tough decisions early to make the Bank of England independent, to establish a proper fiscal framework, and to repay the national debt. Consequently, inflation is now at a 30-year low, and is the lowest in

Europe. Long-term UK interest rates are at about their lowest for over 35 years, converging with those of Germany.

Through the new deal, which is the most ambitious welfare-to-work programme in Britain, we have cut youth unemployment. One and a half years early, and at half the planned cost, we have exceeded our goal. Not 250,000, but 270,000 young people have now moved from welfare to work.

In total, 1,100,000 more people are in work now than four years ago. Britain has the lowest unemployment since 1975, the lowest long-term unemployment since 1979, and the lowest youth unemployment since 1975. Employment rates among women are the highest ever, and today, there are 1 million vacancies spread across the country.

That clearly demonstrates that the Government are working in the interests of all our people. The economy is enjoying its longest period of uninterrupted growth since the war. As well as huge improvements in the labour market and the economy, we have put public finances on a sound footing.

In the early 1990s, the national debt doubled. Consequently, we inherited an unacceptable level of debt in 1997. The tight fiscal stance we have adopted means that we have been able to repay some of the national debt. Last year, some £9 billion was repaid, and this year £34 billion is being repaid. As we cut the costs of failure, we are able to provide money for our real priorities and those of the British people.

In 1997, more was spent on debt interest repayments than on schools. We inherited that position. In 2001–02, we will spend £10 billion more on schools than on debt interest. That is not coincidence or luck. It has happened not by chance but through the deliberate choices that the Government have made. However, it can be sustained only if we hold firm to the financial disciplines that we have imposed, and run fiscal and monetary policy in tandem.

Our recent history shows all too clearly what can go wrong when risks are taken with the economy: businesses and people suffer.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): What will happen to interest payments from 2002–03 onwards, when the Government's net borrowing increases by £1 billion, and, successively, £10 billion, £11 billion and £12 billion? What will happen to the interest charges to the Exchequer in those years? Will they go up or down?

Mr. Byers: The figures are clearly stated in the Red Book. We are complying with the fiscal rules that we have established. We are therefore not taking risks with the economy. Yesterday's Budget was prudent. We will not do as the Conservative Government did in the late 1980s.

Let us consider Lord Lawson's Budgets. He had a strong economy, but what did he do with it? He cut taxes irresponsibly. Businesses and people paid the price in the early 1990s. Let us go back 10 years to February and March 1991. This week 10 years ago, inflation was more than 8 per cent; interest rates were more than 13 per cent. That is the Tory record of irresponsibility. Thousands of small business men and women were beginning to feel the consequences. There were more than 47,000 bankruptcies in 1991, and GDP fell by 1.5 per cent.

Businesses and millions of people suffered. At least 1 million hard-pressed home owners suffered negative equity. Approximately 250,000 homes were repossessed between 1990 and 1993. More than 1 million people lost their jobs in manufacturing in the early 1990s. That vicious circle trapped businesses and individuals. It was a traumatic period which must never be repeated.

Those are not just my views. Recently, I found on the internet the "Alan Duncan MP Westminster Zone", which I recommend to hon. Members. The website proclaims various publications and draws attention to "An End to Illusions". Some might say that that was an appropriate title. Of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when I believe a Conservative Government were in office, the book states:

"In the late 1980s political leaders claimed that Britain was experiencing an economic miracle. The years of decline had come to an end. Instead the 1990s began with unprecedented debt, a deep recession and a credit squeeze that destroyed thousands of businesses and caused hundreds of thousands of repossessions."

That Alan Duncan is none other than the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton, who speaks for the Conservative party on trade and industry matters. I have given an example of his being right for a change. In those words, he outlined the true position in the early 1990s.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): During the period to which the Secretary of State refers, Britain was a member of the exchange rate mechanism. The right hon. Gentleman advocates fixed exchange rates. Does not he realise that on both occasions in the 20th century when Britain joined fixed exchange rates, unemployment soared? From 1925 to 1931, unemployment increased from 1.25 million to 2.9 million, and between 1990 and 1992, it increased from 1.65 million to 2.85 million. Does the right hon. Gentleman not realise that that is the effect on employment of going into fixed exchange rates? Does it not register with him that that is a powerful argument why we should never join the single currency?

Mr. Byers: I would like to know whether the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) agrees with that statement.

Mr. Gill: The right hon. Gentleman should answer my question.

Mr. Byers: I will answer the question, but I am interested to know whether the statement that the hon. Gentleman made represents Conservative party thinking on the single European currency. I think that it probably does, as far as the Members sitting on the Opposition Front Bench in this debate are concerned. One can tell; we know what the reality is. These are principled people sitting opposite me, and they believe strongly that the United Kingdom should never join the single European currency. *[Interruption.]* I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) nodding his head in agreement with that.

Mr. Bercow: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: No, I want to answer the legitimate question raised by the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill).

There is a tendency among certain members of the Conservative party to blame the rest of Europe for all the problems that have been created over a number of years.

[Mr. Byers]

The difficulties that were created in the early 1990s came about as a direct result of the irresponsibility of the Tory Budgets of 1987 and 1988. The then Chancellor faced a choice. There was a strong economy, as there is today. He chose to act in an irresponsible way, introducing swingeing tax cuts that were applauded at the time. In the Budget of 1988, the basic rate of income tax was reduced by 2p and the higher rates above 40 per cent. were abolished. The problems of the early 1990s were a result of that.

That is why we have chosen prudent tax cuts, which are targeted, and also to invest for the long term. That is the Government's approach. We have built a strong economy and we now have the foundations on which we can invest in the future to create wealth that will benefit all our people.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I will now give way to another anti-European.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton is living proof that size is not everything. He has a distinguished track record in business, unlike the right hon. Gentleman, who has never worked in a company in his life.

Given that the Secretary of State is now auditioning unconvincingly for the role of high priest of prudence, will he tell the House what assessment he has made of the impact of the change in the rules on the use of capital receipts from the sale of council houses on the size of interest repayments on local authority debt?

Mr. Byers: That is a very important question, and I know that the hon. Gentleman will receive a reply from the Paymaster General when she winds up the debate later.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: I want to make some progress, but I will give way to the hon. Gentleman in a minute.

The situation to which I was referring obtained in the early 1990s. We have now managed to move away from the stop/go economy of those days. As a result, living standards are rising for many people. Someone with a £60,000 mortgage now is paying £315 a month less in interest payments than in 1990. Someone with a £100,000 mortgage is now paying £600 a month less than in 1990. That makes a real difference to hard-working people.

As we cut the costs of economic failure by cutting public debt, reducing unemployment and maintaining low inflation, we are freeing up the finance to invest in the infrastructure and high-quality public services that our country so badly needs. That is money that the Conservatives would simply take away.

It was interesting that the right hon. Member for Wells, in opening the debate, confirmed the Conservative position of sticking to investment of just 2.25 per cent. The Budget announced yesterday by the Chancellor means that spending will now grow by 3.7 per cent. a year over the next three years. The Conservatives have stated that their spending is to be capped at 2.25 per cent. or less. We need to know how they intend to fill the spending gap that would clearly result. If 2.25 per cent. were stuck to for all three years, a gap of more than £16 billion would result. If we were to be generous and suggested that they might postpone the 2.25 per cent. restriction in the first year, limiting it to the second and third years only, they would still have to find cuts of a little more than £10 billion. That is the Conservatives' position, and they have not stated where those cuts would come from.

In the election campaign, the British people will know that there is a choice: prudent, long-term investment in high-quality public services, which we support, or long-term cuts in public services that would come about under the Conservatives. Without risking our hard-won stability, we are now investing in public services, increasing opportunities and prosperity for hard-working families and supporting the small firms that are the lifeblood of our economy.

Mr. Duncan: It was eight years ago that I wrote "An End to Illusions", but I am grateful to the Secretary of State for pointing out that it was at least intellectually honest and cogent, and that it covered a difficult time that needed analysis.

Will the right hon. Gentleman in return be equally intellectually honest with the House and admit that the benefits that the Government have enjoyed over the past couple of years have been that receipts have been greater than planned, and that expenditure on welfare payments has been less? However, we are probably at the top of the economic cycle, and his plans are on schedule to outstrip the growth in the economy as a whole. Will he therefore admit that as soon as the economy turns, he will face a squeeze for which he and his Administration will have to be accountable to the general public?

Mr. Byers: I should like to make a number of points in response to that question. First, the fiscal rules are set in a very cautious way, with an in-built barrier or margin against particular difficulties equivalent to 1 per cent. of GDP. In addition, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that tax receipts have been buoyant; they have been higher owing to a number of factors, the main ones being higher earnings and increased employment. Those are the signs of a successful economy, and we make no apology for them.

Our first ambition must be to secure substantial productivity growth, as the right hon. Member for Wells mentioned in his opening speech. That is why the Budget proposed further reforms to promote competition and innovation, and to support enterprise. Competition has long been recognised as essential to an efficient economy. It creates pressure to innovate, to keep costs down and to improve the quality and choice of products available, and it ensures that resources are allocated to the most efficient firms. Competition is also the most effective way of ensuring that consumers receive a fair deal.

The Government remain anxious to ensure that all sectors of the economy are exposed to competition. The Office of Fair Trading yesterday published its report to the Government on competition in the market for professional services. Today I wish to give the Government's response to that report.

The Director General of Fair Trading concludes that the professions should be fully subject to competition law and that unjustified restrictions on competition should be removed. He raises questions about a number of existing restrictions, including the distinction between Queen's counsel and junior barristers, which is said to have significant effects on competition. He also questions the operation of the system as a quality mark and its value to consumers.

The director general comments on the number of rules of various professional bodies preventing or hindering the establishment of multi-disciplinary practices. Such practices could bring together accountants, lawyers and other professionals such as surveyors and estate agents. Potential benefits such as overhead cost savings, more flexible allocation of resources and more open access to the professions could be gained as a result. That could help smaller businesses in particular.

The director general noted that solicitors employed by non-solicitors can act only for their employers. Removal of that law could allow solicitors working in different business structures to compete on a broader front. He also noted that solicitors and accountants are not allowed to make payment to a third party for work that is referred to them. Such a restriction may be hampering the development of an online market place that would bring clients and professionals together.

The director general states that the Law Society prohibits seeking business by telephone from potential clients and comparative fee advertising. He draws attention to two further restrictions and believes that further implementation of sections 34 to 52 of the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990 would allow banks and building societies to provide conveyancing services. Solicitors have 95 per cent. of the market. Further implementation of sections 54 and 55 could increase competition in the market for probate services. Where lawyers compete for work with non-lawyers, perceptions of legal professional privilege can distort competition. It falls to Ministers to deal with all those restrictions.

We recognise that those are complex areas. We shall therefore consult on the report, and it seems appropriate to consider comments on the director general's analysis before taking further action. The Government will therefore issue a formal consultation paper addressing those issues and inviting comments. However, on one recommendation, I feel that action should be taken now.

Under schedule 4 of the Competition Act 1998, there is an entitlement to request that professional rules be excluded from the provision in that Act that prohibits anti-competitive agreements. The director general believes that the regime weakens the incentives not to engage in anti-competitive activity that exist elsewhere in the economy, as the threat of financial penalties and action for damages does not exist. He recommends that the provision should be removed. The Government agree that the entitlement to exclusion should be removed and that the professions, as a result, should be fully subject to competition law.

We need a tax system that supports companies large and small. We have already reduced corporation tax from 33p to 30p, but in the new, knowledge-based economy we need a tax regime that reflects the nature of that new economy. That is why we propose to introduce a new tax relief for intellectual property and goodwill. We shall consult on the detail on relieving tax when companies sell substantial shareholdings.

Enhanced capital allowances since 1997 and new tax credits to encourage investment and innovation have already saved businesses more than £1 billion, with a third of a billion pounds being saved by manufacturing. We shall now consult on proposals for a new tax credit aimed at boosting research and development and innovation in larger companies. That new credit is designed to complement the R and D tax credit for small companies, which we introduced in April 2000.

Mr. Jack: The Secretary of State mentioned the policy on business tax allowances for capital investment that the Government have been pursuing. How much net extra investment has resulted from those proposals?

Mr. Byers: If the right hon. Gentleman reads the Red Book, he will see that we have record business investment compared to GDP, although that is not how the right hon. Member for Wells portrayed the situation. The figures are based on 1995 prices, so the comparison is good.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): My right hon. Friend the Chancellor said that, to encourage enterprise, six tax cuts will be targeted on areas that have suffered relative depression, such as coal, textile and steel communities. Presumably, my constituency will be included, as Biwater has closed. Will information be supplied as to which areas will be eligible? Obviously, I have a constituency interest in that. The proposals are distinct from ones to which he referred at a previous Question Time, when he said that tax credit provisions will relate to the best bids for help with economic regeneration. There is sometimes a problem over who has made the best bid, so targeted provision is important, as is knowing whether we are in on it.

Mr. Byers: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The six-point package, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor mentioned yesterday and which I hope to touch on later, will be available to designated areas and communities. Work on that designation is still going on, but we can expect an announcement in the not-too-distant future as to which areas will qualify for that important package of help with regeneration and job creation in the parts of the country that need it most. The package is part of an active regional industrial policy, which is important to ensuring that our country's economic prosperity is shared round and that we enlarge the winner's circle so that more people can benefit from the success that we are making of the economy.

Extending the R and D tax credit from small companies to larger companies will be an important development resulting from the Chancellor's statement. We want to make sure that we get it right, which is why we want to consult in detail, particularly those industries that will be able to benefit from such a regime.

Since 1997, the number of small businesses has grown by 170,000. That is a response to the tax cuts that we have introduced for the sector. Small company tax has been cut from 23p to 20p and there is a new starting rate of just 10p in the pound. That means an overall cut in the typical small company tax bill of nearly 25 per cent.

[Mr. Byers]

We shall continue to improve the environment for smaller firms to create new opportunities for enterprise and to help existing firms to grow, creating new jobs and prosperity. That is why we shall introduce a new regime to simplify VAT for up to 500,000 small businesses, which will include allowing at least 100,000 more businesses to file VAT returns annually instead of quarterly and increasing the VAT threshold in line with inflation, keeping the UK threshold at the highest level in Europe.

We shall also seek views on a new optional flat rate scheme for small firms. It would be simpler to use, with VAT calculated as a percentage of their taxable turnover; and rather than small firms having to wait until they had been registered for a year, they would be allowed to enter the annual accounting regime immediately. That would achieve real practical benefits for small companies.

We are also consulting on a radical new look at the tax treatment of small companies. Those proposals would allow small companies to base their tax calculations on their statutory accounts, which would end the current administrative burden of having to submit to the Inland Revenue a tax calculation in addition to the statutory accounts.

We also intend to improve the enterprise management incentive schemes to make them easier for companies to operate, doubling the limit on the total value of shares that can be offered and removing the limit on the number of employees who can be granted those options.

As the Chancellor announced yesterday, we accept all the recommendations of Paul Myners' review of institutional finance. We shall change the rules on life insurance companies investing in venture capital so as to provide greater incentives for insurance companies to provide equity finance for small and medium-sized enterprises. We shall also make it easier for small companies to raise equity and long-term finance.

We shall create new opportunities for businesses to support the jobs and growth of the future; but at the beginning of the 21st century, we must also invest in our children—the future of our country. We have already introduced a wide range of reforms that benefit women, families and children in particular. There are more women in work than ever before. We have introduced the national minimum wage, benefiting some 1.5 million workers, more than 70 per cent. of whom are women, and helping to reduce the pay gap between men and women to its narrowest ever.

Last year, we introduced new rights for part-time workers, 80 per cent. of whom are women, and ended discrimination on pay, pensions, training and holidays for the 5 million women and 1 million men who work part time. We calculate that the changes have benefited part-time workers by about £555 each. Part-time workers will no longer be treated as second-class citizens under the law. They play a valuable role in a flexible labour market, and they should be treated justly.

In introducing these regulations for part-time workers, I have paid particular attention to the needs of families. I have extended the new rights to include all workers and ensured that some of the most vulnerable groups—such as home workers and agency workers—will now receive full protection.

Full-time workers who start working part time will now be able to compare their new terms and conditions to their previous package. That will help women returning to work part time after maternity leave.

We have also introduced a right to time off work to deal with a family emergency, starting from day one of employment. We have introduced statutory rights to decent minimum standards—all of them opposed by the Conservative party.

In the modern economy we need to harness fully the energy and talents of our work force. In a tight labour market, employers find it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain skilled people. In this changing world, it is vital that we recognise the pressures on working parents and business, and that we look at ways to support businesses and parents in meeting the challenges of family life. That is why last December I published a Green Paper setting out proposals to give more help to new parents and greater support to the businesses employing them. Our proposals were based on the most comprehensive review of work and parents ever undertaken by a Government in Britain. In the light of that review, we set out nearly 50 options to give more support for new parents and for the businesses that employ them.

Following an extensive consultation on these options, a range of measures was announced yesterday that will radically improve the lives of working parents with a new baby. We will increase statutory maternity pay and maternity allowance from its current £60.20 a week to £75 a week next year, and to £100 in the following year. That is as big a rise in the next two years as occurred in the previous 40. We will not only improve the rate of maternity pay, but increase the period during which it is paid, raising it from 18 weeks to 26 weeks. For the first time, parents who adopt will qualify for these benefits: paid adoption leave, for the same period and at the same rate, will be available when a child is first placed with a family. To help working fathers, we will introduce a new right to two weeks' paid paternity leave—at £100 a week—from 2003.

To help employers, we will increase the support that small businesses receive for the administration of maternity pay. We will double the threshold for small-employer relief, to £40,000. That means that about 60 per cent. of all firms paying maternity pay will be able to reclaim their costs in full, plus compensation.

These measures support a range of further steps in the Budget to support families and children. There will be a further increase in the sure start maternity grant, from £300 to £500, for more than 200,000 low-income families. The value of the children's tax credit will be increased from the previously announced £8.50 a week to £10 a week when it is introduced on 1 April this year—making it worth up to £520 a year for around 5 million taxpaying families.

However, we also recognise the additional costs that are incurred during the first 12 months after a child's birth. We will therefore raise the children's tax credit to £20 a week for a year from the birth of the child.

One of the issues raised in our consultation on work and parents was the need for good, affordable child care. The absence of affordable child care remains one of the main barriers to work for parents. Evidence clearly shows that an increase in the current limits for child care support

is crucial in order to help cover the regional variation in costs and the higher child care costs for children under five.

That is why we intend to increase the limit in the child care tax credit component of the working families tax credit and the disabled persons tax credit. That limit will be raised to £135 a week for the cost of child care for one child, and to £200 a week for the cost of child care for two or more children.

In order to claim the child care tax credit, families must use appropriate child care. However, current child care credit rules do not apply to child care provided in a person's own home. This restriction poses particular problems, especially for parents who work irregular hours. I heard that at first hand when I recently discussed these issues with a group of mothers in Bolton. They described the difficulties very clearly. A nurse working irregular hours set out graphically the problems that she encountered in finding affordable child care. The mothers said that support for child care costs in their own homes would be a significant advance.

That support would also benefit families who have a child with a disability. I am therefore pleased to be able to announce that we will now consider how we can help families who need formal child care in their own homes. One possibility being considered is extending the child care tax credit. That is a practical approach that will make a real difference to many working parents.

The changes in the Budget will benefit business, parents and, above all, children. However, we need to ensure that the changes translate into real benefits that increase prosperity in every part of the country. Now that we have economic stability, we have an opportunity to make a real difference for all our people, wherever they might live, and to make sure that all parts of Britain share in rising prosperity.

There are now more people in work in every region than there were in 1997, and average earnings have increased in every region as well. However, too many areas are still underperforming. Some regions are lagging behind in productivity growth and investment in research and development. Our next steps must be to put in place the measures that will allow all regions to fulfil their potential.

Over the past four years, we have made a start in giving the regions the tools that they need. We established regional development agencies and we are increasing their funding substantially. Tomorrow, my right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Deputy Prime Minster will announce new financial flexibilities to enable regional development agencies to fulfil their role in delivering higher productivity and balanced growth in every region.

In addition, we will introduce new fiscal incentives to extend the opportunities for enterprise in rundown areas. In total, we are introducing six new tax cuts targeted at enterprise and growth and worth £1 billion over the next five years.

To render tax free the first stages of buying property and bringing land back into use, stamp duty will be abolished in designated areas. To bring disused properties back into use, we will cut VAT on residential property conversions. There will be accelerated tax relief for cleaning up contaminated land, and to help revitalise our high streets, we will provide 100 per cent. first-year capital allowances for bringing empty flats over shops back into the residential market.

Moreover, to cut the cost of small-business borrowing, we will introduce a new community investment tax credit. That was recommended by Sir Ronald Cohen and, with a capitalisation of some £40 million, it will ensure that a partnership between Government, financial institutions and the charitable sector makes a real difference to businesses growing in the designated areas.

To cut the costs of start-ups, the Small Business Service will offer one-stop support and up to £2,000 of help for any start-up company drawing up its business plan. That will make it easier than ever in the designated areas to start and sustain a business. With our active industrial and regional policy, the Government are reaching out to all parts of the country to ensure that they can benefit from our economic prosperity.

The stability that we have achieved means that we can now make the reforms that our country needs. Those reforms include increasing enterprise in every region and supporting hard-working families. The Government can do that because we have made our choice. We have chosen stability, not boom and bust; full employment, not mass unemployment; investment in future prosperity, not cuts in essential services; tax cuts that we can afford; and a commitment to strong communities, not a belief that there is no such thing as society.

This is a Budget to build a Britain of opportunity and prosperity for all. I commend it to the House.

3.19 pm

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): First, I welcome the Budget as far as it goes. The Chancellor made a great point of saying that it should be a balanced Budget, but much of that balance is subjective. I welcome the help for low-income families, particularly in rural areas where, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, far too many families—especially those working in agriculture—are on very low incomes.

Small businesses predominate in rural areas. More than 97 per cent. of businesses in Cornwall and in my constituency are small, or even micro-businesses employing fewer than 10 people. The fact that they will have a simplified means of paying VAT and corporation tax—for those that have the good fortune to pay tax—is to be welcomed. The reduction in VAT on the renovation of property is also to be welcomed. There is a significant number of empty properties which could be used for affordable housing. I hope that the measure will be directed at that sector, not at providing even more potential second homes for other people who want to live in Cornwall.

I also welcome the raising of the minimum wage, which, for an area of very low wages, is one of the most significant measures in the Budget. I hope that that increase will help a considerable number of my constituents who take home the minimum wage.

But—and there has to be a but—one sector of our business community has suffered considerably in the past five or six years, not only from the consequences of BSE but, in some places, from the catastrophe of swine fever, from the wet weather and the flooding of much farmland, and now from the disaster of foot and mouth disease.

[Mr. Colin Breed]

It must have been a bitter blow for many people engaged in that industry when they listened yesterday afternoon for the sort of measure that might give them some hope, but recognised at the end of the speech that what they would get was a free tax disc for their tractor. That will be a bitter blow to many hard-working families—families of the kind who the Chancellor recognised needed assistance.

I suspect that there can be no harder-working sector of the community than those who are engaged 12 or 14 hours a day in trying to make a living on a farm. Their incomes have dropped significantly in a relatively short time, but they have not succeeded in attracting the Chancellor's attention to their plight.

The fact that the Government are going to apply for agrimonetary compensation is welcome, but if they had applied for it six months ago, some of the payments would be coming through now. I welcome the fact that the Government recognise that they must try to get it fast-tracked, but they were already depending on it to deal with the problems that we faced prior to foot and mouth disease. This morning, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food said that the present foot and mouth crisis influenced the Government's intention to apply for agrimonetary compensation. It would not, perhaps, be wrong to deduce from that comment that, had the disease not occurred, the Government would not have applied for the compensation.

Mr. Hope: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, in the lifetime of this Parliament, farmers have received upwards of £500 million in agrimonetary compensation, whereas under the Conservative party, they received not a penny?

Mr. Breed: I agree, although I suspect that the Opposition would say that they were only in power for three or four months during the period when they could have applied for such compensation. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman is right. Farmers have benefited over a long period of time. The Government have also recognised that remaining outside the euro at present has a cost not only to farmers but to tourism and manufacturing. The agrimonetary compensation scheme was set up for that purpose. That cost should be provided for.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we went into the euro at the present exchange rate, it would not make the slightest difference? He is assuming that we would go in at a much lower rate. He cannot assume that.

Mr. Breed: If we were going in at today's rate, presumably we would be having a referendum now and deciding to do so. I do not suggest that we would go in at the present rate.

The agrimonetary compensation scheme finishes this year. At present, there is no successor scheme to provide further support while we remain outside the euro.

The timing was right and the compensation is to be welcomed. However, specific support to deal with foot and mouth disease would be unbalanced. The Chancellor's great card was that he wanted the Budget to be balanced. At present, the balance is that farmers who have the misfortune of having foot and mouth disease confirmed on their farms will have their animals slaughtered and receive 100 per cent. of the market value for them, but that many more farmers who will probably be affected by the disease because they are in a restricted area and cannot market their animals will receive nothing.

I accept that the question of consequential loss is a minefield. For some time the Government have said that no Government have provided for consequential loss to be compensated, and that a decision to do so would set a precedent. However, these are unprecedented times for agriculture. We cannot ever have seen such a decline in the industry. There cannot have been a time when farmers have been subjected to so many disasters in such a short time, or when a consequential loss has rippled out to affect such a large area. We should consider measures that would be carefully targeted—a phrase that the Chancellor often uses—on areas affected by foot and mouth disease which will not receive compensation.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman makes a lot of sense on foot and mouth disease and assistance to farmers, but was casual in his reference to the experience of this country outside the eurozone. Will he confirm that he does not think that short-term fluctuations in interest rates or the difficulties posed by an over-valuation of the exchange rate in any way constitute an argument for the permanent abolition of our national currency, given that under the terms of the treaty of Amsterdam, the European Central Bank is not merely entitled but obliged to ignore any representations from outside bodies about its conduct of monetary policy, and furthermore, that the treaty goes on to specify in article 108:

"governments of the Member States undertake to respect this principle and not to seek to influence the . . . decision-making bodies of the ECB or of the national central banks in the performance of their tasks."

Is that not an affront to, and the antithesis of, democracy?

Mr. Breed: I do not agree with virtually any of that, to be honest. The situation is clear. Farmers and many people in my part of the world recognise only too well that being outside the euro has been a disaster. Many of their businesses have been affected. Had we had the opportunity to be inside the euro, they would not have been visited by quite so many disasters.

Support for those affected by foot and mouth disease is unbalanced: the present situation with respect to compensation is at best an anomaly and at worst a real injustice. So many people whose businesses are clearly affected will receive no compensation. To continue that anomaly or injustice would not be right. However difficult it may be—I suspect that it will be very difficult—the Government must decide to assist those businesses which have been affected by foot and mouth but which under the current arrangements will receive no compensation. Many of the good measures in the rural White Paper will be much more difficult to achieve if the economy in rural areas is further weakened.

There is another disappointment. The introduction of an early retirement scheme linked to a new entrants scheme could have assisted the agricultural sector. We have been promoting such an initiative for a long time. It can be no surprise to many hon. Members that a significant number of older farmers—especially tenant

farmers—are locked into their business. In the current circumstances, they cannot get out. They are making almost no money and have no real assets to provide themselves with a decent pension fund, while other people have the skills, experience and enthusiasm—even at present—to take over some of those agricultural holdings and make a success of them.

It should not be beyond the wit of the Government—nor should it be extremely costly—to develop a scheme whereby those who are locked into a miserable situation can retire with some dignity and those who have the enthusiasm and will to get into the business can do so. Not only will that help to revitalise the industry: it will address a particular hardship, which I am sure the Chancellor wants to do.

Over the past three or four years, although I have heard much talk about venture capital for small businesses, no significant amount has gone into them. Most small businesses are undercapitalised: it is difficult for them to access affordable and sensible amounts of capital. The Government have announced several schemes—regional and national—to which the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry referred again today, but no significant progress has been made.

Small indigenous businesses, especially in rural areas, are still much in need of genuine risk, venture or even development capital, but there is no source for it. In many cases, the costs involved are small. I realise that if a business needs capital of £50,000, the costs will be horrendous, but there should be some means of providing the small amounts that businesses want.

Mr. Hope: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has bothered to listen to any of the debates that have been held in the House during the past four years. The English rural development programme provides £600 million for rural areas, directly targeted on the small businesses which he claims have no support. Will he offer the House the facts about the support that the Government give to rural areas and small businesses, rather than misleading people by pretending that those programmes are not available?

Mr. Breed: The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the actual number of investments is extremely low. Many of them are not much more than buy-outs, where there is an opportunity to sell out to a trading investment or to go on to the market. There are pitifully few investments of small amounts—between £50,000 and £200,000—partly because of the costs and partly because of the monitoring and the barriers around such schemes. However, small businesses offer a real opportunity for employment growth.

I want to deal with landfill tax. I support the principle of such a tax, but do the Government realise that the fly tipping that results is beginning to affect the countryside? Many landowners are subjected to indiscriminate tipping of rubble on their land. That is a direct result of landfill tax; people are not prepared to pay it, so they tip their rubbish on someone else's land. That is wholly reprehensible, and we need to ensure that it stops. Increasingly, local authorities are unable either to detect fly tipping or to pick up the rubbish. The problem is growing in rural areas.

Last year, measures were introduced on interest on late payment of debt, in order to improve cash flows for small businesses. Many of us were sceptical about exactly what improvements would result; we felt that many small businesses would not charge their larger customers interest on outstanding debts. Recently, I examined the number of creditor days. It has not decreased; indeed, according to some reports, there has been a marginal increase.

Perhaps we should try another tactic: to name and shame those companies that persistently do not pay their bills—especially to small businesses. One way of doing that would be to insist that audited accounts include a note of debtors of 30 days, 60 days or more. We could then see which large companies persistently make late payments to their suppliers.

Mr. Jack: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the exercise he describes is already undertaken by the Federation of Small Businesses? That information is already in the public domain.

Mr. Breed: The Federation of Small Businesses has produced the information, but it is not at present included in audited accounts. Accounts are audited for tax purposes, and I see no reason why they cannot provide information to allow us to identify the companies.

A pesticides tax has not yet been introduced, but it is hanging like a sword of Damocles above many people in the agriculture industry and is due to be considered in 2002. No one could possibly suggest that the industry is likely to be in good enough shape to bear a further tax by then. Would it not be more sensible—indeed, humane—to defer the tax for at least a year, or even two, so that the industry had the opportunity to recover?

3.36 pm

Mr. James Wray (Glasgow, Baillieston): I come from a poor constituency. At one time, we had the highest unemployment in Britain; 40 per cent. of my constituents were recipients of social security.

It really annoys me to listen to Opposition Members in this Chamber talking about fiscal terms and Red Books. The red book that I read did not bother about tax increases as long as they were made in the right place and went in the right direction. Our Chancellor has done a great job on the economy. We must never forget—we must never let the people forget—the fragmentation, the misery and the deprivation left by the previous Government. They raided the coffers; they fell off the Front Bench like snow off a dyke because of corruption and all the consultancies they reached out for. They were not interested in the poor. We are interested in the poor.

The Tories were given plenty of advice from their bible—*The Economist*—about their short-term strategy and their boom and bust, but they did not heed it. They laid the foundation stones of the economy in sand and it crumbled around them. We do not forget the people who are still out there—thousands of them—who were enticed by the former Prime Minister to take out equity, but who finished up having their houses repossessed, even though wives and husbands were still working to pay the money back. That is why the people of this country will never forget and will never return a Conservative Government.

I come from a family who lived—10 of us—in one room and a kitchen. I saw some of my family die of poverty—from tuberculosis and from sleeping in damp beds. That is why we must give all that we can. The

[Mr. James Wray]

Chancellor made the right decisions; he is laying his foundation stones in concrete and he is spending his money on the right people—those who deserve it.

Is there anything wrong with giving to the poor? Is there anything wrong with a working families tax credit that takes account of the family situation so that children aged between one and 15 are given an extra £15 or £25? A family of four, with children aged 16 and 18, receive a further £26. Families can also receive a child care allowance, which is especially important for lone parents, who need it most. They can receive a grant of 70 per cent. of child care costs. That could be a lot of money for big families.

If that money had been available when I was born, we would have had much better quality of life. That is what a Labour Government are here to do. We are not here to get consultancies; we are here to build the economy to ensure that we decrease the gap between the rich and the poor. Let us not worry too much about taxation, so long as it is against the rich and gives to the poor. We, as a Government, must be a Robin Hood.

Mr. Breed: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is reprehensible that many of the families who went through the appalling negative equity and are just getting back on their feet are being chased by the banks, which, although they are making billions of pounds profit, want to try to recoup some of the negative equity with which those families thought they had dispensed?

Mr. Wray: That is why we must pay heed, and why we should write off the debt. We should tax the banks a bit more heavily and give the money back to the poor, who were robbed in the first place. The shadow Secretary of State did not mention or apologise for the previous Government. He never talks about the £28 billion deficit or the fact that 42p in the pound was paid in interest charges because of the economic mess that they left behind. How can the Tories appeal to the nation to be the Government again? I do not think that they will ever be in government this century.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman talks about the importance of giving help to those who most need it. Will he therefore helpfully explain the justification for the operation of the children's tax credit, whereby two parents, each of whom earns £30,000 a year, are eligible to receive the credit, but where only one parent earns £40,000 a year, he or she is not?

Mr. Wray: Sometimes we do not get the particular economics correct, but if there is any anomaly, and it is brought to our attention, we will make a change and redirect the money if we can. It is difficult to have a universal tax with low-income people, but that will be tackled in the near future. I remind the hon. Gentleman that we will not forget what the previous Government did when they took power. We cannot forgive you for the fact that 3 million people were unemployed. I do not know why you cannot understand that a Government who have created the conditions for the lowest percentage of unemployed people for 35 years must be a success.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member and should remember that he should use the third person when referring to another hon. Member.

Mr. Wray: The Opposition should know that we went through a difficult period, and I am only telling them that unemployment was never worse than when they were in power. Surely they are not against us spending millions of pounds more on the health service. We are talking about spending about £835 million on it in three years. One reason why we are doing so is that everyone knows that 3 per cent. more must be spent on the health service just for it to stand still. We hope to double that figure. That is because of the state that the previous Government left the health service in; they were not interested in nurses or sisters, or whatever. In fact, their White Paper said that they wanted to encourage accountants and business managers. We have to change all that. A lot of nurses left the health service because of that reconstruction, and we must encourage them back. The Government have said that they will spend £135 million on recruiting hospital nurses, which cannot be a bad thing.

Not enough money was spent on education when the previous Government were in power. There was overcrowding and composite classes, and children were sharing books, but things have changed now. We have decided that about £200 million will be invested to recruit extra teachers.

One of the most important things is that the Tories left a legacy of drug abuse, and it has taken millions of pounds to try to get rid of it. All kinds of people tried to attract some of the great financial resources that were put into drug abuse. An organisation called SCODA—the Standing Conference on Drug Abuse—was more interested in starting a federation so that that could control the finances. We must win the battle. I have heard hon. Members talk about harm reduction, but that is a backward step; we should invest the money to encourage all organisations—whether those involving teachers, ministers, priests, or ordinary fathers and mothers or brothers and sisters—to fight the problem. We have to deal with it; we cannot give in. We must be the winners. We must not be beaten by the minority—the drug dealers and peddlers.

I sometimes think that we do not pay enough attention to child abuse. We should do much more. Organisations outside the House know that it takes not only a great deal of time to get the perpetrators to court, but 10 or 20 years to discover the abuse. It should not take that length of time to help those children in care and protection who have been abused by housemasters and the various other workers in homes and other institutions. It is time to put our money into the problem and to change legislation to ensure that no one gets away with child abuse. We should change the legislation so that those who committed abuse before 1964 can be prosecuted. They should be treated in the same way as anyone who commits murder. There should be no restrictions on prosecutions for child abuse; they should be possible regardless of the date.

I want to raise one or two other issues, but I know that other hon. Members want to mention the many ways that people have gained under the Budget. I shall not take too much time because I know that they want to catch their trains and planes home. Once the Chancellor has made his statement, we always find that everything goes dull in

the Chamber and people want to get home. I simply say that the Government's direction on the economy is right. I hope that there will be more changes and that pensioners, lone parents and unemployed people will gain. My constituents and I are grateful that the Chancellor gave consideration to the poor in the Budget.

3.49 pm

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow, Baillieston (Mr. Wray) and to hear somebody speaking on a platform of compassionate socialism. He is right to speak about his constituency and Scotland, and to remind us of some of the real problems that have beset post-war Governments for a long time. I take issue with his suggestion, however, that the Conservative Government cared nothing for the national health service. Our rate of real-terms increase in health spending was ahead of that of the early years of this Labour Government.

The hon. Gentleman was right to alert the House to the scourge of drugs. As a former Home Office Minister responsible for drugs policy I can tell him that we took that matter just as seriously as do this Government. Our expenditure of £500 million a year was an effort to tackle the problem. I share his concern that Governments of recent times have not yet got to grips with this scourge on society and, more importantly, on the individual. The effect on criminality and crime is there for all to see. I join him in wishing this Government and Ministers well in their endeavours to fight this scourge of modern living.

In the Budget there is some discussion about further measures to help the inner city. I applaud that and support anything that helps to clear up the mess that still exists in some of our great urban centres. I remind the hon. Gentleman that it was the last Conservative Government who maintained a high level of investment in Scotland. That is why Scottish industry is restructured, and Scotland has the benefits of silicon glen and the high levels of employment that go with it. It is fair to criticise the Conservative Government just as we criticise the present Government, but to say that we did not care is utterly to ignore the facts of the matter.

I was delighted to be here to listen to the Secretary of State's opening comments and his announcement of help for working families who work anti-social hours, particularly lone parents. At long last some help will be given through the various tax credit mechanisms. I am sorry that he could not announce today what that help would be. I have letters going back over the past 12 months to the Treasury and the Department for Education and Employment on this very subject. I wish him well, but ask him to speed up the consultation on his announcement. I have constituents working, for example, in the care homes sector who would much appreciate child care help during what are termed anti-social hours and who would be interested to know the outcome of the consultation exercise.

I also welcome the measures to assist families in general and small businesses in particular, especially with reference to the completion of their tax returns. I will return to the theme of tax simplification.

So far much has been made of the contrast between the good economic situation that is seen from the Government Benches and the difficulties that pervaded part of the premiership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) and his Chancellor, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry did not pay as much attention as he should have done to the natural economic cycle. All Governments hit difficulties from time to time. I commend to him the historic data in the Red Book which show what a mess previous Labour Governments made of their situation and the problem that the Conservative Government had in clearing up their mess before we could make progress. Yes, we had difficulties in the early 1990s, but prior to that we had got borrowing down to a very low level. We exercised properly fiscal control and imposed monetary disciplines. My right hon. and learned Friend again did that once we had the economy back in hand.

It is interesting that the *Financial Times* review of the Budget points out the relative luck that this Chancellor has had in having a benevolent economic situation. It points to:

"A seven-year run of output growth averaging 2.9 per cent a year, combined with low inflation."

The Chancellor could not have had the low inflationary levels which he enjoys had it not been for the work done by my right hon. and learned Friend to put in place the foundations to give us a low inflation economy. It is said that interest rate decisions take about 18 months to come through. We hit the inflation target set by my right hon. and learned Friend at 2.5 per cent. on the nail on the month, and it is noteworthy that in this Budget this Chancellor has sustained my right hon. and learned Friend's inflation target. Equally, we have had a seven-year run of output growth, so by definition three of those years were ours. I contend that much of the benefit that the Government have put before the House in the Budget was due to my right hon. and learned Friend's prudence. Part of the benefit that this Government have enjoyed in terms of their record on public expenditure comes from the fact that they took over the former Government's spending plans and went one better: they were even meaner and did not spend the money which we had left in place. Then they turned round and criticised those plans for not providing the resources which should have been spent.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I appreciate the honesty and integrity of the right hon. Gentleman's remarks. Is he pressing for a change in the shadow Chancellor to bring back the sanity of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke)?

Mr. Jack: No, my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor has shown in his recent remarks a proper line of intellectual activity to probe the question of the level of the inflation rate. It is right to test existing assumptions, even if at the end of the day one concludes that the existing assumptions are correct. If we are to sustain a low inflation economy, it is right to look at the underlying implications. Now is not the time to have a debate about that, but if the hon. Gentleman cares to have one in Westminster Hall, I would gladly attend.

The *Financial Times* article goes on to provide a further interesting insight. It states:

"Mr. Brown has guided the economy well in a sunny period. But he cannot control the weather—even if he would like to imply as much in the euphoria of a pre-election period."

[Mr. Jack]

That gives us an important perspective on the Budget and the substantial increase in public expenditure which is included in the Red Book. The article reminds us that

"total departmental expenditure limits are set to rise at an annual rate of 8 per cent a year between 1999–00 and 2003–04."

If the sun shines those numbers can be sustained, but the true test of any Chancellor—and of this one if he is lucky enough still to be in office after the general election—is how he deals with the situation when the going gets tough. Any Chancellor can look good with lots of cash coming in, a self-imposed corset on public expenditure and some rather nice numbers on borrowing. Previous Conservative Chancellors have shown their metal in getting the economy back on the rails after a period of difficulty.

The *Financial Times* is interesting in its analysis. It states:

"Mr. Brown ducks the question whether such a rate of expansion is sustainable, even assuming steady economic growth. Of course it cannot be over the long term, unless taxes are to be raised."

The article then rather teasingly says:

"That is a problem for another Budget in another parliament."

It is not, in the sense that the nation is likely to have to go to the polls before another Budget. Therefore, the question of the sustainability of the Chancellor's much proffered public expenditure position is not for the next Parliament, but for here and now.

Mr. Breed: If the right hon. Gentleman is saying that the last five years of the Conservative Administration and the first four of the Labour Administration are two parts of the same economic cycle, would he have repaid £34 billion of the original debt that was run up during the Conservative period?

Mr. Jack: I counsel the hon. Gentleman to go back through the historic data in the Red Book. He will observe that towards the end of the 1980s we paid back debt because public finances were good. Whether paying back £30 billion odd is the right thing to do with the money is an interesting point. There is some conjecture. It could have been used to do more to help with savings.

The most that the Budget did for savings was to leave in place the current levels in the complex individual savings account system. Instead of examining ways to encourage improvements in the saving ratio in the way that my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor has done, the Chancellor ducked the issue. He ducked the issue as to whether he could have used creatively some of the fiscal surplus to encourage more private investment, in particular, in new activity in the economy. That is sad, given the amount of money that the Chancellor had and the things that he could have done with it.

In *The Daily Telegraph*, Ian Cowie, its personal finance editor, wrote an article under the headline, "Don't be misled, the main winner will be the taxman". He points out the massive increase in tax take that has occurred as a result of the Chancellor's activities. Since the Government took over, they have received a further £43 billion of extra receipts of one sort or another. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) said yesterday, that is effectively the equivalent of 10p up and 1p down.

It is a very small people's dividend for the hard work of the hard-working families of Britain to have such a scant reward, because no Chancellor can deliver all that he claims. Given the sum total of the parts of the British economy, the people's dividend is very limited.

I went back to look at the Red Book that I signed off when I was in the Treasury. In the years 2001–02, we pencilled in Government receipts of £370 billion, but the projection in the current Red Book for the same period is just short of £400 billion. That again shows the increase in the tax take that has occurred.

The result was even more fascinating when I searched for the table in the current Red Book to see how the Government were dealing with the increase in the personal tax burden. "Put up taxes" are the words that the Chancellor hates to utter. I looked in our Red Book for the figures for the year 2001-02 and I noted that the figure for income tax as a percentage of gross domestic product that we had pencilled in was 9.8 per cent. The current Red Book shows that that figure has gone up to 11.3 per cent. of GDP, but what is missing is the comparator with last year's Red Book. Here the Government look seriously embarrassed. The telling point is that, for the period 2001-02, last year's predicted figure for income tax as a percentage of gross domestic product was 10.8 per cent. The burden of income tax is rising whatever those on the Treasury Bench may say.

Mr. Bercow: All my right hon. Friend's points are telling. Does he not agree that it is now becoming clear that what Labour meant when it said that it would be a people's Government was that people who are married, people who pay mortgages, people who own cars, people who have the temerity to put petrol in them, people who acquire savings, people who possess pensions and people who run businesses would all soon face significantly higher tax burdens as a result of the depredations of this Administration?

Mr. Jack: Indeed, and to build on my hon. Friend's salient point, families with children may have had some recompense, but all the married couples, who have lost the married couples allowance, home owners, who no longer receive mortgage interest relief at source, and anyone who runs a car will all know just how hard they have been hit by the Government.

I commend anyone to examine table C9 in the Red Book and compare last year's projections for the percentage of GDP taken by income tax with the current position. The figures for social security contributions may show a more level picture, but more telling is the rise in all tax receipts when compared with last year's projections for them as a percentage of GDP. The Government are condemned by their own figures as a high-tax Government.

I want also to consider the issue from a personal point of view. One of the arguments that the Government have used to explain the increased tax receipts is that more people are in work. Yes, that may be so, but the 1999 edition of the Inland Revenue statistics contains some interesting facts. In the financial year 1997-98, a fraction over 17 million people were basic rate taxpayers. The Government claim that they have created 1 million extra jobs, so one might assume that there should now be 18 million basic rate taxpayers. However, the projection

for 1999–2000 in the document is that there will be 20.8 million taxpayers. Not only are the Government receiving more tax receipts, but they have now put more taxpayers into the tax net.

That is equally true for higher rate taxpayers. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will be familiar with the contents of table 3.4 of the Inland Revenue document that points out that we already have 635,000 people paying the higher rate on incomes of only £30,000. Many middle managers pay higher rate tax already.

With the public finances in better order, it is time for the Chancellor to consider how he can take people out of paying tax altogether and to review the total number who are paying higher taxes. Mr. Andy Goracy, the general manager of the Somerfield at Downend near Bristol, was interviewed in the *Financial Times* and he makes it clear that he, for one, wants that to happen. He says that

"it is time to move the threshold up to about £33,000."

Mr. Goracy is not a highly paid man; he is one of Britain's middle managers who work in the engine room of our economy. It is time that we encouraged such people by reviewing the higher rates of tax.

The landfill tax has been briefly mentioned and the House was reminded that it has gone up without any corresponding decrease in national insurance. This issue shows how small increases in little taxes, such as the landfill tax, can suddenly become nice little earners for the Chancellor. The Chancellor enjoys spending other people's money. After all the earlier ballyhoo about extra money going into health and education, it is still clear that he had not got things right, because he had to announce a bit more yesterday.

However, if the Chancellor were engaged in a value-for-money exercise, my constituents in Fylde would seriously question whether he has got it right. We had joy celebrating the decision to build a new cardiothoracic unit at the Blackpool Victoria hospital, but a recent parliamentary answer said that that would happen subject to the availability of capital. It is clear that the job is still tight for money. Those who send their children to Lytham St. Anne's High school have heard about all the money for education, but they will wonder why a school for 1,800 pupils can provide accommodation for only 350 of them for school dinners every day, because no capital is available to expand the school's facilities. My constituents in the ward of Ingol, a part of Preston that is beset by vandalism, will still wonder where the extra police officers are in spite of all the talk about extra money being spent on law and order.

I mentioned a moment ago what the Chancellor might have done with some of his surplus. He said in his Budget statement that he was committed to energy saving and to meeting the Kyoto targets. Why did he not use some of the money to promote further work to assist the development of the new generation of nuclear power plants? A 1,000 MW power station would achieve as much as the climate change levy in the reduction of CO_2 emissions. What could be a better way of investing for the future of our environment than helping in that way?

I have already referred to tax and it is evident that, with the plethora of credits, our tax system is becoming ever more complex. I congratulate the Paymaster General on the way in which she has supported the tax law rewrite exercise, but the Budget missed a great opportunity to go further and form a partnership to develop models of analysis of how we could reduce the complexity of the tax system.

I awoke at an early hour this morning to hear a Mr. John Williams of Progressive Engineering, a midland company, say on Radio 5 Live that he already spends a quarter of his time as a Government agent in dealing with issues such as the working families tax credit. If such people in small engineering companies are spending so much time on the complexities of the tax system, does it not cry out, if entrepreneurship is to be truly set free, for us to get a grip on simplifying the tax system?

I say that against a background of a Chancellor who loves to fiddle and micromanage the economy. That is why I asked the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he could say how much extra investment had arisen from the tax credits or small-scale tax measures. He answered that question and the Paymaster General directed me to page 46 of the Red Book. It mentions a total amount of investment, but does not make a specific analysis of those measures. Before the Chancellor introduces any more whizz-bang ideas, he should undertake and publish a cost benefit analysis to establish whether those ideas are capable of delivering.

The hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) mentioned farming. That industry has gone through an unprecedented period of difficulty. Foot and mouth caps it all. I should have liked the Budget to include a measure to help with the costs of slaughter and the difficulties faced by abattoirs. Many farmers have—thankfully—been allowed to take some of their animals for slaughter so as to enter the marketplace, but they are deeply worried that the normal market mechanisms are working against them and that the costs of slaughter are likely to rise in these unprecedented times.

If Ministers are involved in discussions with farmers and their representatives and there is any way to assist the industry temporarily, that would be money well spent. Without a well-financed farming industry, farmers' ability to be the stewards of our countryside—to look after our landscape and environment—is much diminished.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: My right hon. Friend raises an important point which, for a good reason, the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was unable to deal with fully today in either of his two appearances before the House. Does my right hon. Friend accept that farmers in general and livestock farmers in particular are having their cash flow dramatically interrupted? Bearing in mind that financially they are on their knees, should not the Government try to intervene with the financial institutions on their behalf? They should at least deliver guidance or an exhortation that the situation should be properly taken into account, otherwise, many people will be lost from the land.

Mr. Jack: My hon. Friend is knowledgeable on such matters and makes an extremely good point. I can give him a crumb of comfort. Yesterday, I received a letter from Mr. Andrew McThomas of Barclays bank advising me that it had given a three-month period of special help to farmers who have borrowed to keep their businesses going. That illustrates my hon. Friend's point.

The Chancellor has led a somewhat charmed life. He has a great deal of money because he has soaked not just the rich but all taxpayers. My right hon. Friend the

[Mr. Jack]

Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) gave an idea of how a future Conservative Government would turn the clock back by helping pensioners, savers and hard-pressed taxpayers. Our policies stand in excellent contrast to those of this Chancellor who is a pure exemplification of tax and spend.

4.13 pm

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) said that the Chancellor has led a charmed life. I am reminded of Gary Player, the great golfer, who said, "It's funny. The harder I practise, the luckier I get."

The Chancellor has demonstrated sheer competence, which has had a rich reward. I approve of the Budget enormously. In our job, we sometimes have to think about the things that people no longer say to us, one of which is, "It's not worth working." That used to be said over and again when there was no minimum wage, working families tax credit, children's tax credit and so on. The Government's attack on child poverty is superb. It must be encouraged. If we impoverish our children, we later impoverish our society. Thank goodness we are through that phase. The fact that the former chief inspector of schools left his post has meant that we are no longer hearing the nonsense that poverty does not affect educational achievement, because it does, and we are attacking it.

It is a fine Budget. However, three matters concern me, two of which I should like the Government to reconsider. I am worried about the regulation of insurance companies. There are public expenditure implications if something goes wrong with them. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) knows what I am going to say because he heard me discuss this matter in an Adjournment debate in Westminster Hall.

The conduct of the insurance industry concerns me in one respect in particular. Chester Street Insurance Holdings, which recently collapsed, carried the bulk of asbestos claims that are covered by employer's liability. The company was restructured, and many people would know it better as Iron Trades. It had a concentration of claims with the shipbuilding industry and heavy engineering. The profitable part of the business was sold off in February 2000 to an Australian concern called QBE. The unprofitable part, which involved asbestos claims, was kept by Chester Street. That deal was approved by the Financial Services Authority, which monitors financial services.

By April, Ernst and Young, the accountancy firm, said that it did not know how long Chester Street could keep going with the liabilities that it carried. By January, the company had collapsed. However, the chief executive had not collapsed; he had awarded himself £450,000 extra for what he had achieved that year. He left the company with his performance-related pay and the congratulations of his chairman on his outstanding achievement, but now thousands of asbestos sufferers cannot be compensated through the courts for what has happened to them.

Chester Street has thrown away people's rights to resort to the law. I am worried about the way in which its collapse has been monitored.

Mr. Miller: A constituent of mine has suffered from that outrageous situation. The complaint that he suffers from got worse and worse and he had to take early retirement. The day that he reached terms with his employer, the cheque from that wretched insurance company was withdrawn. That cannot be allowed to continue.

Mr. Worthington: I am glad to have my hon. Friend's support. I am so incensed because my constituency has the highest concentration in the country of people who suffer from asbestos-related diseases. More and more hon. Members will receive representations by people who think that the situation is outrageous.

The *Insurance Times* says:

"What is happening to insurance regulation? Chester Street Holdings switched all its assets to Iron Trades and then flogged off Iron Trades to raise cash to pay claims."

Indeed, it sold it off for £77 million less than its book valuation. The result, which the regulator should have seen coming, was that the paying ability of the residual lump was not enough to cover its liabilities with regard to long-term claims. Chester Street has gone belly up and the supposed regulator—the FSA—washes its hands of the problem while thousands of seriously ill claimants lose out.

There was much fuss when Equitable Life turned a bit dodgy, but that was because prosperous people had policies with it, including some MPs. However, when asbestos sufferers lose out, the reaction is fairly quiet.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: The hon. Gentleman spoke eloquently the other day in a Chamber of this House. I was unable to participate in the debate because I was in the Chair. However, I am pleased to be able to tell him that he has proper cross-party support for the campaign that he is leading. In Macclesfield, Mr. McCreery, who is a resident of Bollington, is dying of asbestos poisoning and needs the money to ensure that he has some quality of life in his remaining days. The hon. Gentleman has my full support. What has happened is an abuse by the insurance industry.

Mr. Worthington: I am deeply grateful for that. I am sure that we can make a change. It would be utterly wrong if anyone lost a penny out of the activities of Chester Street. Our aim has to be 100 per cent. restitution of the claimants' civil rights. I hope that the Government will come forward soon with proposals to do that. I believe that the insurance industry should put it right. It should have a collective scheme to prevent its name being blackened in this way. The Government were very active on pensions mis-selling, and all credit to them for that. We cannot allow an insurance company to restructure itself in order to fail. We have to act, and the industry has to act.

Another issue that I want to raise is VAT. My compassion goes out to the poor souls on the Front Bench who have to understand VAT. Many good things were said in the Budget about VAT, such as relaxing VAT rules on refurbishment of derelict property. VAT on repairs to listed buildings has been cut from 17.5 to 5 per cent. There has been a VAT cut for small businesses, for museums, and so on. I welcome all that, and the consideration of VAT relaxations for sports clubs. However, those proposals make even more anomalous the imposition of VAT on hospices.

There are 185 hospices in this country. I have one in my constituency. It is a magnificent institution that is tremendously respected by local people. It is run by the Sisters of Charity, under the dedicated and committed leadership of Sister Rita Dawson. It is the largest hospice in the west of Scotland. It has 60 in-patient places and 60 day care places, and it provides a great deal of home care. It costs about £2.5 million a year to run. It receives about half of that from the Greater Glasgow health board, so it has to raise £1.2 million or £1.3 million a year to tick over to provide a service that would cost millions more to provide ourselves.

I am told that the cost of an NHS acute care bed in that area is about £500 a day, yet the hospice receives only £64 a day. Every time nurses' salaries go up, as they should, more fundraising has to be done. The hospice's costs are mainly staff costs. Hospices are treated in an absurdly hostile way in VAT terms. My local hospice successfully runs a tea room and restaurant for patients, carers, the bereaved and the wider community. It is in no sense a commercial restaurant, but it has to pay VAT. The hospice built a laundry and staff facilities. If it had had the money, it would have built them when the hospice was originally built, but it had to build them separately so it was clobbered for £34,000 of VAT. It built an education centre that is totally non-profit making, for which it was clobbered for £132,000 of VAT. It built a spa pool for the patients, and it was clobbered for £50,000 of VAT.

The cost to the NHS of providing such a service would be huge. The fundraising that has to be done is enormous, and we are not treating our 185 hospices correctly. I appeal to my colleagues on the Front Bench to reconsider the issue. They are considering sports centres and sports clubs and they have done good things in many other areas of VAT. There is no case for putting VAT on hospice activities. I am told by the hospice people that the percentage of funds given by the state to support hospices is falling year by year, so I ask for that to be attended to.

The Myners report came out yesterday. I thoroughly approve of it. It looked at institutional investment in this country. It is immensely important. My interest in this goes back to when I was with Strathclyde regional council. I was chair of the finance committee. On day two of the job, I was told that I was also chair of the pension fund. My knowledge of pension funds was not voluminous. It was the largest local authority pension fund in the United Kingdom. It was responsible for the pensions of all the regional council and the 19 district council employees in Strathclyde. I see that my impact was not too damaging, because the assets of the pension fund are now £6.7 billion—a lot of money.

The Myners report accurately describes trustees. It says that they do not know what they are doing. There is no training for them. There is no guidance on what their role is, and that needs to be looked at. I remember when I started the job of chairman that I asked naive questions. I asked what good the fund did for Strathclyde. The response was silence. That was not the point of the fund. I wanted to know what good all that investment did for the Strathclyde area. It was there simply to provide a guaranteed income for the pensioners. I got a strange look.

The money was being gathered together by the workers of Strathclyde, put in a big bag and shipped down to London. There was a beauty contest between Schroders—Barings in those days—Robert Fleming and so on. We asked the fund managers how they intended to conduct the fund, and they gave their story. I asked the local pension fund controllers what benefits there would be to our investing through them, as they knew the local scene. They said that there would be none at all, because they would invest in just the same way, in equities and so on.

The Myners document is useful because it makes us think about how our pension funds invest. I was astonished to see that in the 1960s more than half of British industry was owned by individual shareholdings. That is now down to about 15 per cent. The great bulk of British industry is in a sense owned by pension funds, insurance companies and so on. If one wants to put it that way, we nationalised the industries. People own companies, but they do not know that they own them.

A key sentence in the Myners report is:

"Savers' money is too often being invested in ways that do not maximise their interests."

It is likely to follow that capital is being inefficiently allocated in the economy. I think that that is so. Pension funds are not creating as much wealth as they could. We have an enormous asset in our pension funds. That is one of the reasons why we will not face the same difficulties as other countries in Europe as people age. They have brought about immense improvement.

The Myners report illustrates that there is too much of the herd instinct in the investment industry. The key thing for people is that they do not slip behind the line in terms of investment performance. It used to be called the Wood Mackenzie line. All the institutions jump the same way at the same time so as to be average. They all go into dotcoms, and they all come out. It is a case of "Do not panic, but panic first". The report illustrates that there has not been much investment in private equity by pension and insurance companies. By private equity, it means unlisted companies that are not on the stock exchange. It says that it is striking that the growth in venture capital has been led by United States companies investing in this country in a given way.

I am aware that others want to speak, so I shall conclude my remarks by saying that although some of the Myners report was implemented immediately, I hope that the House will find time to debate it, because it deals with big money and the future of our country's investment policy. I have not had time to study the report in full, but I hope that many others—including the Select Committee on the Treasury—will do so and that extensive consideration will be given to ways in which we can ensure that money in this country is used more effectively. The subject should not be left merely as a reference in a Budget statement.

4.30 pm

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): Yesterday's Budget was clearly a Budget for an election, so it is reasonable to ask how the Chancellor has arrived at the current position since taking office.

It is fair to say—one tries to be fair—that the Chancellor inherited a golden legacy from the previous Government: a growing economy, falling interest rates, falling unemployment and a falling deficit. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) said, the last Red Book of the Conservative Government, produced by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), showed that by 2001–02 the deficit on the public sector borrowing

[Mr. John Townend]

requirement would be eliminated and we would have a £2 billion surplus. When we ask how the Chancellor has managed to pay off so much debt and applaud his wonderful and clever performance, we should remember how lucky he was in receiving no less than £22.5 billion from the auction for the third generation of mobile phones. That had nothing to do with the Government—it was pure luck for them. The sum was so high because telecommunications companies throughout the world suffered a fit of madness, which they now regret.

From the start, the Labour Administration's cynical use of stealth taxes while pretending to keep taxes down has led to a large increase in the overall burden of taxation, which has risen from 35.2 per cent. of gross domestic product at the last election to 37.5 per cent. That does not take account of the fiddling of the figures whereby family income support was changed from expenditure into a tax credit and treated as though it were a reduction in taxation. If that were taken into account, the taxation burden would rise by a further 0.5 per cent. to 38 per cent. of GDP.

As a result of all that, this country has less and less the low-tax environment of the United States—a country that the Chancellor is supposed to admire—and more the tax environment seen in Europe, which is overtaxed and uncompetitive. It is fair to ask whether that is part of convergence policy, whereby we enable ourselves to join the euro by getting our taxes up to European levels.

The section of the community that bears the burden of that taxation is middle England. Pensioners who have saved and contributed to occupational pension schemes have had £20 billion of extra tax taken from them since the Labour Government came to power. It is inevitable that their future pensions and future contributions will be affected by that. At a time when we have a waiting list to get on a waiting list for hospital treatment and when young people are often given preference, the Government have been mean-minded enough to remove tax relief from pensioners' private health insurance. There is nothing in the Budget for the pensioners of middle England.

No action has been taken in respect of the ridiculous regulation that forces pensioners, on reaching the age of 75, to invest the money in their private pension in an annuity, so that if they drop dead six months later, none of the money goes to their children; it goes to the insurance company instead. I was hoping that the Chancellor would have seen the problem and in this year's Budget either abolished that rule or raised the age threshold to, say, 80.

Motorists have faced massive increases in petrol tax—we have the highest in Europe. Almost 80 per cent. of the pump price is made up of taxes. Such high fuel tax rates hit small businesses and rural areas, such as my constituency, especially hard. Since the election, increases in duty and VAT on those increases amount to no less than 15p per litre, so the 2p that the Chancellor has given back in the Budget is pretty mean compared with what he has taken away.

Another attack on middle England takes the form of the swingeing tax increases on company cars. Whenever the Chancellor increases expenditure or makes a concession to the taxpayer, he announces it and reannounces it and often double-counts, but in this year's Budget statement he did not announce that the next 12 months hold a further swingeing increase in the taxation of company car drivers. That measure was announced last year, but the Chancellor did not announce it again yesterday.

Married couples have borne the brunt of tax increases. Last year, the Chancellor abolished the married couple's allowance. He said that it would be replaced by the children's tax credit, but there was a year-long gap in which even people with children were worse off and paid more tax. Furthermore, the tax credit is means-tested, so there is nothing for couples whose families have grown up, couples with no children, or couples with children if one of them earns about £35,000 a year. Middle England has been hit again.

The home owner has lost his mortgage tax relief and has had higher stamp duty imposed on him. That punishes middle managers—the people who have ambition and on whom we depend for economic expansion. They are hit whenever they change job and move to a different area.

By not uprating the starting thresholds for higher taxes, the Chancellor has put 30 per cent. more people into the higher tax bracket. That does not mean that there are 30 per cent. more wealthy people in this country; it is merely the result of fiscal drag. He has not raised the starting threshold for higher rates even in line with inflation, and certainly not in line with the increase in earnings. Again, the section of the community that suffers is middle England.

It is clear that the Government are no longer new Labour, but old Labour in disguise. They are a high-tax Government. That is the most outrageous breach of promises and commitments that they made at the last election. In August 1996, the right hon. Member for Sedgefield (Mr. Blair) said:

"Our proposals do not involve raising taxes";

in September 1996, he said:

"We want people to pay lower taxes";

and in January 1997 he said:

"The programme of the Labour party does not imply any tax increases".

That was systematically dishonest and misleading, for what did the right hon. Gentleman say after he became Prime Minister? He said that he had not meant all of that, but had been referring only to the standard rate of income tax.

Two years of Conservative restraint on spending and then large Labour tax increases meant that a large surplus was inevitable. That will rapidly disappear and turn into a deficit as a result of the Chancellor's spending spree, which is set to last for the foreseeable future. The Labour party is reverting to type and it will end its first term as a tax-and-spend Government.

Mr. Miller: We are going to win again.

Mr. Townend: It is arrogant to judge in advance what the public will do. We shall wait and see. If Labour wins, it will do so having built up troubles for itself. The International Monetary Fund—not the Tory party—thinks that the Labour Government's plans are so worrying that it has published a warning that they could eventually push interest rates higher and keep sterling overvalued.

I should like to turn now to public spending and value for money. The Government do not seem to realise that it is not just the amount of spending that matters, but what

the spending produces. More does not always mean better. Judged on that criterion, the Government have been a failure in many areas. I want to point out where money is being wasted or is not delivering the goods. In some cases, additional savings that could be made should be added to the list that has already been spelled out by Conservative Front Benchers. I have to say, however, that that list is a little modest.

Take education. At the last election, we heard "education, education, education." We were told that class sizes would be reduced. However, those were just words. Overall, class sizes have increased. I accept that the size of primary school classes has been reduced, but that has been more than offset by the growth in the size of secondary school classes. Examination results may, on the face of it, be better. However, if one talks to any university professor, he will say that grades are easier to achieve and standards are lower. Once again, there is spin and no delivery on education.

Mr. Worthington: The hon. Gentleman said that if one talks to any university professor, he will say that. Can he name some?

Mr. Townend: I am not going to name individuals, but I shall give an example. Only last week, on "Question Time" on television, a university professor said exactly that. To be honest, he blamed the previous Government as well as this one, and said that grants were increased for those universities that gave out more first-class degrees. The pressure in his university—against which he had fought, but failed—was thus to increase the number of first-class degrees so as to get more grants.

Mr. Shaw: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Townend: No, other Members want to speak, and I want to move on to the health service, which is important.

At the last election, the Prime Minister promised that the NHS would improve to the highest standard in the European Union. We are not even near the average standard. Where waiting lists have gone down, as they have in some cases, they have been replaced by waiting lists to get on waiting lists, which are getting longer and longer. Regrettably, our health service is one of the worst in the EU, but that is not because we spend less. We spend more from the public purse on our health service than practically any other country in Europe. The difference is that, in this country, Governments have discouraged expenditure by the private sector, so far less private sector money goes into our health service than into those of continental countries such as France.

After four years, people know that the Government have not delivered on health. All of us must now look for radical change. One of the problems of the NHS is that it is the largest organisation in Europe; it is the largest employer in Europe. We shall probably have to accept that we will never have as efficient a health service as we need without radical change. In my view, it is unwieldy and too big to manage. We need a radical rethink.

On crime, higher spending does not seem to have produced a safer society. Crime was coming down when we left office and it continued to come down. Now, regrettably, there is a significant increase in violent crime. We were told that the Government would spend more money and that there would be more policemen. In the House, members of the Government said that there were more policemen. Today, I checked with the Library and found that, at the last election, there were 125,051 police in this country; the last time figures were taken, there were 122,230, which is 2,821 fewer police.

The police are spending too much time and money on being politically correct. Since the Macpherson report, many chief constables have become obsessed with race. Take the case of Constable Pentry, a policeman with 13 years' exemplary service, who, in a moment of anger, lost his temper and was then accused of calling another officer a wog—not to his face, but to another policeman in a dispute about shifts. He was suspended and dismissed. He appealed, but the dismissal was approved by the chief constable. There was a public outcry, which was led by many members of the ethnic communities. To the Home Secretary's credit, after a year there was another inquiry and Constable Pentry was reinstated.

If I treated my staff like that—if one of them called somebody a black bastard, which is equally offensive, and I sacked him on the spot—I would be taken to an industrial tribunal. Under the law, I would have to give my employee an oral warning; if he repeated the offence, I would have to give him a written warning and, to be safe, I would have to give him a second written warning too; otherwise, I would be taken to an industrial tribunal, which would probably cost me about £10,000.

One area to which the next Conservative Government must attend—I do not think that this Government will, but they ought to—is the way in which ours is becoming a rights and compensation society. The emphasis on rights, particularly the incorporation of the European convention on human rights in British law, is encouraging a vast increase in compensation mentality and is costing the country billions of pounds. That is happening not only in the private sector, but in the public sector too. Every day one picks up the paper and sees that somebody is asking for compensation. A policeman who was at Hillsborough got—

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: £330,000.

Mr. Townend: Absolutely. Because of psychological problems, he claimed and got £330,000. How many policemen on the beat would that have paid for? People who join the police, the other emergency services or our armed forces do so on the understanding that part of their job is to deal with emergencies and tragedies. They will see people killed and badly injured; if they are not prepared for that, they should not go into those services.

Mr. Winterton: It is important to balance what my hon. Friend said. Although I entirely endorse the views that he expressed about the behaviour of that policeman, an overwhelming majority in the police service deplores the action of that individual, who has deprived the police service and taxpayers of a huge sum that could have been used to much better effect.

Mr. Townend: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

I was brought up in the war. If the present situation had prevailed in 1945 or 1946, practically everyone who had seen service on the front line could have claimed masses

[Mr. Townend]

of compensation. My hon. Friend says that the case that I described is an exception, but it is not. There was another case of a policewoman, Angela Vento, who suffered taunts and won £258,000, yet a young lady who suffered a terrible attack and head injuries was awarded £22,000. Another policewoman, Sarah Locker, won £1 million from Scotland Yard for racial and sexual harassment.

I have no qualms about people responsible for such behaviour being disciplined, but those large sums paid in compensation must come out of the public purse. The same applies in the health service. A fund should be set up for people who suffer from inefficiency and poor care, but such cases should be taken out of the compensation business. Lawyers are making enormous sums of money. The expense to the public purse arises not just from the compensation, but from the cost of such cases being brought.

Mr. Forth: Before my hon. Friend leaves the point, does he agree that where people are genuine victims of crime, in particular, and especially where they suffer physical injury, there is a case for a properly structured compensation scheme? The cases that my hon. Friend mentioned are, in many people's view, frivolous and unnecessary. The longer we allow the situation to continue, the worse it will become.

Mr. Townend: I agree with my right hon. Friend in general. He takes me on to my next point. We are now seeing a growth in claims for compensation from convicted criminals who are in jail. Surely that is nonsense. An IRA bomber—a murderer—was involved in an escape attempt in which a warder was shot. The terrorists who were trying to escape claimed that in the scuffle they were assaulted with rather more force than was necessary. I have no objection to an inquiry being set up to look into the case, and the officers being disciplined if the claim was proved to be correct, but I do not believe that convicted murderers and terrorists who shot an officer while trying to escape have any right to compensation at all.

Compensation claims were made in the forces, too. Ladies who joined the forces signed a contract to the effect that if they became pregnant, they would leave the forces. Using the European convention on human rights, women who had left the forces five or 10 years earlier claimed. The total compensation paid out was between £80 million and £100 million. That money had to come out of the defence budget, or the taxpayers had to find more money.

I come to social security. The Government promised at the last election that they would save billions of pounds by reforming the welfare system and cutting out waste and corruption, and that that money would be spent on the priorities—education and the health service. Once the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) was given the boot, Labour gave up any thought of radical reform, however. Far from expenditure on the welfare budget being reduced, it has gone up, from £99.5 billion to £108.3 billion. Consequently, the worthy projects that were to have been financed by savings have had to be paid for by massive increases in taxation.

Fraud and waste in the welfare system are growing to a frightening extent. There are 20 million more national insurance numbers in issue than there are people in the country. That is an indication of the extent of fraud. Many people have two insurance numbers—one where they work and one where they claim benefit, because they say that they are not working. The next Conservative Government must grasp that nettle if we are to make meaningful tax reductions.

What are asylum seekers costing us? Their numbers are soaring. I object strongly to Labour Members who say that anyone who raises the issue is racist or xenophobic. Let us be honest: the majority of asylum seekers entering the country illegally are white. This is not a racial issue. The question is whether a country has a right to stop itself being swamped by people who have no right to come.

We know that, this year, 100,000 asylum seekers came here. Those are the ones that we caught, but there are enormous numbers coming in who do not get caught—perhaps another 50,000. If no action is taken, over 10 years that could amount to 2 million people, because those who are allowed to stay or who disappear will eventually bring their families.

What is the cost in housing and education? What are the legal costs? Every time we try to send asylum seekers back, they go to court, appeal and re-appeal. It is no wonder the rest of Europe looks upon the United Kingdom as a soft touch. The costs are enormous. Most want to stay in the south-east, and the number that will have to be accommodated means that much of the green belt will have to be built over during the next 10 years, with environmental consequences.

We could save up to £1 billion a year if we had a system whereby asylum seekers were seen within seven days and, if they wanted to appeal, had to do so within seven days, and those with no right to be here were sent back. The French are good at doing that. They send them across the channel, and when we say we want to send them back, they refuse to have them.

Last year, although the Government decided that 35,000 asylum seekers had no right to be here, they sent back only about 3,500. The courts are now in revolt because the judges say that they will be made to look stupid if they decide that people should be sent back and nothing is done.

Money could also be saved on overseas aid, on which we spend up to £3 billion a year. Between 25 and 30 per cent. of that is not spent by Britain but goes to the EU, which is not noted for its efficiency in spending money, and there are many instances of corruption. One would expect such money to be spent in sub-Saharan Africa and other places where people are starving, but the list of the main recipients includes Morocco, Tunisia, Poland, Egypt and Algeria. I find it strange that so much goes to north Africa. That shows the influence of the French on the Commission. These are francophile countries and the French get most of the trade.

Mr. Bercow: I for one am particularly sorry that my hon. Friend, who always speaks his mind and has powerful convictions, is not seeking re-election to the House. But is he aware that the European Court of Auditors recently denounced the extravagant and inefficient EU aid programme, and that its report was published to coincide with the Nice summit, but

the Government, in their feeble, institutionalised wimpishness, did nothing to try to tackle this endemic problem?

Mr. Townend: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I think that he would agree that, if we repatriated and kept all our overseas aid budget and dealt with it ourselves, rather than sending it to Europe, we could get better value, do more good and save the taxpayers' money at the same time.

With regard to whether our money is being well spent, no one today has mentioned the fact that £1 billion provided by the public was spent by the Government on the dome, which, far from being a great advert for the millennium, became an embarrassment.

There has also been an enormous increase in Government expenditure due to the constitutional reforms which resulted in the setting up of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and Irish Assemblies, and due also to an increasing number of civil servants, especially political advisers. The majority of that expenditure has been borne by the English, but they have received no benefit from it. My constituents still have about 25 per cent. less per capita to spend on health, education and local government than Scotland enjoys. That is not fair and it is due to the out-of-date Barnett formula.

From the point of view of equity, all parts of the United Kingdom should be treated the same, and Scotland and Wales should be treated the same as Ireland. It is argued that Scotland is so much poorer, but most of Scotland has a higher GDP than the north of England. If the Barnett formula were phased out, £1 billion a year could be saved.

With regard to alcohol duties, I declare an interest. I was pleased that the Chancellor froze alcohol duties, for the simple reason that, because of the enormous amount of smuggling, there is not a level playing field. But had it not been an election year, it is highly unlikely that he would have done that. However, one anomaly that the Chancellor should have dealt with was the duty on sparkling wine. Sparkling wine is no stronger than ordinary wine, and the extra duty of 58p a bottle is a relic from the past when people used to think of champagne and rich people. Most sparkling wine is now drunk by ordinary people and is not champagne at all.

I had intended to speak on small businesses, but I want to allow others to speak.

Mr. Forth: Before my hon. Friend even thinks about finishing, will he answer a brief question? Does he agree that in his brief resumé of potential savings—not least on the sub-state of Scotland—he may already have identified savings well in excess of the modest ones to which my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor referred? Has he given his list to my right hon. Friend? If so, will he encourage him to build on it and to produce even greater savings for the people of this country, to be delivered in a few weeks' time?

Mr. Townend: Earlier, I said that I hoped that Conservative Front Benchers would take notice of some of the things that I had said. I have known the shadow Chancellor for some time, so I can assure my right hon. Friend that he became well aware of the views that I have expressed when he was Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Indeed, he was keen for my support as chairman of the Conservative Back-Bench finance committee in trying to persuade other high-spending Ministers to curtail their avarice.

I have spoken in every Budget debate except one since I have been in the House, and this will be my last such speech. I think also that I have a reasonable grasp of finances, since I trained as a chartered accountant. In the past couple of years, however, I have had great difficulty in finding the information that I want from the Budget documents. When we used to have the Red Book and a White Paper on public expenditure, it seemed very easy. Today, I had to get the Library's help to obtain some information that I could not find. I told the chap there, "I think it's a good job I'm retiring. I must be too old, as I can't seem to get a grip of this." He replied, "I have to tell you, sir, that neither can we or most other Members. It takes us far more time to deal with queries than ever before." I appeal to Treasury Ministers to try to bring back a little more simplicity and order into the Budget documents, so that they can be understood not only by chartered accountants, but by ordinary Members.

This is not a Budget for all the people. It is a means-test Budget. There is very little for middle England; the main thing for it is an increase in the 10p band, but taking inflation into account, that is worth only about £40 a year. There is also very little for savers. Certainly, there are nothing like the measures that would have been introduced if the Conservative proposals to exempt tax on savings had been accepted. There is nothing to compensate occupational pensioners for the £20 billion rape of their pension funds. As the Government had such a massive surplus, they could have done something for the pensioners. There is also little for the countryside. The tuppence off petrol sales pales into insignificance when compared with the rise of 15p a litre since the election.

This is a pre-election Budget. The Chancellor has been a very clever politician. He built up his war chest by taxing the hell out of the country and keeping expenditure down for the first three years. He has now started a spending spree, but has given a pittance back to the taxpayer, who has paid more than he should have done. The taxpayer now deserves a significant rebate, but he has not got it.

I believe that the country needs a deregulated and competitive enterprise economy, with low taxes. The most efficient economy in the world is that of the USA, and we should move our tax burden towards USA levels. We should move down towards 30 per cent. of GDP, rather than up to 40 per cent., as we are currently doing. I believe that my party has been too reluctant in recent years to propagate the benefits of lower taxation for the people of this country and I hope that it will take on board some of my suggestions. I would like the Conservative party to have a 10-year programme to reduce the tax burden to 30 per cent. of GDP. That might sound like a large reduction, but such a level would be only 3 per cent. less than when we took over in 1979.

As often happens when a Budget is cheered to the rafters by the Chancellor's supporters, things will turn out differently as time goes on. There are shadows on the horizon. We do not know the extent to which we will be affected by the American downturn or how long it will last. The Chancellor did not mention one of our biggest problems: the growing deficit on our balance of trade. The economy has been growing as a result of the enterprise

[Mr. Townend]

economy started by Mrs. Thatcher, but the growing burden of regulations and taxes on small and medium-sized businesses will progressively take effect.

The Budget is designed for an election; to please the country now and pay later. It is the Budget of a Chancellor who believes that he can spend people's money better than they can: the Budget of a tax-and-spend Government.

5.4 pm

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): The hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend) said that the Budget was a pre-election measure, but he made a pre-election speech, even though he is not standing for re-election. If whistling in the dark was ever a strategy for victory, we have just heard a mournful tune, and had a brief tour d'horizon of the Tory prejudices and failures of the past 20 years.

I welcome the Budget as a boost for families and pensioners in Corby and east Northamptonshire, and for schools, health services and businesses in my constituency. Other speakers have drawn attention to the Budget's help for families and pensioners. In Corby and east Northamptonshire, more than 12,000 families will be significantly better off, and more than 15,000 pensioners will receive a real increase in their incomes.

Motorists, especially those in rural east Northamptonshire, and the distribution industry, which employs so many people in Corby, will welcome the cut in taxes on cleaner petrol and diesel, and the cash help from the reduction in vehicle excise duty for lorries, businesses and cars with engines of up 1500 cc.

I know from my meetings with representatives of local businesses that there will be a genuine welcome for the measures to reduce the impact of VAT on small businesses and for the tax credit for research and development by larger companies.

The measures that the Chancellor set out will build on the record amount of investment in local schools and hospitals. The £3 million Corby education action zone and the £3 million sure start initiative are helping to give children in my constituency a better start in life. The extra cash for schools that the Chancellor announced yesterday will give teachers, head teachers and governors additional resources to buy new equipment such as computers and to invest in new facilities for learning, which will help to raise education standards in the town, thereby reflecting and fulfilling our policy of education, education and, yes, education.

What a contrast yesterday's Budget made with those that we endured for more than 18 years under the previous Government. There were more than 18 Budgets because various rescue Budgets had to be announced in between the annual Budgets. What effect would Tory cuts of £16 billion have on rural areas? How many families and pensioners in rural areas would lose out? What about schools? Three thousand rural schools closed under the Conservative regime; such schools would be under threat again.

Department of Trade and Industry investment in post offices would be threatened, as would rate relief for village shops. The £900,000 subsidy for rural transport that will go to Northamptonshire would also be vulnerable. Let us consider rural policing. The ring-fenced sum of £30 million for Northamptonshire would be under threat, as would support for farmers. Agrimonetary compensation and the pig outgoers and ongoers schemes would be threatened by a Tory Budget.

Earlier, I drew attention to the rural White Paper, which provides a comprehensive strategy for a living, working and sustainable countryside. I do not underestimate the problems. Foot and mouth disease is a genuine crisis, and we must face up to it. However, we have done much to support rural areas. We have to do a great deal more, but there would be a lot to lose from a Tory Budget.

I want to concentrate on the importance of building a long-term, sustainable future for the constituency through a new approach to personal and community assets. Let me begin with physical regeneration. The Budget contains several new measures, which Opposition Members have welcomed, that are targeted on the physical and economic regeneration of run-down areas, especially support for urban regeneration companies. My hon. Friend the Minister knows that Corby launched the first urban regeneration company after the publication of the urban White Paper in December. I was delighted that my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister was able to visit Corby in February to launch the new partnership for regeneration between local businesses, local authorities, the East Midlands development agency, English Partnerships and local community and voluntary groups.

The Corby regeneration company that will be established over the coming weeks will attract major investment into Corby, and provide an opportunity for the borough to grow and prosper. It will create new jobs in industry and help to create a future of high-skill and high-wage employment in Corby. It will help to bring about the much needed redevelopment of our town centre, improve the leisure and community facilities in the town, restore—we hope—a main-line passenger railway station providing links down to London and up to Sheffield, and build thousands of new homes to attract many more people to what is becoming a successful and dynamic town in the north of Northamptonshire.

I regret that the Conservatives have chosen to oppose the regeneration company. The right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), a Conservative spokesperson on the environment, has made it clear in our local press that they do not want to see Corby grow, develop and prosper. That is a pity because other right hon. and hon. Members—the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), for example—earlier supported measures for regeneration in run-down areas, and I hope that we shall receive cross-party support for the initiative. Furthermore, the £1 billion package of regeneration measures in the Budget will be of enormous benefit to Corby's regeneration.

I am keen to see further corporation tax relief for firms investing in urban regeneration companies, because that would be a major boost for the company that we have established in Corby. The accelerated tax relief—at 150 per cent.—for the cleaning up of contaminated land will be of particular benefit to Corby, which still has substantial areas of former British Steel land that was quarried for the extraction of iron ore.

We are also keen to make the most of the new community investment tax credit, which is to be introduced alongside the first community development venture fund, itself a partnership between the

Government, financial institutions and the charitable sector. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for charities and the voluntary sector, I am delighted at the various new measures for tax incentives to encourage giving and investment in the sector, which will help to build active communities.

A few weeks ago, the Chancellor announced about £60 million of extra money for investment in the voluntary sector's infrastructure, about £70 million for the children's fund to develop local community projects in the most disadvantaged areas, £50 million for community chests to be developed and £120 million to support volunteering in public services, particularly among older people. A total of £300 million will, therefore, be available over the next three years to support voluntary sector and volunteering activities. That is very important. Those and other Government initiatives will help in the development of the new Corby community trust that we are trying to establish, which will be an endowment fund to provide financial help in the form of small grants for local community groups and voluntary organisations in the town.

I shall move on from the Budget's help in building the physical asset base of our communities to my second theme, that of building the financial asset base of individuals and families to provide greater security and a platform for personal development for individuals.

Measures to encourage personal savings were at the heart of the Chancellor's Budget speech. Policies encouraging financial wealth and the ownership of assets are not new. They have shaped British politics over the past 20 years. I am sure that the Conservatives would want to remind us of their introduction of the right to buy for council tenants, and the various privatisations that tapped into people's aspirations for independence, freedom and ownership. However, I regret to say that those assets policies were in no way egalitarian, and had scant regard for social justice and social inclusion. The number of households with no financial wealth increased from 5 per cent. in 1979 to 10 per cent. in 1996. As much as 50 per cent. of the population are now asset-poor, with less than £500 in savings.

The Government recognise the power of people's aspirations for asset accumulation but, unlike the Conservatives, we believe that aspirations for individual ownership must go hand in hand with social renewal. A progressive asset-based welfare policy can lead to fundamental increases in opportunity for all, allowing everyone to realise their potential. That is why it is right that we are helping pensioners by spending an extra £4.5 billion a year on pensions and, in particular, helping those who have saved hard all their lives, through the pensions tax credit. If a person has worked hard and saved hard all their life, they should enjoy security in retirement.

The Budget also encourages savings by allowing people to save up to £7,000 a year tax free in individual savings accounts. About 8.5 million people have opened ISAs and, by 2006. According to the figures in the Red Book, that will represent a cost to the Exchequer of £2.85 billion, which is £800 million more than was projected if we had stuck with TESSAs and PEPs.

Those two measures represent the asset development that I want to happen, but I have a particular concern for a group of people who are not part of that system—the young. How can we ensure that young people, as they move from childhood to adulthood, have access to the financial help that they need to cope with what I call lumpy items of expenditure, such as setting up on their own, getting a job, gaining qualifications or even setting up a business?

At certain times, young people do not have the financial backing that they need, perhaps because they have just left home. However, middle and higher income families with savings take it for granted that they will help their children out with finding somewhere to live, buying new clothes for a job interview, getting transport or buying furniture.

Why should young people from lower income families not have access to such resources? If young people could develop their own financial asset base as they were growing up, they would be able to draw on it when they needed it most—around the ages of 18 to 25, as they leave home and begin to make their own way in the world.

Asset-based welfare represents a new approach to welfare policy. Such an agenda would build on the popular ISAs by encouraging low-income households to accumulate financial assets for long-term economic security and investment. Such accounts would be based on a contract between the individual and the Government. For example, the state could make matched contributions: for every pound an individual deposited towards the future, they could deposit another.

Targeted incentives to save money would ensure a fairer distribution of assets. The key objective would be to ensure that all people live their lives knowing that they will have a sum of money to invest in their own futures and aspirations. Encouraging saving by low-income groups would be positive for three reasons. First, the process of saving and accumulating financial assets empowers people. It has positive psychological effects and enables them to think and plan for the future while developing financial literacy and confidence.

Secondly, holding financial wealth gives people the benefits of greater economic security. Thirdly, spending that financial wealth opens up a huge range of potential advantages. People could invest in their futures or use their assets to overcome difficult lifetime events that might otherwise trigger their return to poverty.

An assets-based policy could come in several forms. One example would be to build on the development in the United States of individual development accounts, which are a highly targeted version of the policy that concentrate on specific communities. We in the UK could explore that option through credit unions, which could be used as delivery vehicles for highly local policies aimed at developing the financial assets of excluded communities. It might even be possible to pool individual assets in communities so that people could collectively invest in their futures and aspirations.

Another option to which I am especially attracted is a universal child-centred version of the policy. It has been labelled a form of baby bond, although the Institute for Public Policy Research, which has developed the idea in the UK, calls it an opportunity account. Such an account would be universal and inclusive, and one would be opened for every child. The state could deposit an initial capital endowment—perhaps of £250—in every account at birth. All accounts would benefit from favourable tax treatment to encourage saving for all children. If we wanted to reap the benefits earlier, the policy could start

[Mr. Phil Hope]

with 11-year-olds and an account could be opened for everyone. There are lots of possible variations on the theme.

There could also be a targeted element whereby the Government would match contributions from individuals on low incomes, using a pound-for-pound ratio. That policy would support savings for all children, but would also give extra help, through a means-test, to people on low incomes. The funds would not be accessed until age 18 and restrictions might have to apply to their use, perhaps alongside the provision of financial advisers and linking the process to the school curriculum.

Public policy could specify how such funds might be used—for example, on education, home ownership or entrepreneurship. That would ensure that every child had a pot of financial capital to invest in opportunities denied them at present. The policy has been researched and there is enthusiasm for it. One respondent summed up the positive reaction by saying that

"being in a council flat and working every day and coming home and just doing everyday things, you haven't got an asset, you haven't got anything . . . this is why I think it is a good idea."

Given that time is short, I shall not elaborate on that proposal. I hope that it will be developed from the policies on people's savings opportunities that were at the core of yesterday's Budget statement. The Government have established that sound economic policies and social justice are two sides of the same coin. Similarly, personal aspiration and social justice are part of the agenda of opportunity for all.

The Budget's investment in public services and its support for pensioners and families will be greatly welcomed in my constituency. The measures to promote physical regeneration are of huge importance to Corby, and are very welcome. However, I have argued today that that is just the start, and that we need to build on the measures to encourage saving.

When my hon. Friend the Paymaster General winds up the debate, I hope that she will say that the Government agree with me. I believe that adopting a radical assets policy will give us a real opportunity to change fundamentally the lives of ordinary people in the United Kingdom.

5.21 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend) on what he described as his swan song. It was a typically robust contribution, full of Yorkshire common sense, and one of a long series of such contributions that he has made to Budget debates.

The hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) referred to urban regeneration in the context of his constituency. He will recall that, following British Steel's disappointing decision, the Conservative Administration of the 1980s established an enterprise zone in Corby. That initiative helped the community to come to terms with the loss of jobs and to rebuild itself.

I recall visiting Corby at the time and finding that almost every square foot of the enterprise zone had been taken up. There had been a substantial move towards rebuilding the town, so I hope that the hon. Gentleman will not attribute to the Conservative party any hostility to urban regeneration—nor any hostility to the problems that confront towns such as Corby.

The Budget contains measures that I, too, can welcome, although I shall not be as effusive as the hon. Member for Corby. I am afraid that I cannot bring myself to say that the increases in current expenditure on health and education should be called investment, but the extra money is welcome, and it is a further dividend of some nine years of sustainable growth.

In passing, however, I note that although extra money has been given to the NHS, there is no extra money for social services. That replicates a pattern evident over the past few years, yet the fortunes of the two services are increasingly intertwined. Much of the pressure on the NHS arises from problems backing up from social services. Bed blocking is the best example of that, but it is by no means the only one. I hope that discussions may take place between health trusts and social services at a local level, and that some of the extra NHS money may be nudged sideways towards social services. That would be in the interests of joined-up government.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has clearly decided to spend more money on the family, and I welcome the decision to rebalance the tax burden more in favour of those confronted with the costs of bringing up children. I also welcome many of the other initiatives in the Budget—those on research and development and help for small businesses, as well as some of the VAT changes.

The Chancellor enjoys referring to the deficit of £28 billion inherited by this Government. The Red Book calls it structural, but I happen to think that it was cyclical. I have two remarks to make in passing. First, whatever the level of the deficit in 1997, it would have been a lot higher had the previous Conservative Government listened to the Labour party in the previous Parliament. The then Opposition objected to decisions to increase the revenue at the same time as they urged us to spend more, so it ill-behoves this Labour Government to criticise the level of the deficit that they inherited.

Secondly, and more importantly, my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) was correct to say that the previous Government had taken decisions designed to eliminate the deficit within three years. That turned out to be the case—the deficit was eliminated within that period.

I should be letting my constituents down if I did not say that farmers are very disappointed with the Budget—a point that has been made by others. Abolishing vehicle excise duty on tractors is an inadequate response to what is happening in agriculture. An important sector of the economy is on its knees: if the Chancellor can help the betting industry, it is perverse that he cannot help farmers. I hope that the Chancellor has not ruled out some transitional help for agriculture as it recovers from the crisis afflicting it at present.

May I mention in passing the Government's failure after nearly four years to identify the way forward for the London underground? I am no longer a London Member of Parliament, but my commuting constituents use the underground and I feel that it is verging on negligence that there is still no clear strategy and no agreed financial regime to deal with it. During those four years, the costs of catching up have risen. In addition to promoting social and economic reforms on the macro scale, it is legitimate to expect a Chancellor to deal with those bread-and-butter issues in the capital.

I have four brief points to make. First, I found paragraph 3.71 the most disappointing in the Red Book. It reads:

"Reducing red tape in the public sector is an important factor in creating a productive work environment."

In itself, that is a serious understatement, but what is the solution? We are told:

"The Government has a team analysing, assessing and actively reducing red tape and bureaucracy on frontline public sector staff. Projects include work on reducing the burdens faced by General Practitioners, head-teachers, the police and local authorities."

That is hardly the sound of the cavalry coming over the hill.

There is a real problem. I was talking to a policeman in my constituency a few days ago. He said that before he makes an arrest he now consciously pauses because of the number of forms that he will have to fill in and the length of time he will be off the pitch. He asserted, and I believe him, that that problem has got worse, and it is the same right across the public sector.

It is bad enough being a Member of Parliament and having to open all the unsolicited mail that we get from the Department for Education and Employment, but imagine what it must be like if one is a teacher. I have no confidence that this Administration will tackle the problem of red tape in the public sector. Indeed, much of the Chancellor's reform agenda will make it worse. There is no sense of urgency or timetable in paragraph 3.71. There are no targets in that section of the document.

Secondly, although the Budget speech had at its heart the theme of sustainability, the strategy is unsustainable. Hon. Members may have heard the Chancellor on the "Today" programme this morning saying that public expenditure was planned to grow at 3.7 per cent. According to paragraph 2.37 of the Red Book, trend growth in output is only 2.5 per cent. In the short term, one can do that, but one cannot go on doing it. In the medium term, one has to either change the policy on borrowing—the Chancellor may have locked himself out of that option—increase taxation or switch off the public expenditure tap.

The Chancellor has rather ingeniously glossed over that matter in paragraph 2.61, with a sentence that some wordsmith in the Treasury must have spent some time crafting:

"The average surplus since 1999-2000, which on the Government's provisional judgement is the start of the current cycle, also stays positive, remaining above 1 per cent. over the next five years."

In other words, one defines the cycle as beginning in the years with a huge unexpected surplus; one averages it over the next five years; and one declares it to be above 1 per cent. That leaves unanswered the question of what one does at the end of the five years, once one has used up one's credit.

My third point is on another structural issue that arises out of the Budget, to which the answer is less than clear. The Government want to bring together the tax and benefit systems. Paragraph 5.53 of the Red Book is a good example of what they want to do. It states:

"The Pension Credit and associated changes represent a further step in the Government's programme of bringing the tax and benefit systems closer together"—

a worthy aim. We would all like to simplify the interface between the citizen and the state, preferably by having one dialogue with one Government Department instead of one with the Revenue and another with the Department of Social Security. Integration has been a gleam in every Chancellor's eye for the past 30 years, although progress has been faltering since the abolition of child tax allowances and family allowances in 1970 and the introduction of child benefits. Now, even part of that simplification is being unpicked.

I found it surprising that there was no attempt in this Budget to align the tax and national insurance systems, which many see as a pre-condition for such integration.

The Budget speech and the documents that I have looked at are silent on some key questions. The tax system takes as its unit of assessment the individual taxpayer, and has done so for more than 10 years, since separate assessment for husband and wife was introduced. The benefit system takes as its unit of assessment the family—broadly defined; a single mother will find that the resources of the live-in boyfriend are taken into account if she claims benefit. The tax system looks at income over a year, whereas the benefit system takes a series of snapshots to assess need when an application is made. Some benefits are contributory and some are means-tested.

The section in the Red Book on the pensioner credit is silent on how integration will work. What is the unit of assessment to be? Is it to be the individual pensioner or the pensioner couple? Significantly, the example is of a single pensioner, not of a married couple. However, we know about the anomalies that can arise when the two systems are hastily knocked together, because they have recently arisen in connection with the children's tax credit. As other contributors to the debate have pointed out, if a father and mother both work and earn £32,000, they can claim the full amount of the credit—£520. However, if one of them earns more than £40,700, no credit is payable. There is no logic in that; it actually encourages both parents to go out to work. Nowhere in the Red Book or in the debate could I find the answer to this question: what are the ground rules that will apply when we try to merge two completely separate regimes in the case of the pensioner credit?

Many differences between the parties have arisen during the debate—the traditional one being the argument on tax and spend. However, there is a more significant difference: the Chancellor wants to use the tax system for what might loosely be called social engineering. He wants to target particular groups and design a tailor-made regime for them. That entails forms, rules and means-testing—more contact between citizen and state. Against that background, it is surprising that, on page 93, the right hon. Gentleman describes means-testing as "intrusive", since what he is actually planning is a massive extension of means-testing.

That is one approach. The alternative, which I favour, is simply to take people out of the tax system—or, if they stay in it, to reduce the burden of tax and then take supply-side measures to allow the market to work better. I have some doubts as to the efficacy of the Chancellor's micromanagement of the economy, based especially on what happened with the new deal. It is clear that what is planned is a huge new and much resented burden on employers and a massive extension of bureaucracy.

What about the citizen? The jury is still out as to which is the best approach in the eyes of the average citizen. The further the Government go down the road they have

[Sir George Young]

chosen, the more the public will prefer the simplicity and clarity of the approach proposed by my right hon. and hon. Friends, and the more they will reject the complex, Kafka-esque structure of interrelated benefits that are being introduced by the Labour Administration. The debate will move from the traditional themes—who will spend more and who will tax more—to the question of which party has the best approach towards the interface between the citizen and the state. I infinitely prefer the policies that my hon. Friends propose.

5.33 pm

Mr. Jonathan Shaw (Chatham and Aylesford): I am pleased to follow the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) with whom I spent many a day on the armed forces scheme, both in this country and abroad.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to social services. Part of health expenditure goes to social services departments; for example, the winter pressures money. That mechanism is jointly organised locally, in much the way he advocates; there are already many examples of social service expenditure that reflect his suggestions.

Additional money has been allocated for children leaving care, many of whom do so far too early, at the age of 16 or 17. The relevant age is to increase to 21. Such young people make up only 1 per cent. of the general population, yet 30 per cent. of them are in young offender institutions. It is a damning indictment of public policy that such damaged individuals have to leave their home so young. Young people will now be able to leave care at 21. Provided that they stay in education or training, they will be able to stay in care until they are 24. That is a huge departure and a big improvement for a vulnerable group in society, and it is an example of the differences between the Labour party and the Conservative party.

The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire welcomed the increases in expenditure on health and education, but later in his speech, he said that they were unsustainable. The Conservative party cannot have it both ways.

I welcome the Budget; it builds a strong economic base for my constituents and all constituencies across Britain. Unemployment has fallen in Chatham and Aylesford, and youth unemployment has fallen by more than 80 per cent. Interest rates are down and inflation is firmly under control. We are seeing the benefits of public expenditure and public investment in schools and hospitals throughout my constituency.

I want to talk about industrial matters later, paying particular attention to the paper industry, but I shall make some more general points before doing so. Teacher recruitment is problematic in the south-east. I welcome the announcements made by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor in that regard, because we have to consider creative ways to be more flexible and to entice people back into teaching. There is a pool of teachers out there who choose not to teach, for a variety of reasons. I come from a family full of teachers, so I know that if flexible arrangements and incentives for teachers are introduced and used in the way in which head teachers want, it will provide a plank to overcome that difficulty. The £6,000 grant to teachers who enter college represents further assistance. We have recently heard about more money for people willing to go into the areas of particular shortage in secondary education.

There are more books, more computers and brighter classrooms. Standards are rising thanks to the additional funds and the hard work put in by teachers. I pay tribute to the hard-working teachers and the learning support assistants at the schools in my constituency. I often visit schools and people introduce themselves, saying, "I'm only a learning support assistant." I always take issue with them because they form an important part of the education provided at those schools.

I am a school governor, and our school has employed many more learning assistants to help pupils, especially those with special needs. That is possible because of the additional resources made available by the Labour Government. Before 1997, we used to have to try to find where to make savings in our budgets every October. That simply does not happen any more.

I pay particular tribute to head teachers, whose leadership is central to raising standards and who deserve our gratitude and thanks for the hard work that they do.

I should like to refer to a couple of examples of how the additional expenditure is helping children's education in my constituency. Chatham South is a popular high school, and it was my pleasure to speak at its prize-giving recently. The head teacher was pleased to inform parents that, after waiting 26 years, the school was to get a hall. Work will begin later next month not only on a new school hall, but on seven additional classrooms and a refurbished canteen—again made possible by £1.24 million of additional money from the Government.

St. Mark's school is a small village school in Eccles. It was built in the 1880s and has slightly more than 100 pupils. Its head teacher, Mrs. Celia Smith, told me that the additional money that it was receiving for resources was fantastic but that the school has no room to store the equipment. Mrs. Smith is not concerned about that, however, because £1.5 million has been allocated to build a brand new school. That money comes from the new deal, which the Conservative party is pledged to scrap. What should I tell my constituents in Eccles? The work should begin in May and the bills will be finalised in March 2002. So if they vote for a Tory Government, there will be no new school, and they will remain in the 1880s, because the Tories have pledged to scrap the new deal. After years of waiting, there is to be a new school. The Tory party has accused us of introducing stealth taxes: their cuts would be certainly be stealth cuts.

I have lived in Kent all my life. I am a Kentish man from the west of the county. The hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) talked about his website and about negative equity. I have no information about negative equity on my website, nor have I written a theoretical piece about that episode in our history, but I experienced it, like thousands of others who bought their first house in the late 1980s. Many people in my constituency, in Walderslade, Lordswood, Larkfield and Snodland, who purchased houses at that time aspired to get on to the ladder because they were concerned that, with rocketing house prices, they would not be able to buy a house if they did not move quickly. My wife and I were both local government workers and we purchased a house when we thought that the time was right. We got it completely wrong, as did thousands of my constituents

and many more people up and down the country. If only we had waited. Like many of my constituents, we experienced the Tory bust of the 1990s. It hit us. Not only did people lose their jobs and their homes, but when they had to sell their home, it was worth less than they had paid for it. People are still having to carry with them a negative equity millstone of up to £15,000. My constituency is one of the youngest in the United Kingdom, so my constituents were particularly affected by the negative equity problems in the south-east.

My constituents want stability. For most of us a house is our most expensive purchase. Today's Bank of England announcement is a ringing endorsement of my right hon. Friend's stewardship and management of the economy. Not only have interest rates not been increased, despite the increase in public expenditure, but the fact that the decision has been made so early on is a ringing endorsement. We shall not see interest rates held down artificially as we did before.

I welcome the VAT reduction for empty properties. I have been campaigning for that for a long time and have initiated Adjournment debates and introduced 10 minute-rule Bills on it. We will be able to get more out of what we already have. It is crazy for VAT on a run-down property to be charged at 17.5 per cent.

We need to recycle more. The Government have set targets of 25 per cent. for local authorities. Paper is the largest single commodity that we can recycle, yet the three newsprint mills that reprocess paper are full to capacity. If we are to increase recycling, local authorities have to have somewhere to take the waste paper. It is all very well to ship it abroad, and for a period we shipped it to Asia, but now Germany's paper is cheaper and our paper is stored by merchants. Companies do not want to collect it from the local authorities because the price has gone through the floor. We need increased capacity and assisted investment in a large mill that can start to reprocess paper.

I pay tribute to my local authority of Tonbridge and Malling, which has increased its recycling by 16 per cent. with the introduction of a green box system. Every resident across the borough has a green box and there is plenty of information. This is an important issue, and we need to take people with us if we are to increase the amount of recycling.

Members have mentioned manufacturing industry, where gas prices have doubled in the past year: they have risen by £10 million a week. I raised this issue with my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe in an Adjournment debate, and I am pleased that the Government have persuaded the European Commission to hold an inquiry into the matter. However, the Office of Fair Trading should also conduct an inquiry here in the United Kingdom.

The Budget will go a long way to assist hard-working families and pensioners in my constituency. It will also help those who have found it difficult to get off benefit and into work. The new deal, the working families tax credit and the children's tax credit will help the people who need our assistance. They will make a real difference to their lives. Improving the quality of life and creating firm foundations are what the Budget has delivered. I look forward to our building on it in future Labour Budgets.

5.46 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am pleased to have the opportunity to make a brief contribution to the debate. The House has heard some excellent speeches.

I was particularly taken with the views expressed by the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington), who raised several issues which one would not necessarily have expected to be raised in a Budget debate. The matters are of deep concern to him, to people outside the House and to hon. Members on both sides of the House, not least Conservative Members. He described what I shall call an insurance fraud perpetrated by a company, and explained how people who are dying from asbestos poisoning could be deprived of the compensation to which they are entitled. I hope that the Government will consider the issue carefully and seek to intervene in the industry. Perhaps the industry could produce a life-saving package to help those who have suffered because of the conditions that they experienced at their place of work. Only recently have we realised the long-term damage that asbestos can cause.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) made, as usual, a thoughtful and positive speech, identifying elements of the Budget that Conservative Members could welcome and, carefully and sensitively, pointing out where he disagreed with the Government and believed that action should be taken.

The speech of my hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend) was a tour de force. I regret that it is likely to be his last in the House before retirement. He has been a good friend and a good parliamentarian. The House will most certainly miss him.

I know of the interest that the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw) takes in the paper and board industry. If he examines some of the steps that the Government have taken, however, he will realise why several industries—not least the paper and board industry—are concerned about the Government's failure to appreciate the impact of their policies on manufacturing.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) on his thoughtful speech. He spoke with great clarity and demonstrated his commitment to the points that he made.

This is clearly a Budget for a general election. As always, it was well presented by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but he simply gave back to the people of this country—I emphasise the term "gave back"—a fraction of what he had already taken from them in the previous four years. Research carried out by the Centre for Policy Studies—not by the Conservative party—shows that the Labour party has imposed 45 stealth taxes since it came to office four years ago. At the last election, the Labour party claimed that there had been 22 tax rises under the previous Conservative Government. So it has more than doubled that number of tax rises.

I was somewhat confused by the Chancellor's statement. His Budgets appear to get more complicated as the years go by. It is not what he says that is important, but what he leaves unsaid. Figures in the Budget's small print show that the tax burden in the United Kingdom has risen from 35.2 per cent. of gross domestic product when the Labour party took office, to 38.2 per cent. of GDP this year. Therefore, we have a Government who have increased the amount of taxation that they raise from our people. They have raised, as part of the tax burden, about

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£28 billion, which is equivalent to 10p on the basic rate of tax. Even if the measures that were announced yesterday are equivalent to 1p off income tax, the right hon. Gentleman has turned out to be a 10p up, 1p down Chancellor. Other people have said that, and I am sure that it will be repeated many times between now and the election.

Labour's stealth tax strategy has led it to impose a disproportionately heavy tax burden on the business community. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford talked about business and industry. I know of his commitment to the paper and board industry, which is the major employer in his area. For some years, I was a non-executive director of a paper company, so I know the industry well and I am aware how important energy is to it. The industry is vulnerable to any increase in energy prices, whether they are introduced by the energy providers—the hon. Gentleman mentioned gas—or as a result of any climate change levies, which tax energy. Such price rises or impost from Government make it less competitive in a highly competitive worldwide industry.

Labour has imposed a disproportionately heavy tax on the business community while trying to conceal its tax rises from the general electorate, who will vote on election day. According to the Confederation of British Industry, businesses are struggling to cope with paying £5 billion a year in extra taxes. In addition, the Institute of Directors believes that there is an extra £5 billion of regulatory costs. Both bodies represent industry, business and commerce in this country.

The small businesses forum, which represents many smaller companies, has made a number of criticisms of the Government. The Chancellor and other Labour Members have expressed considerable concern about such businesses. However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and business is carrying a bigger tax and social cost burden, which makes it less competitive. If the Government were serious about helping business, they would repeal the £1 billion energy tax which will hit businesses, especially manufacturers, from 1 April. I refer of course to the climate change levy.

In an intervention, I mentioned a textile company that I know well, which employs some 300 people. It is highly successful in what is perhaps the most competitive of all industries in the world because so many companies have set themselves up in developing countries, where labour and social costs are much less than in the United Kingdom. That company has spent £1 million on energy conservation and introducing energy generation and production methods that will emit less and less pollution in the form of carbon dioxide into the environment, yet it advises me that it could well face a bill for between £60,000 and £80,000 a year from 1 April as a result of the climate change levy.

I have been in touch with the British Apparel and Textile Confederation. There are about 4,000 companies in the United Kingdom in that sector of our economy. Only 150 of those will benefit from the climate change levy rebate. One of my disappointments is that yesterday, faced with growing evidence from industry of the damage that the energy tax will have, the Chancellor did not decide that it should be cancelled. There are other, better ways of reducing pollution in the environment than the one that the Chancellor has adopted, which is making industry less competitive in the global market in which we operate.

Under the Labour Government, petrol and diesel taxes are the highest in Europe, but has that money been invested in better roads and transport infrastructure? No. Since May 1997, the price of a litre of petrol has increased by 20p, but more than 15p of that rise is directly due to the Government's fuel tax increases. The balance is due to the rise in crude oil prices. More Labour stealth taxes will soon hit our towns and cities, with Labour perhaps taxing people who park at work or drive into town centres.

It seems that the Government have got things the wrong way round. Let them first improve public transport. Let them put in systems whereby people can get to work efficiently, quickly, securely and at a reasonable price. When they have done that, they can by all means introduce some penalty for driving, although I believe that it is wrong to deny people mobility. The Government will learn the lesson, as they did in the autumn, that people want mobility, and the car provides them with it.

In return for all the taxes that they have raised from the driver, the Labour Government have delivered what some people call a standstill Britain. They have slashed roads programmes. One of the first things that they did in my constituency was to remove from the priority roads programme the Poynton bypass and the Manchester airport east and west link roads, which are vital if my constituency is not to be submerged in traffic and people are to be able to get to Manchester international airport. The airport is now blessed with a second runway, which I supported because of its economic benefits to the country and the north-west.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): The hon. Gentleman mentions a subject that is close to my heart. He and I have worked together to ensure that roads schemes in the south-east of Greater Manchester are developed. Does he agree that the sooner we have the report from the Government consultants and get some cheques signed, the better it will be for all of us?

Mr. Winterton: I am delighted by that intervention. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we have worked together. Not only do we both want the roads that are vital to the economic progress and prosperity of the area in which both our constituencies lie, we strongly support the extension of another part of the transport infrastructure: the metrolink.

This country often boasts that the headquarters of about 240 of the top public limited companies are located in London or elsewhere in the United Kingdom, but I do not regard that as an advantage. It is not something of which I should boast. All those companies are wholly in the gift of the City, because they move their accounts and produce reports based on how they believe the City will receive them. To my mind, we need more private companies, because investment in those companies is made in the right way and at the right time—not to decorate annual reports, but to provide progress and new jobs and to pay for the investment required to keep them in the vanguard of their industrial sector.

I hope that the Paymaster General will accept my following remarks as coming from one who represents an area of extremely low—in fact, negative—unemployment:

our unemployment rate is 1.3 per cent. None the less, much of my local industry is deeply concerned about increases in the business rate. It is all right that industry is given some incentives, but if the Government ignore the business rate and heavy local costs—dictated and decided by Government—they make industry less and less competitive.

Although I am happy with the modest changes that the Government have made to capital gains tax, when will a Government reduce tax paid on capital gains from the marginal rate to, say, no more than the standard rate? The Conservative Government failed to do it. If we want people to invest in this country's companies and manufacturing industry, it is crazy to make them pay so high a rate on capital gains. I concede that there is an element of disregard—about £7,200 in the last year. In addition, there are benefits for those who hold shares in the company for which they have worked, but they comprise only a small percentage of those who are prepared to invest in stocks and shares and in the equity market. To have the marginal rate as the standard rate of tax on capital gains is grossly unfair.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Winterton: Certainly—I am pleased to have provoked the Minister into rising to his feet.

Mr. Timms: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the rate of capital gains tax on all unquoted shareholdings is 10 per cent. after four years.

Mr. Winterton: The market in unquoted shares is somewhat limited. I should like all shares that people buy to be taxed at the standard, not the higher, marginal rate of tax.

Farming is vital to my constituency, but I fear that farmers are being driven off the land. In a recent article in *The Daily Telegraph*, Bill Deedes warned that the current foot and mouth epidemic could bring about further urbanisation of the United Kingdom. To my mind, that would be a disaster. We want farmers to be able to earn an income on the land by producing the food that we need, and to do so without experiencing the desperate problems that have affected them in recent years.

I accept that the Government are drawing down agrimonetary compensation, but that is to compensate for the value of the pound against the euro and does not provide farmers with compensation for the unique problems that they have recently faced. May I tell the Treasury Ministers that that is extremely important? My right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), in answer to my intervention, said that Barclays bank was allowing farmers to have credit for longer. However, we need a rather bigger package of aid and assistance from the complete range of financial institutions. If farmers are not on the land creating work for themselves and those whom they employ, producing goods that the country needs, who will maintain the countryside?

There is a crisis, and the Government must produce more answers than they have so far. I have great regard for the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food; he has been outstanding in his handling of the foot and mouth outbreak and he has received strong support from the Opposition. He will continue to do so, but the farming industry, because of the crisis that it faces, deserves greater support, understanding and action from the Government.

To conclude, this is an election Budget. It will become rather less attractive as we look at the nitty-gritty of the Red Book; its results will be less appealing. However, my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor has introduced sound proposals, which will be well received by the electorate.

6.6 pm

Mr. Jon Trickett (Hemsworth): The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) said that this was an election Budget. If that is the case, I am happy to fight the election on the Budget.

This afternoon, I have sat through the whole debate without a single break, and it has been interesting that not a single Tory Back Bencher could be bothered to discuss the £24 million worth of cuts which, if the Conservatives were elected, would be imposed on every constituency, including their own. In talking about the election and the budgetary strategies of the two parties, it is fascinating that the Conservatives were happy to concentrate their fire on alleged misdeeds on our part, but failed to mention the cuts that they intend to impose.

I welcome many of the measures in the Budget; indeed, I welcome all of them. In doing so, I speak not only for myself, but on behalf of 16,000 pensioners in Hemsworth, who will benefit from the £5 increase for single pensioners and the £8 increase for pensioner couples. Changes in the tax regime will also help those who have been saving to have a modest additional income. I welcome the Budget on behalf of the 2,500 families who will receive the working families tax credit introduced by the Chancellor.

I welcome the Budget also on behalf of my 150,000 fellow citizens in Yorkshire and the Humber who will benefit from the announcement about the minimum wage. It was noticeable that the Tories failed to say that they supported the increase; they said that they would not oppose it, but they did not say that they supported it. When the election comes, 150,000 people in Yorkshire will no doubt remember that. I reckon that one in 10 working people in my constituency is on an income of less than £4.10 an hour. No doubt, they will all welcome the Budget and the Government's strategy and, whenever the election, they will want to turn out to vote for the Government to continue their strategy.

Everyone with children at school will welcome the additional money that the Chancellor allocated to schools. He has also allocated £100,000 a year for four years to larger secondary schools, which is an extremely significant allowance. Doubtless, teachers, head teachers and governors will welcome that. Above all, parents and children themselves will see the benefits of changes and increases in education funding, which add up to £1 billion.

May I tell my hon. Friends on the Front Bench that, in relation to school funding, the Chancellor seems to be falling into the habit of making money available directly to schools? I do not object to the sums of money going to the schools, but I do object to the fact that the money is distributed through the standard spending assessment mechanism because the system is unequal. In my

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constituency, there has been major progress on school funding, but there is a differential of £1,400 per child between Wakefield schools and schools in Kensington and Chelsea, which is surely unjustifiable. One understands why the Chancellor is making money available directly to schools: that introduces an element of egalitarianism.

Fundamentally, the problem lies in the inheritance that we gained from the Tories—the unequal formula which unevenly distributes money to schools not only in my area, but throughout the country. We feel strongly about that. I know that the Government are looking into the matter, and want to make progress if not before the election, then shortly afterwards. It would be better if a more equitable formula were drawn up, so that local education authorities could be supported directly. Wakefield is a good LEA and has just received an excellent Ofsted report.

I shall touch briefly on the regeneration of communities such as mine, which consists of about 15 pit villages and small townships, which the Tories destroyed during their tenure of office and which the Government are beginning to regenerate. In my constituency there has been a reduction of 70 per cent. in the number of long-term unemployed. That is a phenomenal achievement for our Government, of which we should be proud. I know many people in my area who never thought that they would have a job again, and who now have a job—a job with a minimum wage, which is beginning to give them a decent, civilised living and, above all, self-respect.

I worry, though, about the definition of unemployment and the statistics that define so many people as economically inactive. Altogether in this country, about 2.5 million people of working age are, for one reason or another, regarded as economically inactive. In my constituency, it is staggering to discover that 27 per cent. of those who are of working age are disregarded because they are considered economically inactive. That is a huge number of people. For every three people who are regarded as available for work, one is said to be economically inactive.

Again, that is a legacy of the Tory Government. During the days of the pit closures, many of my constituents were told by civil servants on Government instructions that if they wanted to avoid having to sign on every two weeks and the dole queue, they should register for invalidity and disability benefit. Many of them are invalided in some way or another, but many would like to work. It is important that we tackle the issue. The Government have done a great deal to intervene in the labour market, but more intervention is needed in the next term, if we win the support of the people in the general election.

I worry slightly about the transformation of training and enterprise councils into learning and skills councils. In my area, we find that our labour market is being directed, in so far as that is done by the learning and skills councils, from Bradford, by a board that is dominated by people in the Leeds and Bradford area.

I have the best will in the world towards Leeds and Bradford—after all, I spent all my life there until I became the Member of Parliament for Hemsworth—but the Leeds and Bradford economy has nothing whatever to do with the Wakefield economy, especially my constituency, which consists of the most deprived communities, as a consequence of the vindictive closure of the pits by the previous Government.

I worry about whether a board dominated by Leeds and Bradford representatives and located in Bradford has the capacity to understand, let alone to come to terms with, the problems faced by people in my area. We have a distinct local micro-economy within the west Yorkshire economy. Leeds is booming; Hemsworth is still on its knees. We need to know that the learning and skills council based in Bradford will understand the problems and reach out to help the communities that I represent.

I welcome the Chancellor's announcement, reiterated today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, of tax cuts for certain geographical areas, which I understand amount to £1 billion. I want to look at the details, but I hope that former colliery areas, such as mine, will be included within the geographical definitions. It would be unthinkable for us to be excluded. At least, I hope that it would be unthinkable.

There are two former pit sites in my constituency, which is no doubt representative of many other former coalfield areas, one at Green lane in Featherstone, and the other at the South Kirkby colliery site. The land there has been cleaned and there has been investment in the infrastructure. We have been promised a new road up to the A1(M), which will unlock the development potential. We are waiting for developers to come, and the loyal and flexible work force there is desperate for work. We need investment and tax breaks and other incentives to attract private industry into our area so that people can realise their full potential, as all decent people in Britain should be allowed to do.

Elsewhere in my constituency is the small industrial estate of Langthwaite Grange, created by a previous Labour Government as an enterprise zone. We have some good companies there, such as Berwin and Berwin, a long-established textile manufacturer which does high quality tailoring, whose suits I frequently wear with pride in the House. Such firms need buttressing. I do not suggest that they are likely to go, but we understand the pressures, particularly on the textile industry. But were they to go, the consequences would be devastating. In that part of my constituency, the only employers of any size, other than those on that trading estate, are the schools. The high schools are the largest employers in that part of my constituency and we cannot afford any further loss.

When I approached Yorkshire Forward, our local regional development agency, about the possibility of helping a local firm on that industrial estate, I was told that no money was available to ensure that such firms became competitive, rather that the RDA stood ready to intervene to help anyone who was made redundant. It is bizarre that an agency that we are proud to have established should say that it cannot help a company to survive, perhaps by re-tooling and re-equipping itself, but that it will find money should redundancies occur. That is entirely wrong.

I understand that one other hon. Member wishes to speak, so I simply say that I am fully behind the Budget. The Government need at least one more term, and probably more, so that we can advance faster and farther in the direction laid out by the Chancellor.

6.17 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hemsworth (Mr. Trickett) for his courtesy.

I want to make four points about the Budget, thinking ahead to the next term and the term after that, to which my hon. Friend has just referred, and I do so against the background of incredibly positive events in my constituency.

For example, the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who knows my area well, will know the Cheshire Oaks complex. When that was granted planning consent under the previous Government, no one in the House or outside would have believed that it would attract 7 million day visitors a year. That is a sign of the economy's success and of the free capital that there is in the community to be spent on quality goods in companies that are supplied by many of the quality firms to which my hon. Friend referred.

Alongside that are other successes. Despite all the difficulties of General Motors internationally, Vauxhall created 1,000 new jobs last year. Hon. Members might want to go into the Tea Room and have a weightwatchers sandwich made by Gibsons, a bakery in my constituency, which now employs 300 people to supply a national market that was not there a few years ago.

More importantly, hon. Members should consider the success of Brookside school, which I visited the other day. The school is situated inside an education action zone and has brilliant architecture, excited and enthused teachers and well-equipped information technology facilities. That all happened because of our policy on education action zones.

As for my four points, first, although the proposed research and development tax allowances for larger businesses are a superb idea, I remind Ministers that we must use them in our discussions with businesses to attract R and D back to our shores. For far too long, we have lost laboratories and research centres involved in the production of pharmaceuticals, vehicle building and other industries. We have the expertise; one only has to look around the M25 belt to see the fantastic support in Formula 1 and at the top end of the vehicle-building industry. However, most of the R and D in the manufacturing sector has disappeared from this country. That has begun to happen in the pharmaceutical industry also and we must make the new policy work for such industries.

Secondly, we must deal with vehicle taxation in its broadest sense. I made rather belated representations to my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary about liquid petroleum gas, as it struck me that it would have been nice to introduce LPG incentives to create some encouragement for companies that are equipping their car fleets. A tax deduction could be made for drivers, who are currently carrying the extra £1,500 capital value of LPG vehicles. That is a disincentive for people whose company offers them a choice. Unless we tweak that regime, they are unlikely to opt for LPG.

I should like to go a little further. I want the Treasury to take a long-term look at what is happening to vehicle engines. Within five years, fuel cell technology and better quality electrically powered vehicles will be on our roads and there will be more use of gas, so we need a much longer-term vision of how to tax vehicles in their entirety and not merely in respect of purchase, excise duty or fuel. The matter has to be considered in the long term, so I suggest that we develop some serious modelling, and work with the industry and consumers to consider the best way of creating the positive incentives that are needed to encourage people to use more environmentally friendly vehicles. Of course, we should also not forget that the Treasury needs to raise funds for all the good things that the Government do with their money. An earlier speaker seemed almost to suggest that the Chancellor raises funds for himself. It is not his money, but that of the nation, and it is the Government's job to ensure that it is spent wisely and in the nation's interests. That is why we should take a long-term look at the very complicated issues involved in vehicle taxation.

Thirdly, I have a more specific point for my hon. Friend the Paymaster General about an anomaly of which she is already aware. As far as I can see, there is not yet a solution in terms of the various child credits and child support mechanisms. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have demanded an increase in the number of nurses in our hospitals. If nurses who are going to Chester college on a £6,000 bursary decide instead to work for Sainsbury's down the road—I say this with the greatest respect to nurses—they will be considerably better off, as the bursary is not considered to be a wage.

If an apprentice goes to work while training, we would not expect him to do so without pay or without being treated as a normal employee by the taxation system. Trainee nurses have to go on the wards, where they undertake proper work while learning how to be nurses. Like apprentices, they are under a lot of supervision, but not treating them as employees is anomalous. I urge my hon. Friend the Paymaster General to consider that carefully. A single parent in my constituency launched herself on a nursing career through sheer determination. She is at a significant disadvantage, especially as she has three small children.

My fourth point deals with the six welcome tax measures that are aimed at deprived areas. The selection of those areas should be linked to associated Government policies. For example, areas that have education action zones, or benefit from the single regeneration budget, sure start and so on should be considered. We should try to ensure that the support systems that are being introduced are managed under a unified structure. I am worried about multiple management of the new initiatives in some parts of the community.

A special set of circumstances pertains in my constituency. Many people live in the deprived part of the community, in five wards that are cheek by jowl with the petrochemical industry. A large piece of brownfield land, which is currently owned by Shell, would be ideal for attracting support under the new mechanism. The Treasury can count my comments as an early bid. I hope that Ministers will listen carefully.

There are important considerations in petrochemical areas. No one who moves into the area would choose to live in the housing adjacent to the industry, yet those houses were built because of it. That phenomenon occurs in petrochemical towns throughout the western world. How do we balance the interests of industry with that of communities? The Treasury has found a potentially wonderful solution through the combination of its policies on tax support and on VAT on empty properties.

[Mr. Andrew Miller]

How do we create an incentive to attract modern industry to those sites? The six tax proposals do that. How do we create uplift in areas where there are large numbers of vacant private sector properties? The VAT regime and proposals for flats above shops might create a viable package. I hope that my hon. Friend the Paymaster General will consider joined-up schemes. It is vital that we do not simply establish another industrial development site in deprived housing areas; we must ensure that our actions raise the standard of living of those who live cheek by jowl with the chemical sector. People need to get something out of that relationship, which is important and well understood in the community. The Budget presents ideal opportunities to find imaginative solutions.

I had no premonition of the Budget's contents, but I contacted the Government office of the north-west and Shell last week and told them that it was time for people to get their heads together to devise imaginative proposals for using the waste land productively, while ensuring that we work with the community to improve housing in that area.

This Budget presents the possibility of real solutions to the long-term endemic problems that my constituents have faced. I welcome the Chancellor's Budget proposals and I know that the people of Ellesmere Port and Neston will also do so.

6.30 pm

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry began by echoing the Chancellor's boastful claims of achievement over the past four years, seeking to take credit for the positive economic up-cycle that has, in reality, been in place since 1992. Indeed, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) pointed out, economic growth in the past four years has been almost exactly in line with the projections in the 1996 Budget, except that inflation has been slightly higher and the tax take has been £28 billion per annum higher.

The United Kingdom has under-performed over the past four years on almost all counts. Growth has averaged about 2.4 per cent. a year, compared with 3.1 per cent. a year during the last five years of the previous Conservative Government and 4.6 per cent. a year in the United States. We have even under-performed in comparison to euroland. Investment in new ventures has run at only about 27 per cent. of the level of the United States, pro rata to the size of the economy. There are 14 economies in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development with lower unemployment than us, and there has been a marked slow down in the rate of new jobs over the past four years.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) pointed out, the productivity growth figures have been disastrous: down to 1.4 per cent. a year in the past three years, compared with 2.4 per cent. between 1992 and 1997, and less than half the level in the US. Those figures are some 60 per cent. worse than they were under the previous Conservative Government.

Savings have collapsed from 11 per cent. to 4.75 per cent. The Chancellor boasts that he has reduced Government debt by £30 billion, but I must remind him that he has created a rise in personal debt of more than double that amount—about £60 billion. Part of the reason for that has been the disastrous decline in the rise of disposable incomes. Growth is down to 1.6 per cent. a year, compared with 2.75 per cent. a year until 1997. Disposable income growth is now approximately zero.

There is similarly bad news on investment, which has fallen from an increase of 7.75 per cent. in 1997 to only 2 per cent. now. The Chancellor also forgot to mention that the trade deficit has doubled to £29 billion in the past four years, reflecting the vulnerable position of many manufacturers in this country. My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) pointed out that we have standstill Britain as far as transport is concerned. In agriculture, as the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) pointed out, the Government are presiding over the worst depression for the past 70 years, and all that they have to offer are free tax discs for tractors.

Further bad news is that the tax take has increased by about 3 per cent. of GDP, up from 35.2 per cent. to 38.2 per cent. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend) pointed out, that is, in principle, bad for an economy. Our economy needs to get closer to the US tax take of 30 per cent., rather than rise to 40 per cent., if we are to have the growth that will pay for the health care and education that we all want.

There is a further crucial point, on which I am not sure where the Government stand. If they think that they are going to maintain the increase in public spending at a rate of 3.7 per cent. a year—which they are proud to boast that they are now planning—it must result in higher taxation and the squeezing out of growth in the private sector. They also run a severe risk of increasing inflation, as the International Monetary Fund has warned the Chancellor, much to his displeasure. Alternatively, there could be a massive increase in Government borrowing. Indeed, a £58 billion increase in Government borrowing is already projected. Interestingly, the IMF recommends that the Government prune back their plans for extra spending by about £10 billion, which is very much in line with Conservative policy.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wells drew attention to a practice that is becoming increasingly objectionable to the country as a whole, which is the use of propagandist and devious tactics in presenting figures. We have got used to projections that deliberately lead us to think that taxation will not go up as much as it does. Now we see that forecast spending turns out to be much higher than the reality. Often, it is the poorer members of society who do not get the benefits that the Government claim to be laying on for them.

Right across the board, such misrepresentations rear their head. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the leader of the Conservative party, pointed out the failure to mention VAT being imposed on spectacles and other optical aids. Indeed, Customs and Excise has been told to advise opticians very quietly of that, because the Government do not want the embarrassment of making an announcement.

Perhaps no one noticed that the Red Book shows no increase in the threshold levels of corporation tax. Indeed, that follows several years of no increase in such thresholds, which, over time, is one of the main causes of rising taxation on companies. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire pointed out, middle England

is being hit in all manner of ways. Income tax is now paid by 20.8 million people. The rise in the national insurance ceiling to £575 a week means that many people at that marginal income level will pay out a lot more than the 75p a week they will get as a result of the wider band of lower taxation. Those who have to move for their jobs will be hit with double the level of stamp. As we all know, the alleged substitution of means-tested child care for the universal married allowance has left a gap of a year with nothing.

The hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) said that, because the £7,000 limit is being retained, the ISA regime will be more tax generous than the old PEP and TESSA regime, referring to its costs. However, £10,500 a year could be saved in a mixture of PEPs and TESSAs, so the ISA regime is significantly less generous. The landfill tax is being increased without any national insurance compensation, which will increase illegal tipping. The Government have accepted some of our proposals for making the enterprise management incentive scheme slightly less inflexible, but the Chancellor failed to mention that the Government have imposed taxation of 47.32 per cent. on all unapproved options when employees exercise those options, making them completely unattractive and useless as a mechanism for smaller businesses to attract talent.

What about annuities? There is some guff in the notes about further consultation, but the reality is that people who retire with money purchase pension schemes are being exploited by the Government. They are being forced to lend too cheaply when they buy their annuities, which have to invest in gilts. The Governor of the Bank of England said last week that he is deeply concerned that these distortions in our economy will result in long-term interest rates being artificially low because of the reduction in supply and the increase in demand from annuity purchases.

We all welcome the Myners report and the ending of the minimum funding requirement regime, but what have the Government to say about the European Union proposal to put in place a measure that will be infinitely worse?

Mr. Worthington: The hon. Gentleman wrote those remarks beforehand. When will he reply to the debate?

Mr. Flight: The hon. Gentleman clearly was not looking as I was scribbling away, taking notes. I have deliberately woven into my speech the remarks of various Members and I shall get to his comments, for which I have considerable support, in a moment.

For business, the little string of positive measures will not do much to reduce the £10 billion of extra costs and red tape. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells pointed out, the Confederation of British Industry and the whole of manufacturing industry are disgusted with the Government for proceeding with the foolish climate change levy. The levy will damage agriculture, horticulture and manufacturing in particular—the most vulnerable sections of our economy.

Really worrying is the worsening of the country's underlying competitive position. Much of what has been introduced and what has happened over the past four years has chipped away at that position. Sadly, our reputation internationally is no longer substantiated domestically.

The fuel tax reductions are welcome, but our hauliers are in a poor position, and they have serious problems with foreign competition.

I shall deal now with charities and VAT. We welcome the fact that the Chancellor has honoured by means of rebates what he had promised to churches in respect of repairs. The hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) asked about hospices and charities such as the Leonard Cheshire Foundation. Charities are burdened with a gamut of arbitrary and unfair VAT liabilities that need to be redressed and corrected. I also support what the hon. Gentleman said about Chester Street Insurance Holdings, and I trust that the Government and the FSA will address that matter.

The Government have imposed higher taxation on charities than any Government in the past. When the advance corporation tax recovery on dividend incomes runs out in 2004, charities will be hit with increased taxation of £500 million a year. That used to trickle down to all other charitable activities, so more than pension funds will suffer from the loss of ACT recovery.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) correctly said that nothing has been done to increase funding for social services. They have been starved of funds for the four years of this Government.

In summary, the Chancellor has performed the oldest trick in the book. He increased tax in the first three years of the Parliament, then aimed to bribe the electorate in election year. He was very successful in achieving his first target, but more lacklustre when it came to his second target. His proposals are far too complicated and pernickety. They wrap us in red tape—as my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire said, a Kafkaesque system of benefits is developing in this country. A psychiatrist friend of mine told me that such obsession with complication reflects the mentality of the anally retentive. As a nation, we are being tied up in an unnecessarily complicated system of taxation.

It has been said:

"The fact is that, in terms of manipulating the Budget to boost Government popularity, he"—

the Chancellor—

"has done exactly what he claimed he would never do.

In his first two years, he controlled spending and put up taxes and so moved the public finances into surplus. By contrast, in the 18 months leading up to the General Election, he has announced big increases in spending and an expensive assortment of tax cuts.

The lurch from puritan fiscal restraint to cavalier tax-and-spend abandon is far more pronounced than under the Conservatives in their 18 years of rule up to 1997.

Mr. Brown may be able to kid himself his fiscal policies have been impressively stable and prudent, but it would be a shame if he is also able to kid the electorate."

Those are not my words, but the words of the country's leading monetary economist.

6.44 pm

The Paymaster General (Dawn Primarolo): Yesterday's Budget was a Budget for the future. It set out the best economic conditions for a generation and built on them. It was a Budget for growth and stability. It is our commitment to stability that gives us the lowest inflation for 30 years, the lowest long-term interest rates for

[Dawn Primarolo]

35 years and the lowest unemployment rate since 1975, with more people in work than ever before, as well as sound public finances.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who cannot be in the Chamber for the closing speeches, pointed out that many excellent speeches have been made in the Budget debate of the past two days. Those speeches have come from both sides of the House and some have been extremely considered.

Before I deal with the speeches, however, I must point out one thing to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), who repeated an allegation that was made in the Chamber yesterday by the Leader of the Opposition about the imposition of value added tax on spectacles. I make it clear to the House that that measure is not a result of this or any previous Budget. In fact, it is the consequence of a decision that was taken in 1990, under the previous Government, to pursue a highly complex and long-running insurance court case, which eventually led to a House of Lords appeal hearing in January that was lost. I will be more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman about that issue so that he can understand its consequences.

Mr. Flight: Will the Paymaster General confirm the Opposition view that the House of Lords decision results from a European Union judgment that pertains to the imposition of VAT, which takes us into wholly different territory? Why did the Government not announce the fact that VAT would increase? I did not say that the increase was in the Budget; I said that the Government had failed to announce it.

Dawn Primarolo: I have explained that the increase was the result of a court judgment following action taken by the previous Government. It is not connected with this Budget and I will be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with the details.

The hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend) made a spirited and wide-ranging speech. There was much in it with which I did not agree, but the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) pointed out that the hon. Gentleman would not be seeking re-election to the House. I believe that he was first elected in 1970. I presume that his contribution was a final "getting everything off his chest" on every subject under the sun. I wish him a happy retirement. I think that I can say without fear of contradiction that we will all miss him—even hon. Members who did not agree with what he said.

The hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) mentioned a tax on pesticides in 2002. He, too, offered his apologies as he could not be here for the closing speeches—I do not know what I have done to offend all these hon. Gentlemen. The Government have welcomed the crop protection industry's voluntary package of about 20 measures aimed at reducing the environmental impact of pesticide use. We are pleased that the measures have the support of the National Farmers Union. We hope that the package will be implemented in full from 1 April and that it will deliver the environmental benefits that have been identified.

I am sure that hon. Members would agree that it is sensible to review the package as soon as possible—preferably in the run-up to the next Budget.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): On behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed), may I ask the hon. Lady about the time scale for that review? Will it take place within one year or within a few years?

Dawn Primarolo: I thought that I said that the review would take place before the next Budget. I assume that there will be another Budget within a year—as is normal.

The hon. Member for South-East Cornwall also said that landfill tax causes fly tipping. However, there is no evidence of that. A survey carried out by the Tidy Britain Group in 1999 showed that most fly tipping is of household waste, and of course households do not directly pay the landfill tax. However, I am sure that every Member of the House would agree with his comments on fly tipping. The illegal disposal of waste is taken seriously by the Government; a number of penalties can be and are imposed on those who are prosecuted for such offences. I understand that the Environment Agency has a 24-hour hotline that people can use to report fly tipping.

Like other hon. Members, the hon. Gentleman referred to the pressures currently experienced by the farming industry. The House will continue to discuss many aspects of that matter over the coming months. I remind the House that the Government have paid farmers £750 million more during this Parliament—on top of existing subsidies. I certainly do not want to tell the House that we do not take the position of the farming industry extremely seriously. Clearly, the work of my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in dealing with the current pressures will inform our future decisions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Baillieston (Mr. Wray), who is also no longer in the Chamber, made a spirited speech on unemployment and house repossession. He concentrated on the scourge of poverty and his experience in his constituency. He made some policy suggestions that are not immediately attractive to the Government, but he made them with great sincerity and conviction and I promise to read them carefully.

The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), who is an experienced Member of the House and a former Financial Secretary, raised several issues. He made suggestions as to what the Government should be doing to tackle and reduce compliance costs for business. I agree with him about setting objectives, but I am sure that we shall probably disagree on the measures for their achievement. In the press releases on the Budget, we announced that there would be consultation on a radical new look at the treatment of tax for small businesses—aimed at reducing the regulatory burdens, through, for instance, broadly aligning their profits for tax purposes with those reported in the accounts.

I know that the right hon. Gentleman continues to take an active interest, both inside and outside the House, in tax simplification questions. I am sure that he will want to participate actively in that consultation with business. I shall ensure that he receives the documentation and that he is kept informed of developments. The Budget announced a range of measures on VAT; that will be of

specific help in the reduction of burdens on small businesses. There is a commitment to consider a flat rate of VAT for small businesses, although he will appreciate that such a scheme would be incredibly complicated. That is why we need to consult businesses on its design and operation, in order to avoid what the right hon. Gentleman described—starting off with good intentions but ending up by making matters worse, without giving them proper consideration. I am sure that he will welcome that.

The right hon. Gentleman commented on the Government's intention, announced in the Budget press releases, to extend child care provision, so that carers can look after children in their own homes. He must understand that the child care industry was not regulated before. We must ensure the quality and safety of the care provided to those children and make sure that it is regulated properly. I am talking not about a massive scheme, but about Government money being used to support a home child carers regime. We are consulting on that matter and if he is actively interested in it, I am happy to keep him informed. If I fail to do so, I am sure that he will jog my memory.

The right hon. Gentleman suggested that we should increase the basic tax rate threshold to £33,000. That would cost an estimated £1.4 billion, and it is the Government's judgment that it would not benefit those in most need. As he will see from our Budget, targeting tax cuts and investing in public services represents the way forward. I shall not add that sum to the running total of all the commitments that the Conservative party has made this evening to cutting tax while increasing expenditure, because the right hon. Gentleman offered that suggestion to explore how our tax limits operate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington)—who is here—started with a succinctly and well-made point, with which I cannot believe any hon. Member would disagree. He said that if we impoverish our children, we are impoverished as a community. Our children, their skills and the contribution that they make to our future society are important. He will see from the Budget that we are attempting to provide such help with the children's tax credit, the introduction of the new baby credit, the increases in the working families tax credit and in the child care element.

My hon. Friend made some important points about the Government's regeneration package. Unfortunately for me, he settled on the vexed problem of VAT. I absolutely share his admiration for the hospice movement, as all hon. Members would. I am sure that even the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) would not disagree with that. My hon. Friend will understand that the Government have carried out a charity review, in which we considered the imposition of VAT on some of the activities that charities undertake. The cost of relieving the charities of that VAT would be £400 million, which the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs committed the Conservative party to spending.

I need to look very carefully at the issues that my hon. Friend raises about the hospice in his constituency. Clearly, we need to balance the independence of the hospice movement, which wants to be independent from the national health service, and its charitable status with the sensible operation of the tax system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie, and several other hon. Members, referred to Chester Street Insurance Holdings. Of course the Government understand the position of those involved. I am sure that he is aware that, as a consequence of the insolvency of Chester Street, provisional liquidators were appointed on 9 January this year. At a meeting on 5 February, a scheme of arrangement was agreed with the creditors. The Government expect the Policyholders Protection Board to work closely with the provisional liquidators to ensure that claims are processed promptly. The PPB will ensure that the provisions of the Policy Holders Protection Act 1975 are implemented fully. Her Majesty's Treasury is monitoring the position by keeping in close touch with other Departments and the Financial Services Authority, and my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary is pursuing the matter—

It being Seven o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Monday next.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [28 February],

That the Motions in the name of Mr. Secretary Straw relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if they related to instruments subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) in respect of which notice has been given that the instruments be approved.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Fuller's Earth Mining (Mid-Bedfordshire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

7 pm

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Nothing that I have to say this evening will surprise the Minister because I have given him a copy of what I intend to say. This discussion has been going on between his Department and myself for the past three years. It concerns the plans of Steetley Woburn Bentonite Ltd. irrevocably to despoil the landscape of one of the most attractive parts of Bedfordshire so that its foreign parent company can make marginally more profit.

Ministers have told me that they cannot interfere and that it is for Bedfordshire county council to determine the matter. The council has acted: it has rightly refused Steetley's application to surface quarry in one of the most attractive parts of my constituency.

Bedfordshire county council's refusal stated:

"In accordance with Minerals and Waste Local Plan Policy, MW8, it is considered that the applicants have not demonstrated an over-riding need or economic benefit arising from the proposals, when set against the significant environmental impact in terms of

A: the unacceptable effect on the Area of Great Landscape Value

B: the significant adverse effect on the County Wildlife Sites

C: the effect on the setting of listed buildings and the Woburn Conservation Area

D: the possibility of potential nitrate and pesticide leakage into the groundwater at the Woburn Sands aquifer."

I have read a number of planning refusals in the past, but rarely one so comprehensively damning. Steetley's application is in conflict with the minerals and waste local plan, the Bedfordshire structure plan and the Mid-Bedfordshire local plan.

We now hear that Steetley is to appeal to the Planning Inspectorate and will plead that all these planning policies can be overturned because it can prove that there is a need for fuller's earth and that it is in the national interest to quarry it. I am also told that it will claim DTI support for such an assertion.

First, will the Minister confirm that no statement has been made by a Minister or official which Steetley could pray in aid? Secondly, I intend to show that no such statement should be made. I then hope, in the light of this evidence and the county council's decision, that the Minister will feel able to confirm that no support will be given to Steetley in future and that in the last resort the Secretary of State would call the application in.

Steetley is a wholly owned subsidiary of a private Spanish-owned minerals and mining company, TOLSA S.A., to which the profits revert. Another player in this saga is Ciba Speciality Chemicals (UK), formerly Allied Colloids—a Swiss-owned company.

The product that Steetley wishes to surface quarry is fuller's earth, which is processed with other materials into bentonite. It then has a number of applications, including being used for cat litter. Fuller's earth has been extracted locally continuously since the 1950s and the quarry was most recently extended in 1993 on a marginally won appeal. However, that work took place in an area that was not visible to most people.

The current application, however, is for a site of 58 hectares—146 acres—of highly visible open farmland. It would remove the whole of a wooded ridge between Woburn and Aspley Heath and Woburn Sands, and it is part of the famous Greensands ridge. It is greenbelt land, designated as an area of great landscape value—an AGLV—and it is close to two sites of special scientific interest. The nearest residential property is only 10 metres away. *[Interruption.]* I am delighted that I have been joined by many other Members, who have come from the Standing Committee that is considering the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. That shows just how important the issue is, not just to my constituents but to the House.

The effects of the excavation would be profound. Some years ago, in the view of the inspector, the need for the mineral marginally outweighed the effect on the AGLV, but he said:

"I hold few fears that allowing this appeal would create a compelling precedent for other nearby sites . . . I doubt that much land in the locality would have so little impact on the AGLV as a whole. It is the appeal site's location at the core of previous workings that would, I believe, minimise impact."

He continued:

"The fact that from the exterior the works themselves would be wholly screened by trees is a positive advantage and certainly sets this site apart from those in Surrey".

Those were his comments on the refusal of the Laporte application in 1988.

Things are different now. First, there is not the need for the site, as I will show; secondly, there are alternatives, as I will prove; and, thirdly, the damage that will be caused will be highly visible, catastrophic and irreversible, and that is not in the national interest.

Let me provide some background to the issue. The total world production of bentonite is 15 million tonnes per annum. Woburn processes just 30,000 tonnes—less than one third of 1 per cent. of that. Some 92 per cent. of Woburn fuller's earth is processed to form bentonite and sold to Ciba, and 94 per cent. of this product is exported for use in overseas paper mills. Only 12.6 per cent. of United Kingdom paper production uses Woburn bentonite; 87.4 per cent. does not.

Ciba obtains 70 per cent. of its bentonite from other sources because Woburn bentonite is not the preferred material in all its applications. The other sources in Europe and the USA insist that the performance of their material is in no way inferior to that of Woburn clay and they insist that they have the capacity to meet any increase in demand from Ciba. Their general claim is that they can beat Woburn on performance, but not always on price. Ciba itself admits that it has

"an ongoing requirement for Bentonite and particularly Woburn Clay to protect our position in the paper market".

It adds that it needs it

"to maintain their competitive edge".

Therefore, we know that the definition of the word "need", as used by Ciba, means marginally more profitable. However research shows that Ciba has access to alternative, comparable and superior technology, which has been developed over the past few years and is used in paper making worldwide. Microparticle retention using bentonite systems is giving way to newer, cheaper and more efficient technologies. These synthetic water-soluble polymers have no environmental disadvantages. In an advert dated 1997, Cytec described its polyflex micropolymer as "Better than Bentonite." It is used on four continents and lowers the cost per tonne of paper by 30 to 40 per cent.

In September 2000, Ciba bought Cytec's retention and drainage acids, including the polyflex micropolymer, so it believes in the system. Ciba, which at the time was Allied Colloids, has a patented formula called hydrocol, which, when taken out in 1986, referred only to bentonite. In 1998, it extended it to include colloidal silica. A more recent patent extended it again to include "other anionic bridging coagulant", thus widening Ciba's options still further to include the possibility of an organic microparticle akin to the Cytec micropolymer polyflex.

Steetley says that its product is unique, but the facts deny that. Laporte Industries, which is about to mine 176,000 tonnes at Baulking in Oxfordshire—enough for the next decade—maintained in May 1999 that those deposits

"are able to be used in these"—

Ciba's—

"processes to produce paper in an identical or similar way."

So much for the argument about need.

The next Alice-in-Wonderland argument that Steetley may adduce is that of the environment. It may claim that bentonite makes the recycling of paper more efficient. In its site visitors' guide, it states:

"Fullers Earth has special properties that make it a vital ingredient in paper manufacture giving environmental benefits such as conservation of trees, lower energy use and reduces waste effluent".

To achieve that, it wants to dig up thousands of tonnes of soil, chop down a 260 m band of thousands of trees, cause dust, noise and pollution for 20 years and blight the countryside and the lives of thousands of people.

What of the national interest? We know that only a fraction of fuller's earth is used in United Kingdom paper making and that alternatives are available. The majority is exported, so there can be no national interest. Nor are the sums involved so large that their loss would even be noticed. The despoiling of Woburn would be worth £2 million a year to Steetley's parent company, but its effect on Woburn would be profound in terms of noise, dust, loss of amenity, disturbance of roads, destruction of the landscape and loss of jobs.

Woburn is the second-largest tourist destination in Bedfordshire. Walking in the area is a major visitor attraction. Anything detrimental to the visual attraction of the area will deter visitors. Eight circular walks through the area that is covered by the planning application begin and end in Woburn, and there is a new millennium walk. Whereas only two Woburn residents depend on Steetley for their livelihood, 170 Woburn residents are employed in tourist-dependent businesses.

There is no need for the site, as I have shown, and there is demonstrably no national interest at stake, as I have proved. I await the Minister's assurances that this shoddy, shabby and selfish campaign by Steetley will get no help from a Labour Government.

7.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) on securing this important debate. I also thank him sincerely for his

[Mr. Keith Hill]

courtesy in giving me such detailed notice of the issues that he wanted to raise. I shall do my best to address as many of the points that he raised as possible. First, however, I should explain why fuller's earth is an important mineral resource.

Although fuller's earth has been extracted from the Woburn area since 1952, only one site is currently operating. It is, as the hon. Gentleman identified, operated by Steetley Woburn Bentonite Ltd. That site is expected to run out of permitted reserves by 2004. The company applied on 3 April 2000 for planning permission to extend its workings to a nearby site at Wavendon Heath South.

Bedfordshire county council considered the application. Its views are set out in the special development control committee report of 1 February 2001. The council refused planning permission on the basis that the applicant had not demonstrated an overriding need or economic benefit arising from the proposals when set against the significant environmental impacts of extraction. I understand that an appeal has now been lodged against that decision. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot comment on that appeal because there is a legal need for impartiality on the part of the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I am absolutely certain that the hon. Gentleman understands the extreme caution that I have to exercise in the quasi-judicial position that I hold, which explains why no statement of support or opposition will be made by Ministers. However, within those constraints, I want to try to answer the two specific questions that the hon. Gentleman put to me.

First, the hon. Gentleman asked for confirmation that no statement had been made by a Minister or official which Steetley could, as he put it, pray in aid. The most precise answer to that is that the local council asked the Department of Trade and Industry to comment on the economic importance of the application. The DTI said that the development would make a positive contribution to the economy, but did not indicate that the development was of national importance.

Secondly, the hon. Gentleman asked me whether in the last resort the Secretary of State would call the application in. Again, the most precise answer that I can give to that question is that Parliament has given local planning authorities the responsibility for development control in the first instance. The Secretary of State is therefore very selective about calling in applications to determine himself. However, it is open to the public to ask him to do so. If such a request is made, the Secretary of State will consider the particular circumstances of that case in reaching his decision.

I hope now that it will be for the benefit of the House if I try to place this issue in its economic, environmental and planning context. Bentonite produced from Woburn fuller's earth is used almost exclusively by the paper industry. Steetley Woburn Bentonite Ltd., which produces the bentonite, sells almost all of it to Ciba Speciality Chemicals for use in two of its patented products. Ciba, in turn, exports bentonite to the paper industry worldwide. Woburn bentonite is currently used in about one sixth of total UK paper and paper board products.

Fuller's earth has other industrial and even domestic applications, however. It is a bonding agent for silica sand used in foundry moulds. It is a suspension agent for oil-well drilling muds and agricultural sprays. It has various civil engineering applications, for instance supporting excavations. It can be used to refine edible oils and fat. Its domestic applications include face packs. In some countries, such as the United States, clumping pet litter is a growth market, now worth more than $700 million each year. Use of part of the production as pet litter is often emphasised by those who oppose extraction of this mineral, but the important industrial and construction uses should not be understated.

Fuller's earth has been extracted in small quantities since Roman times for cleaning and de-oiling wool. The 20th century saw an expansion of uses. Between 1970 and 1990, the UK was producing about 200,000 tonnes each year to supply both the domestic and export markets. Production has been falling since 1994, possibly reflecting the exhaustion of permitted reserves. In 2000, production was estimated at only 70,000 tonnes.

Fuller's earth and natural bentonite are also imported, partly because of the range of qualities that need to be met for specific purposes, and perhaps partly because of lower domestic production. The amounts have been variable over the past decade, from less than 2,000 tonnes to over 75,000 tonnes in 1999.

There were five operations in 1991. Since then, permitted reserves have been exhausted in east Surrey and in Kent. Three quarries were left in 1999, at Aspley wood near Woburn, Clophill in Bedfordshire and Baulking in Oxfordshire. The Clophill quarry has since closed. The Woburn site has sufficient reserves to support production until 2004. The Baulking site has permitted reserves sufficient for about eight years. It is within this context of declining permitted reserves that a new planning application was lodged.

Where are fuller's earth resources located? Minerals can be worked only where they are found, so we must turn to geology for the answer. The deposits are very localised and occur only in Bedfordshire, Oxfordshire, Surrey, Kent and North Somerset. It is likely that economic resources remain only in east Surrey, where about 1.6 million tonnes of economic reserves lie adjacent to an area of outstanding natural beauty and within the metropolitan green belt, and near Woburn, Bedfordshire, where perhaps 320,000 tonnes at Wavendon Heath lie within a locally designated significant landscape area. Therefore, there are limited options for the future extraction of fuller's earth in the UK.

Because fuller's earth is a scarce material with special economic value, in 1951 the Minister of Housing and Local Government set up the fuller's earth regional conferences to ensure that resources were not sterilised by other forms of development. In 1952 the south-west regional conference expressed concern about how quickly those resources were being depleted and planning authorities were asked to protect potential reserves as far as they could. The national importance of fuller's earth was recognised in that, for example, the M23 road line in east Surrey was amended to avoid sterilising some of that mineral resource.

Between 1970 and 1991 there were five applications to work fuller's earth: one in Oxfordshire, two in Bedfordshire and two in east Surrey. All were refused by the relevant mineral planning authority and each went to appeal. One Woburn site and the Oxfordshire site were permitted on appeal. Following the dismissal of one of

the Surrey appeals in 1988, the then Secretary of State commissioned the British geological survey to undertake the appraisal of fuller's earth resources in England and Wales. That confirmed that the availability of fuller's earth and options for future extraction in the UK were very limited.

Since the 1970s, noise and, in dry weather, dust have been recognised as the main environmental effects of working and processing fuller's earth, especially because large volumes of overlying material have to be dug and then replaced. There have been significant steps forward in site management practices since that time and my Department is currently preparing and consulting on new guidance on the environmental effects of mineral extraction to improve performance further, with noise and dust in the first instalment. Some concerns have been expressed that extraction might have an adverse effect on groundwater resources and quality if adequate operational and mitigation effects cannot be imposed. Other relevant factors may include the effects of traffic both within and outside the site and visual intrusion on the landscape, especially in sensitive areas.

All those factors can be considered only in relation to specific sites for which planning permission for extraction has been sought and they have to be balanced against the economic need for the mineral. The need to handle large quantities of overburden creates some environmental problems, but return of the material to the pit allows restoration close to original levels without bringing additional materials on to the site. There are good examples of restoration of fuller's earth sites to uses such as sports fields, nature conservation areas and forestry.

Minerals are important natural resources. They make an essential contribution to the nation's economic and social progress and thus to the quality of life. We are concerned to promote the development of indigenous natural resources as an activity that promotes economic growth, saving imports and encouraging exports—but not at any price. Sustainable development requires proper attention to the environmental and social aspects of decisions, as well as economic issues.

Current policy for the working of fuller's earth is set out in general minerals planning policy guidance note 1, published in 1996. In their development plans, mineral planning authorities should set out clearly where mineral extraction is likely in principle to be acceptable and where it is not likely to be acceptable, having regard to the objectives for sustainable development. Resources of economic importance should be safeguarded from surface development. For particular scarce and limited resources such as fuller's earth, local authorities should consider the national importance of those minerals and put in place appropriate provision for their future supply. Those are factors that may influence the content of the minerals local plan, which is an important element of the plan-led system.

Local authorities must also protect sites with environmental and nature conservation value, which may range from European sites down to those of local importance. Therefore, there may be a conflict between safeguarding our natural heritage and extracting minerals. It is a responsibility of the mineral planning authority to consider such issues when considering applications for planning permission.

Mr. Sayeed: Does the Minister agree that there are considerable deposits of fuller's earth in other countries and that there is fuller's earth of especially high quality in Turkey? Does he agree that there are synthetic alternatives, which he has not spoken about at all? If the inspector decides that Steetley's application should go ahead, what advice can he give my constituents to ensure that they may do their best to persuade the Secretary of State, whoever that is, to call the application in? The idea that £2 million profit a year for a Spanish company is sufficiently in the national interest to justify despoiling the lives of people in a lovely part of Bedfordshire, as well as the landscape, is extraordinary.

Mr. Hill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I listened carefully to his learned and highly informed speech, in which he ranged over the scope of the availability of that mineral resource in other parts of the world. I would not want to dispute that for one moment.

On the issue of how his constituents should register their concern in the event of planning permission being granted, may I repeat carefully—I have to be extremely cautious in these matters—that I alluded to the fact that there is clear strategy provision for members of the public to register their objection to any such planning permission and for the Secretary of State to consider whether to call in applications on the basis of that expression of local concern. The statutory procedures are clearly there and, on the strength of the hon. Gentleman's representations and the basis of local feelings, I am fairly confident that full exercise of that opportunity may be made in due course, should that eventuality arise.

The hon. Gentleman also asked me about the availability of synthetic alternatives to which, it is true, I have not referred in my remarks. He will recall that I have focused on British legislation and provision in relation to scarce mineral resources. However, I do not doubt the accuracy of his observations on the matter. I hope that I am not being identified as adopting a prejudicial position by giving what, to me, is an entirely objective recognition of the facts.

To conclude, fuller's earth is a nationally scarce resource, with significant economic resources in East Surrey and Mid-Bedfordshire. The quality and specific properties of fuller's earth determine its likely end use. The country is not self-sufficient in fuller's earth; we both import and export the mineral. The planning system seeks to balance the conflict between extracting the mineral and safeguarding our natural heritage. It requires appropriate policies and mechanisms to be set out at national, regional and local levels.

Bedfordshire county council has made public its assessment of the recent planning application for working fuller's earth at Wavendon Heath South. The applicant has appealed against that decision, and the appeal is being duly processed. The House will understand that the Secretary of State's duty of impartiality means that I cannot comment further this evening.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-eight minutes past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 9 March 2001

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PETITION

Railways

9.33 am

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): I present a petition that has been signed by more than 20,000 rail workers and rail users throughout the United Kingdom. It supports early-day motion 69 on railway safety. It is supported by the General Secretary of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen and the Assistant General Secretary of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers. It criticises the privatisation of British Rail, which despite large injections of taxpayers' money has led directly to the present continuing crisis suffered by rail workers and rail users. It regrets that many people are reverting to car use, which has an adverse impact on the environment and consequent increases in death and injury. The petition ends in the proper way.

Wherefore your petitioners pray that your Honourable House urge the Government to restore confidence in the rail network by returning Railtrack to public ownership and accountability with a clear onus to monitor track maintenance and renewal alongside a culture of safety and reliability as opposed to the present regime which places profitability before all else.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

To lie upon the Table.

Points of Order

9.35 am

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker, of which you have been given notice. It is my unpleasant duty to inform the House that, at the sitting of Standing Committee F yesterday evening, I drew attention to the presence of the right hon. Ann Widdecombe, the Member for Maidstone and the Weald, Mr. Patrick McLoughlin, the hon. Member for West Derbyshire, Mr. James Cran, the hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness and Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, the hon. Member for Cotswold, not being members of the Committee, in the part of the Committee Room reserved for members of the Committee.

The right hon. and hon. Members having declined to withdraw, the Committee ordered:

That the Chairman do report Miss Ann Widdecombe, Mr. Patrick McLoughlin, Mr. James Cran and Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown to the House.

The right hon. and hon. Members continued to decline to withdraw, so I adjourned the Committee for grave disorder, without putting any Question. The Committee therefore did not complete its consideration of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill yesterday, as it had been instructed to do by the order of the House on 29 January.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Let me reply to the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale).

I strongly deprecate any defiance of the Chair in a Standing Committee, whatever the alleged justification for such conduct. I am most grateful to the Chairman of the Committee for dealing so calmly with the deliberate disruption of the Committee, in what must have been a difficult situation.

Mr. Forth: Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. It appears that the Committee in question is left in a rather odd position. You will know that the House, through the peculiar and, I think, increasingly unacceptable procedure of programme motions, required the Committee to complete its deliberations by 7 o'clock yesterday evening. We know, because the Chairman has been kind enough to tell us, that the Committee was unable so to do.

I think that the House needs your advice on where we go from here. We seem to be in limbo. The Committee has been unable to comply with the requirements of the House through its programme motion, the only motion of which I am aware to determine the Committee's proceedings. Therefore, the House needs your guidance on how we can best tackle the situation.

Perhaps I might ask a further question. If a further programme motion has to be introduced, will it be amendable? Will proper notice be given of it?

Mr. Speaker: Order. I will not allow the right hon. Gentleman to ask me a series of questions at this stage. He raised a point of order and asked where we go from here. The answer is that we will consider the Orders of the Day. This is a problem for the Government, and they

[Mr. Speaker]

will sort it out. The Chairman has reported, the Government have heard him and, as I have said, they will sort things out.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. As the member of the Committee who, on the advice of the Chair, moved the motion that the right hon. and hon. Members in question should be reported to the House, I should be grateful if you would confirm that consideration on Report and on Third Reading of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill will be able to proceed next week, and that procedures can be introduced for that. Will you also confirm that the principal effect of the action will be to ensure that debate on other matters important to the House is not held?

Will you, Mr. Speaker, say whether, when considering what action to take in relation to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and her hon. Friends, you can take into account the fact that her action was deliberate and premeditated? As she stated in the *Financial Times*, it was a protest that was to have the effect that the Bill could not be reported and to delay

"the passage of the bill".

I ask you to take into account her statement to the *Mirror* that this

"was an 'official Opposition protest.'"

Does not that show that she and her colleagues are not fit even to be in opposition, let alone in government?

Mr. Speaker: The answer lies with the Government themselves. Unfortunately, the Chairman was unable to complete the business that the House gave the Committee, and the Chairman then did the proper thing. The Government will have to table a special motion before we can consider Third Reading and the other matters that the Minister raised.

I disapprove of the conduct of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), but it is for the House to make a decision on her conduct. That is the answer to that question.

Mr. Clarke: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I confirm that the Government will be tabling a motion on Monday to the effect that has been indicated for the House to consider at that time.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You are the guardian of the rights of Back Benchers and the guardian of effective scrutiny of parliamentary legislation. We were confronted yesterday with a situation in which 56 clauses, six schedules, 42 Opposition amendments—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The right hon. Lady refers to Back Benchers, but she is not a Back Bencher. What is her point of order? I do want to hear a rerun of what happened in the Committee. Its Chairman has reported and told me all that I want to know. Does she have a proper point of order, because that was not one?

Miss Widdecombe: My point of order was that, as the guardian of parliamentary scrutiny, be it by Back Benchers or the official Opposition, is it your view that the situation such as one that arose yesterday—

Mr. Clarke: That is not a point of order.

Miss Widdecombe: Yes, it is. Fifty-six clauses, six schedules, 42 Opposition amendments and 10 Government amendments—some of which had huge implications for civil liberties—were all to be considered in a matter of hours. Is that a satisfactory situation?

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is not a matter for me. However, it is a matter for me to say to the right hon. Lady that she should not have been in that Committee.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I would be grateful if you could advise the House on the proper procedure to be followed, given that the disgraceful conduct of right hon. and hon. Members in the Committee last night appears not only to have been premeditated, but undertaken with the active support and preparation of members of the Committee—the hon. Members for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), for North–East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) and for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). I would be grateful if you could advise the House whether it is in order for hon. Members to be party to a conspiracy to disrupt the proceedings of the Committee and to have prepared for and supported that disruption.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I do not want to hear a rerun of last night's proceedings. I say again: this is a matter for the House. If any right hon. or hon. Member is unhappy with the conduct of any other Members, it is up him or her to table a motion and it can be debated. The Chairman of the Committee did the correct thing and he has reported to me.

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I share the concerns of many Members about the progress of the Bill and the difficulties that lie behind it. Given the issues that arose last night, I examined "Erskine May" to determine what an ordinary Back Bencher like me would be able to do if he or she felt that massive civil liberties issues such as can be found in this Bill had not been properly debated. I can find nothing in "Erskine May" to tell me how an ordinary Back Bencher can amend the time allocated to a Bill. Can you, Mr. Speaker, give me guidance on how an ordinary Back Bencher can alter the procedures so as to ensure proper debate?

Mr. Speaker: We have business before us today, but these matters can be debated. The right hon. Gentleman will know that a programme motion is amendable. I am in the hands of the House on these matters. It is not for me to decide the programme motion; it is a matter for the House.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I served on the Committee to which the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) referred. May I seek clarification on two matters that follow the hon. Gentleman's report to you and to the House? First, am I right in thinking that any motion to deal with Members who came into the Committee and disrupted its proceedings will take precedence over all other business?

Secondly, will you clarify whether it is open to any Member to propose how we now proceed to deal with the Criminal Justice and Police Bill? Like many Members, I share the concern that a very severe guillotine was imposed on the Bill and, like many Members, I would like us to reconsider the remaining timetable for the Bill's progress. I would be grateful, Mr. Speaker, if you could tell us whether it is open to me and my colleagues and to Members of any party to table a motion on Monday, so that we can return to an orderly process for completing the Bill's scrutiny within a period that allows all matters to be given proper consideration.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I shall answer the point of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). Any hon. Member or party spokesman can table a motion; that is perfectly in order. The Government have control over the priorities of the House, and Government business will take priority, but any hon. Member can table a motion.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Could you advise me, as a Back Bencher, how I can table a motion to draw to the attention of the House the appalling conduct of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) in frustrating the will of the House as expressed in the resolutions passed by it and in setting, as the shadow Home Secretary, such an appalling example to the youth of this country when we are debating steps to deal with such behaviour?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for me.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Programming Sub-Committee of the Committee convened on a number of occasions to discuss whether it would be possible to have an extra day of Committee consideration. On each occasion, that suggestion was voted down by the Government. On another occasion, the Opposition sought to sit to all night to complete the Bill's consideration, and that suggestion was voted down. Is it possible to reconvene the Programming Sub-Committee of Standing Committee F, so that we can discuss the matter again? It would help the House if the Government were prepared to be not so arrogant and would give us the time to consider important matters to do with police training, police organisation, the funding of the National Criminal Intelligence Service and—

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Heald *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must sit down. The answer to his question is that it depends on the type of motion that is tabled and the type of motion that is agreed.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is the House aware that, on five separate occasions, we extended the times of the Committee's sittings to meet the points made by the Opposition?

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am grateful to you for the clarification that you have provided about the facility that exists for any Member to table a motion of, in effect, censure. Given that part of the argument revolves around the adequacy or inadequacy of time for the consideration of the relevant matters, will you advise the House on whether any motion of censure would be automatically time limited or potentially subject to a guillotine?

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman may have a view on what is part of the argument, but the argument as far as I am concerned is that a Chairman has reported to me that a Committee has been disrupted. The House will be entitled to debate that matter if the House so desires.

Mr. Forth: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I am getting a bit weary of points of order on this matter. I want to get on to the business of the House.

Mr. Forth: This is a genuine new point, Mr. Speaker. The Minister of State has helpfully told the House that he will table a motion in the name of the Government to try to resolve this matter. I did not catch whether he said "on Monday" or "for Monday". You will know, Mr. Speaker, that there is an important distinction. If the Government were to table a motion at the very end of business today, it would give rise to the question of how far hon. Members would be able to consider it and to table amendments to it. If the Government tabled such a motion, would manuscript amendments therefore be sympathetically considered on Monday? The Government's indecent haste in trying to dig themselves out of this mess has created a difficulty and that may not allow Members the proper occasion, which you would want to protect, to consider and to seek to amend the motion. Your guidance would be very helpful on this matter.

Mr. Speaker: The matters that the right hon. Gentleman raises are hypothetical; I cannot answer hypothetical questions.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I thank you for your ruling? What you have said is of great and permanent importance, namely, that the progress of business is a matter for the Government and any comments on the conduct of Members are a matter for the House. You have quite properly and importantly reminded the House that you are

[Mr. Tony Benn]

not in the Chair to discipline Members as an individual Speaker or to progress Government business. If that point has been established by the exchanges today, I think that we have made real progress. I hope that your ruling is duly recorded in "Erskine May".

Mr. Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that. Perhaps on that note we can move on to today's business.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I ceased to be a Deputy Speaker a long time ago.

Mr. Luff: I apologise, Mr. Speaker. We need some clarification. I believe that the Minister indicated that he would be tabling a motion today for debate on Monday.

Mr. Clarke *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Luff: So he is not saying that. I think that it would be helpful if you, Mr. Speaker, could encourage the Minister to say exactly what the Government intend to do.

Mr. Speaker: Quite frankly, in a sense I am not interested in what the Government want to do. It is up to them to decide how they act. We do not need clarification at this stage. All I need to do is to ask the Clerk to read the Orders of the Day.

Orders of the Day

High Hedges Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

9.50 am

Mr. John M. Taylor (Solihull): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

In 18 years in the House, this is the first time that I have come high enough in the ballot to have the privilege of promoting a private Member's Bill. I believe that, in this Bill, I have the responsibility of gaining some redress for those people whose lives have been made miserable by the excessive hedges of their immediate neighbours.

I reminded myself the other day that the first words attributed to God in the Bible are "Let there be light." There was light and God saw that it was good.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): But his neighbours did not.

Mr. Taylor: His neighbours at that time were unidentified.

Soon after, he created man and woman, and some say that it has been downhill ever since.

In one Roman poet's version of our negative impact on creation, it was a sorry sign of the times when:

"The ground, formerly free to all
As the air or sunlight,
Was portioned by surveyors into patches,
Between boundary markers, fences, ditches"

and, one might say, hedges. We are comfortable with living on ground that has been portioned into patches by surveyors. We like to mark the boundaries of our ground with fences, if not ditches. There is nothing wrong with that. An Englishman's home is his castle, as the adage goes. The problem lies with some of the fences that we choose and how we manage them.

I can find no specific biblical reference to link the creation of fast-growing conifer hedges with an act of God. However, we can be sure that such a thing has been created because a curious darkness has fallen across some of our suburbs. God saw the light and saw that it was good, but now countless householders peer into their gardens and cannot see much light at all, let alone appreciate just how good it is.

The Bill offers a lifeline to thousands of people in England and Wales whose quality of life has been seriously hit simply because they cannot persuade their neighbours to keep their garden hedges to a reasonable height. Hon. Members will be all too familiar with the problem that I am trying to address today. We have read about it in the press, we have seen it on television programmes—one of which was called "Neighbours at War"—and we have received countless letters and sometimes facsimile communications from our constituents. I have the permission of Mr. and Mrs. Evans of Yoxhall road, Shirley and of Mr. M. J. Hawker of 44 Whitefields road, Solihull to mention their names in this context. I have also received representations from many others.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The matter is of the greatest importance, although not one with which Burke,

Pitt, Fox, Gladstone, Salisbury or Disraeli would necessarily have preoccupied themselves. Will my hon. Friend, who is an exceptionally assiduous and diligent Member of the House, confirm that he has had discussions on the subject with, and received support from, the august members of Solihull borough council?

Mr. Taylor: I believe that I have the support of that council. It is significant that, although the Bill places an obligation on local authorities, during the consultation procedure conducted by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, a surprising 70 per cent. of local authorities said that they wanted to have the powers that the Bill would confer, despite the fact that it would probably saddle them with obligation and some cost.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): Many hon. Members will have received representations on the problem and we congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising it in the House. However, as we are probably near the end of this Parliament, has he received assurances from the more disruptive of his colleagues that they will recognise the intense anger and frustration that is felt by so many people and will allow the Bill to make progress?

Mr. Taylor: I have neither sought nor received any reassurances. I would not demean myself by doing so. The Bill's merits stand by themselves. I, meanwhile, stand here entirely vulnerable to whatever disruptive element there may be and I am effectively defenceless against that prospect. I throw myself entirely upon the mercy of the House and the good will of Conservative colleagues and, more particularly, of Labour Members, among whom I probably have more friends.

Mr. Forth: Knowing that my hon. Friend is a student of parliamentary matters, he will have watched closely Friday proceedings on other private Member's Bills. He will know that the problem is not whether Members obstruct a Bill but whether 40 of the 660 Members of Parliament bother to turn up on a parliamentary day to express their view. That may turn out to be his main problem.

Mr. Taylor: My right hon. Friend correctly analyses the problem that has been encountered on previous Fridays by other hon. Members. However, I should tell him that in the various reaches of the Palace, I have legions in my support.

Mr. Forth: Probably disguised as hedges.

Mr. Taylor: I hope that you will assist me in making progress, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am struggling in the face of a number of interventions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): It is entirely up to the hon. Gentleman whether he gives way.

Mr. Taylor: I am probably suffering from my accommodating good nature—

Mr. Bercow: And generosity of spirit.

Mr. Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend for assisting me.

I remind the House that leyland cypress—a hybrid tree developed towards the end of the last century and, by culture, a forest tree commonly known as leylandii—has become increasingly popular as a hedging plant over the past 30 years or so. It is cheap, readily available and quickly provides a dense screen that grows well in a wide range of soil and weather conditions. It is widely used in residential locations along the boundaries of domestic gardens to provide privacy. It grows at a rate of 1 m a year. For maintenance purposes, it should be trimmed two or three times a year. If it is not, it can reach heights of more than 30 m. Other conifers such as Lawson cypress and western red cedar are also commonly used as hedges. Although they are not as fast growing as leylandii, they can also become too big if not maintained. Non-coniferous species such as laurel and privet are also used to form dense, evergreen hedges, which if left unchecked can grow to significant heights.

I am sure that we can all appreciate the benefits of a good boundary hedge as a durable provider of shelter, privacy, amenity and security for people and of shelter and food for wildlife. However, hedges in residential areas require a commitment to regular maintenance. Without maintenance, they get out of hand and begin to affect the quality of life of those living on the other side of the fence. They block out light and interfere with views, their roots deprive other plants of water and nutrients and they intrude on garden space.

It is well established that one can lawfully trim a neighbour's hedge back to the line of one's boundary, but there is no clearly defined right to reduce its height. At present, if one cannot persuade the neighbour to reduce the height, there is little that one can do. It seems that going to the civil court is simply not a practical option. The costs and uncertainty involved clearly deter people from that course of action, and they are left feeling pretty helpless.

We should make no mistake: this is a problem faced by thousands of people who are desperate for the House to provide a practical remedy. The response to the consultation paper, issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions was measured in thousands rather than hundreds, and included almost 3,000 from private individuals.

My Bill, which I have chosen to call, in soundbite terms, "Height and Light", will provide the remedy that is overwhelmingly called for by the vast majority of people and organisations who responded to the consultation exercise. It will give people the opportunity, when all reasonable avenues of negotiation with their neighbours have been exhausted, to refer their high hedge disputes to the local authority. It will give local authorities the power to investigate disputes and, if necessary, to order the hedge to be cut back to a reasonable height.

The Bill might run to 20 clauses, but the basic ideas behind it are simple. Clause 1 clarifies the type of complaint that we are dealing with, which is that made by the owner or occupier of a domestic property who believes that a high hedge on another person's land unreasonably obstructs light to the property, which affects reasonable enjoyment of it. The Bill can help that person if their efforts to persuade the owner of the hedge to cut it back have failed, because they will be able to complain to their local authority.

[Mr. Taylor]

Hon. Members will have noted that the Bill is limited to complaints about obstruction of light. I have mentioned already that high hedges can be the focus of other problems, such as blocked views and worries about roots. At this stage, the Bill deliberately concentrates on the main problem, rather than trying to solve all the difficulties that people encounter.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): I assure the hon. Gentleman that he has many friends in all parties, and especially in this one. When regaling us with his litany of horrors, will he bear it in mind that the difficulties of many of my constituents and, I am sure, of his, relate not only to light, privacy and outlook? I speak as a fellow suburbanite, and I think of my constituent, Mrs. Shaw, who bought a house and chopped down a leylandii only to find that the soil was so acidic as a result of the needle droppings that she was reduced to growing camellias and rhododendrons for three or four years. That problem often occurs, and the normal suburban gardener, with whom the hon. Gentleman and I are very familiar, is at a great disadvantage.

Mr. Taylor: I accept the hon. Gentleman's analysis of the problem. In the 1983-87 Parliament, I served on the Environment Committee, which published a report on acid rain. One of its interesting conclusions was that trees are essentially alkaline and that as they grow, by contrast, they turn the ground in which they are rooted increasingly acidic. Of course, in nature, the tree eventually dies, falls to the ground and restores the alkalinity. In tree cropping, however, the alkalinity is removed when the tree is harvested and the environment becomes increasingly acidic. That is a serious problem.

I must, in all honesty, point out to the hon. Gentleman that the Bill does not address that problem. Notwithstanding the scepticism of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), the Bill is conceptually simple and deals with height and light; it does not deal with roots, acidity or other blights caused by high hedges, which are, in fact, screens of trees.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend says that the Bill is conceptually simple. That may be true, but so that the House gets a full picture of the measure, I am sure that he will be telling us, perhaps only briefly, that it contains references to fees, remedial notices, appeals to the Secretary of State, regulations, enforcement, offences and many other items. My hon. Friend is an honest chap and he will want to ensure that the House, in judging his Bill, will not be carried away by its conceptual simplicity but will want to consider the underpinnings.

Mr. Taylor: My right hon. Friend is right to say that the Bill goes on to employ the method of remedial notices. In the name of fair play that, I trust, informs our society to this day, there will be an opportunity for the person complained of to appeal against the remedial notice. I would not wish it to be otherwise. The person who has grown the high hedge has some rights.

Mr. Bercow: I am genuinely sorry to trouble my hon. Friend, but he will be aware that I, in common with many hon. Members, have received many letters on the subject from constituents. I am having to consider the Bill carefully to decide what I should do. I am immensely impressed by the extent of my hon. Friend's ecological sophistication. Will he take it from me that it is probably of such a scale as to impress an arboricultural consultant, one of whom sits in the House and is currently in the Chair?

Mr. Taylor: My hon. Friend flatters me. I do not wish to persuade the House by the merits of the arguments in my humble address. I believe that the arguments and merits of the Bill stand by themselves and commend themselves. As I said, my Bill is conceptually simple because it deals with height and light. I know that the Building Research Establishment, or BRE, in association with the Tree Advice Trust, has been asked by the DETR to develop an objective way of assessing obstruction of light by hedges. The aim is to come up with a test that will show whether a particular hedge is the cause of an unreasonable obstruction of light, and if so, how much it needs to be reduced to remedy the problem.

At the end of the day, most people are looking for a mechanism that will lead to the height of the hedge being reduced because views might incidentally be restored and worries about roots allayed. If the Bill's obstruction of light criterion provides a remedy in a high proportion of cases, it might be possible to rely on that one measurement. If not, clause 16 will allow the Government to bring other grounds of complaint within the scope of the legislation. The Bill therefore provides flexibility to extend the complaints system if experience shows that that is either necessary or desirable.

Clause 1 concentrates on complaints about high hedges that, it is claimed, obstruct light unreasonably. However, it is important to understand what is meant by high hedges, so clause 2 provides a definition: evergreen hedges more than 2 m in height. That covers leylandii and other coniferous hedges such as Lawson cypress and western red cedar, as well as non-coniferous evergreen species such as laurel and privet. The Bill is not intended to apply to individual trees; although they can be the focus of disputes between neighbours, I have not set out to remedy all perceived problems with trees, nor to discourage the planting of suitable trees in gardens. My Bill concentrates on the main problem: tall, dense screens of foliage.

A complaint can be made to the local authority only if the hedge in question exceeds 2 m in height. That does not mean, nor should it be inferred, that hedges more than 2 m in height are necessarily problem hedges that should be trimmed. Whether or not such a hedge causes unreasonable obstruction of light will depend on the circumstances of the case, according to the objective tests being developed by the BRE. The effect of the Bill is to provide a starting point with some degree of certainty. One cannot put a complaint to the local authority unless the hedge exceeds the 2 m threshold. That approach is consistent with that adopted in respect of garden walls and fences under the town and country planning system: the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted

Development) Order 1995 provides that one is free to erect fences up to 2 m in height without planning permission.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I assure my hon. Friend of my full support for his Bill, but one aspect of clause 2 requires further explanation. Subsection (1) states:

"'high hedge' means two or more adjacent evergreens"

and subsection (2)(b) states:

"a line of trees of shrubs is to be regarded as forming a barrier, despite the existence of any gaps, if the gaps do not significantly affect its overall effect as a barrier."

The key word is "adjacent". How large would a gap have to be to be regarded as having a significant effect? Will my hon. Friend leave that to the local authority's discretion when a complaint is made, or does he have in mind a clearer and less ambiguous definition?

Mr. Taylor *rose—*

Mr. Forth: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have just obtained from the Vote Office the Hammond report. Have you received any request or notification from the Government that a Minister intends to come to the House to make a statement at 11 o'clock this morning, or that the Government are making some provision to allow Members of Parliament to ask questions about the report? You will know that there has been widespread reporting in the media regarding the document's contents. Now that we have the report itself, I wondered whether you had had any hint, nod or wink from the Government indicating whether they intend to come clean about its contents.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The answer is that I have had no such request.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I think that I have already dealt adequately with the point of order.

Mr. John M. Taylor: To respond to the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman), who asked me whether the screen had to be continuous—whether, if there were gaps it could be treated as comprising separate items of shrubbery—and whether, in the final analysis, it would be a matter for the local authority's judgment. My view is that it would probably be for the local authority to judge, although the old adage about the elephant comes to mind—it is hard to define, but you recognise one when you see one. The same is true of an obstructive and oppressive high screen—you recognise one when you see one.

Clause 3 defines the reference to domestic property in clause 1. It makes it clear that one can make a complaint under the Bill if one believes that the high hedge in question is causing an unreasonable obstruction of light to one's garden or home. One person might be concerned only about the effect of a hedge on the garden, whereas another might be concerned about lack of light in the living room. In both cases, a complaint could be made under the Bill.

Clause 4 sets out the procedure for dealing with complaints. A complaint goes to the local authority—that is, the district, borough or unitary council or their Welsh equivalents. The authority may charge a fee if it wishes to. The Bill provides for the Government to set a maximum fee and enables local authorities to refund fees in appropriate cases. The local authority is given a power to reject a complaint if it believes that the complainant has not taken all reasonable steps to resolve the matter without involving the authority, or if it considers that a complaint is frivolous or vexatious. If the local authority decides to reject a complaint, it must inform the complainant as soon as it can and explain the reasons for its decision.

If the local authority proceeds with a complaint, it must decide two matters which are set out in clause 4(3). First, it must decide whether the hedge is causing an unreasonable obstruction of light to the complainant's property so as to affect the reasonable enjoyment of that property. I envisage the authority applying the objective tests now being developed by the Building Research Establishment. If the authority finds that the hedge is causing an unreasonable obstruction of light, it must then consider what action, if any, should be taken to remedy the problem and prevent it from recurring. The Bill requires the authority in making that decision to take into account all relevant factors, including the extent to which the hedge contributes to the amenity of the neighbourhood and affords privacy to its owner, as well as any legal obligations relating to the hedge.

It is clearly desirable that local authorities handle complaints made under the Bill in an objective and broadly consistent manner. In addition to the BRE tests, I know that the Government propose to provide local authorities with guidance on the legislation. Many cases will boil down to a question of balance: the authority will find that a hedge is causing an unreasonable obstruction of light to the complainant's property; it will consider whether there are any relevant factors that might lead it to decide against requiring the owner to cut it back; then, if there are none and the authority decides that action should be taken, it will issue a remedial notice under clause 5.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is being characteristically generous in giving way. Does he envisage that the Bill will be cost neutral to local authorities and that the fees that it allows local authorities to charge will cover the costs? If so, can he give us his ideas as to the general scope or scale of the fees, so that we can judge whether the Bill will provide people with an attainable remedy in terms of the fees that they might be asked to pay?

Mr. Taylor: I shall not pretend that the measure will necessarily be cost neutral. There will be fees chargeable by the local authority to the complainant, probably of the order of £100 per complaint. Most local authorities are likely to require one full-time member of staff to supervise the activity. I suspect that there will be a net cost to local authorities, albeit not necessarily a large one; I do not intend to estimate how much it might be. None the less, I believe that a money resolution may be necessary and, if I am successful this morning, that money resolution will have to be laid before the House very soon.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): I shall try to help the hon. Gentleman and to answer the question asked

[Mr. Jim Cunningham]

by his colleague, the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). Initially, there could be a cost, even after the fee is levied, but it would start to drop as the number of cases pending increased. In other words, there might be initial costs to local authorities, but, as I interpret clause 4, the scheme will ultimately become self-financing.

Mr. Taylor: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I agree with his analysis. I do not pretend to the House that in the initial period of backlog, which might even last for three years, the Bill would be cost neutral. There would be a cost in the early stages.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): My constituent Mr. Michael Jones, who has campaigned for such legislation, spent more than £100,000 on legal costs in trying to deal with his problem. I expect that most people who are currently suffering from the problem will be very grateful that there may at last be a remedy that costs as little as £100.

Mr. Taylor: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. I have a constituent whom the exercise cost £24,000—not as much as it did Mr. Jones, admittedly—and whose opponent had the benefit of legal aid, so that even after a successful civil action, there was no possibility of obtaining costs from the other side, so I share the hon. Lady's sentiment.

I am conscious of the fact that, according to the clock, I began to speak half an hour ago. Of course, my speech has been considerably extended by interventions, which I have been happy to take, but I shall shortly move to a conclusion.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend will know that I am concerned, as many hon. Members are, that the House should get what it wants. He will be aware of my perhaps anorakish interest in the procedure by which the House hopes to get what it wants. In view of the provisions on orders and regulations in clause 13 and my uncertainty about subsections (2) and (3) of that clause, will my hon. Friend advise me as to whether any regulations subsequently introduced by the Secretary of State to give effect to the Bill would be subject to the negative or the affirmative resolution procedure?

Mr. Taylor: I am prepared to return to my hon. Friend on that matter, but as I understand it, the regulations would be subject to the affirmative procedure. In fact, this is a moment for candour. I have a bit of a blind spot when it comes to the affirmative and negative procedures, but I have satisfied myself that the higher hurdle will apply.

The remedial notice would be drawn up by the local authority, setting out the action that had to be taken to remedy an obstruction of light caused by the hedge. In practice, we are talking about a specific requirement to reduce the height of the hedge and, possibly, an on-going requirement to maintain the hedge to prevent any further problem from arising in future. The local authority could not require the removal of the hedge or its reduction to below 2 m in height.

Clause 5 sets out in detail what must be included in the remedial notice, as well as specifying the work that must be carried out on the hedge. Among others things, it must state when the remedial work should be carried out and explain the consequences of a failure to comply with the notice. The remedial notice would be registered as a local land charge and be binding not only on whoever owned or occupied the land when it was issued but on his or her successors.

Clause 7 provides rights of appeal against the local authority's decisions under the Bill. If, in dealing with a complaint, the authority issued a remedial notice requiring work on the hedge, an appeal could be made to the Secretary of State. Similarly, if the authority decided not to issue a remedial notice, the complainant could appeal. Those provisions are intended to ensure that the people affected by the Bill are guaranteed a fair and impartial hearing before the determination of their respective civil rights.

Under clause 8, the Secretary of State would be allowed to set down in regulations the procedure for dealing with such appeals. He would be required to appoint "another person" to hear and determine appeals under the Bill. I believe that the intention is to delegate all appeals to the planning inspectorate.

Clause 9 describes the Secretary of State's powers in determining appeals. He may allow or dismiss appeals, either in total or in part. He may quash or vary remedial notices. He may also issue such notices in cases where the local authority has decided not to do so. Under clause 10, failure to comply with the remedial notice would be an offence, punishable on summary conviction by a fine not exceeding £1,000. There is also provision for daily fines if the requisite work remains outstanding following a court order. People will not be prosecuted simply for growing hedges. Those provisions would come into play only if someone refused to comply with the local authority's remedial notice.

Under clause 11, the local authority would have the power to go on to land and carry out the work specified in the remedial notice if the owner or occupier of the land failed to comply with its requirements. The authority could exercise those powers whether or not criminal proceedings were brought under clause 10. The costs of the work could then be recovered by the local authority from the owner or occupier of the land.

Under clause 16, the Secretary of State would have the power to extend the scope of complaints covered by the Bill and to alter the definition of the term "high hedge" by regulations. That is necessary in case experience shows that the Bill does not cover particular high-hedge problems.

I believe that we are addressing a genuine grievance that has brought misery to the lives of a number of our constituents. In conclusion, I should like to thank all those who have supported and encouraged me in introducing the Bill, not least my sponsors. I thank Clare Hinchliffe, the president of Hedgeline, for her help and encouragement, too. I commend the Bill to the House.

10.27 am

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): I congratulate the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) on using his discretion after being so fortunate in the ballot. The Bill is long overdue. On a number of occasions, I have tried to get a similar Bill through the House, although I take no credit away from the hon. Gentleman. I have appreciated the support of hon.

Members from all the political parties that compose the House on the occasions on which I have tried to get such a Bill through the House. I certainly appreciate and acknowledge the work that my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) has done in Birmingham. She has put in a tremendous effort in a number of ways, from tabling early-day motions to holding consultations with members of various groups and individuals who face the problem of high hedges.

When the problem was first brought to my attention, I thought that someone was trying to set me up. I found it incredible that high hedges or high trees could create so many emotional—sometimes neighbour is set against neighbour—and practical problems. The more research I did, the more serious I found the problem to be. With the exception of one or two politicians, people had certainly not taken it particularly seriously before, and its dimensions had not been appreciated.

When I consulted the public on my Bill, I was utterly amazed to be approached by people from the Japanese embassy who wanted copies of it because, as I discovered, Japan has problems similar to those we face here. I was equally amazed to be approached by people from Germany, where a similar problem exists. When Governments were opposing the introduction of a Bill such as this, we were told that everything on the continent was all right. We found out that is was not. The more I explored it, the more I realised the importance of the problem, about which I have had thousands of letters from all over the British isles.

I certainly welcome those things in the Bill which safeguard individual freedoms; that is always the basis of things which sometimes do not seem important. There are adequate safeguards and, at any stage, the notice can be withdrawn. The Bill gives the Secretary of State a say in how it will be operated; at the end of the day, one can go to him. The Bill includes many safeguards and, in some ways, it is better than my Control of Hedgerows in Residential Areas Bill. However, there are certain similarities, such as the right of local authorities to implement the provisions, which was part of my Bill. The present Bill makes considerable effort to provide for conciliation between parties—also in my Bill. There are one or two indications that the draftsman has listened to different opinions on both sides of the House and has tried to cover various points of view. The hon. Member for Solihull touched on the big problem of the considerable costs incurred under the old planning regulations and the fact that one was never sure whether one would get justice. There have been some very expensive cases. I know of a group captain who had to mortgage his house but, at the end of the day, got no justice. He is in his 80s and has a considerable war record of which the country should be proud, yet he is going to spend the rest of his days in debt. That provides an indication of the Bill's social consequences, which, as I said, I welcome.

In my view, local authorities are the only bodies adequate to police the Bill because they are publicly accountable. If there is any threat of injustice, it would be easy for constituents to go to their local councillor and have the matter raised in the council chamber.

Mr. Forth: Surely the hon. Gentleman concedes that, although the initial stage of the proposed procedure is a matter for the local authority—one can argue that it carries the reassurance of local accountability—the appeals mechanism envisaged by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) in his Bill is dealt with by the Secretary of State? Is the hon. Gentleman uneasy about the fact that the decision on an appeal would therefore be far removed from local circumstances and that the initial reassurance of local authority accountability would disappear or be reversed by the second stage of the procedure?

Mr. Cunningham: No, because the notice can be withdrawn at any point. All that is needed is for the local authority—the planning officer or the designated officer—to be satisfied that there has been a change in circumstances. If the right hon. Gentleman studies the Bill, he will find that there are adequate safeguards in the procedure. I do not have a major problem with that.

On that point, I appreciate the fact that, for the first time, the Secretary of State is to appoint an impartial individual to adjudicate on the Bill. That does not happen at the moment.

Mr. John M. Taylor: My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is correct that the appellate jurisdiction rests with the Secretary of State. However, the Secretary of State will employ the planning inspectorate, which is represented at a relatively local level and conducts appeal procedures in the immediate locale. The hon. Gentleman will be familiar with planning appeals that come before inspectors appointed by the Secretary of State in Coventry, as I am with those in Solihull.

Mr. Cunningham: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman; I could not have put it better myself. As he is aware, if the Secretary of State were to consider an appeal, a planning officer or other officer would visit the site and take evidence from all concerned parties and even the public. So, to answer the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), the Bill's provisions on safeguards are pretty well drafted. Even the most cynical of people cannot help but be struck by the fact that there are adequate safeguards for both sides.

On the question of cost, the Bill includes reassurance. Initially, there will be a fee and it has been said that that could be £100. In the initial stages, there will certainly be a cost to the local authority, but as the backlog is dealt with, in theory, we would get to the point where the process was self-financing.

Sir Sydney Chapman: May I invite the hon. Gentleman to comment on this point? I would not be particularly fazed if a cost fell on a local authority, for two reasons: first, it has the right to return or refund the fee, which is at its discretion; secondly, the complainant has to pay the fee—unlike in the planning system, where the fee is paid by the person making the application, who obviously stands to benefit financially if the application gets through. Because the complainant—the person who, through no fault of his or her own, has been moved to make the complaint—pays the fee, the local authority should, as a matter of form, return the fee if the complaint is upheld.

Mr. Cunningham: I agree. I know that the hon. Gentleman has a considerable planning background and is speaking from a position of experience.

[Mr. Cunningham]

It has been said that an additional officer or officers could be employed to police and enforce the Bill. Again regarding costs, such posts are probably already there in planning departments, in which case it is just a question of giving people additional responsibilities, so there may not be an additional cost.

To conclude, may I once again congratulate the hon. Member for Solihull and everyone who, over the years, has tried to get a Bill on this subject through the House? Certainly local communities and individuals would certainly welcome such a measure. In Coventry, the Styvechale ratepayers association would certainly welcome it, as would the Fryern residents association and constituents who have written to me individually. Last but not least I would mention Hedgeline which has campaigned for years on the issue. The Bill will be most welcome throughout the country, as it addresses a problem in our society which can cause nervous breakdowns, set neighbour against neighbour and sometimes lead to violence. There are reports of cases in which individuals have gone to their neighbour's house with guns. There are considerable costs for those who want to bring a case against a neighbour causing a nuisance or whose property is threatened by the roots of those trees, so devaluing it. I welcome the Bill, and I am sure that many others do, too. Once more, I congratulate the hon. Member for Solihull on introducing it.

10.38 am

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): Like the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham), I congratulate the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) on introducing an important Bill. At the same time, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Coventry, South, who has worked on the issue over many years. I, too, pay tribute to the organisations that have worked on the issue, especially Hedgeline, which recognised its importance many years ago and has worked to give the House this opportunity today.

I am delighted to see that the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) is in his place. I do not know whether his constituents, friends or family ever see him, but such is his diligence in the Chamber that, ever since his election, I cannot recall an occasion when I have spoken without his being present and intervening on me. I look forward with great anticipation to his intervention. He intervened earlier on his hon. Friend the Member for Solihull and referred to the large number of former Prime Ministers who chose not to address the issue; he implied that he considered it trivial. That is simply not the case.

As the extremely well prepared guidance notes provided by the Department, with the agreement of the hon. Member for Solihull, clearly demonstrate, there is a known backlog of more than 10,000 cases in the United Kingdom. That is probably just the tip of the iceberg, and represents only those members of the public who have chosen to raise the matter with the various authorities.

Mr. Forth: Has the hon. Gentleman mused on why the first and second Bills on the Order Paper today are accompanied by explanatory notes kindly provided by Her Majesty's Government, but none of the other Bills have explanatory notes provided by Her Majesty's Government? I invite the hon. Gentleman to speculate for a moment why that might be the case.

Mr. Foster: I will indeed speculate—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It would be helpful to the House if we stuck to the Second Reading of the Bill before us.

Mr. Foster: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In connection with the guidance notes provided for the Bill under discussion—lest I stray further and incur your ire—I believe that one of the reasons why the Government have helped in the drafting is that they are keen to see the Bill through as quickly as possible—

Mr. Forth: Ah!

Mr. Foster:—as are the vast majority of hon. Members of all parties represented in the House. They all recognise the importance of the issue. It is likely that at least 20,000 people are victims of the problem of high hedges—often, but not always, hedges of leyland cypress. As the law stands, if we do not take action today, where hedgerows cause a nuisance, victims can only take out a civil action against their neighbours. Such disputes tend to drag on for many years, causing great distress, and are, as the hon. Member for Coventry, South reminded us, likely to lead to serious illness in some cases, and even violent assaults.

All hon. Members who are interested in the matter recognise the difficulty of obtaining satisfaction in the law courts, not least because of the extremely large sum that actions can cost complainants. Typical legal costs have ranged from £25,000 to £40,000 for each case. So severe is the problem that a number of insurance companies refuse to get involved in such cases.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me?

Mr. Foster: I knew that at some point I would have the great privilege and pleasure of giving way to the hon. Member for Buckingham. I thought that that might come a little later in my contribution, but it has come now and I welcome it.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I do not know whether he was planning to traduce members of my family, but I assure him that they all have better things to do with their time than watch me on television. If he is suggesting that one of the consequences of the Bill would be less resort to litigation, and therefore decreased expenditure on legal costs, I think that he and other supporters of the Bill ought to make much of that, for I am not a lawyer—I say that as a matter of pride.

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for two things: first, for pointing out that his family joins the rest of the nation in having no desire to watch him on television, and secondly, for enabling me to say that I had intended to refer to the point that he has raised later in my remarks. One of the enormous benefits of the proposals in the Bill is that they will significantly reduce the need for

complainants to resort to the legal process, which involves such high costs; as I said, those are typically £25,000 to £40,000.

The great advantage of not having to resort to that procedure is that for the many people who suffer the problem of high hedges in silence because they have chosen to take no action, there will be a relatively simple, swift and painless process by which they can end the dreadful blight of high hedges on their lives.

I hope that the hon. Member for Buckingham will bear in mind not only the legal costs, but the significant other costs associated with the problem of high hedges. Many examples have been brought to my attention of the building costs of repairing the damage caused by high hedges, such as repairs to walls that have fallen down and—much more costly—underpinning work on buildings that have been affected by such hedges.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. A moment ago he used the phrase "relatively simple, swift and painless". Does he believe that that is likely to be the case? The clause headings refer to procedure for dealing with complaints, remedial notices, variation or withdrawal of remedial notices, appeals, appeals procedure, withdrawal of appeals, offences, remedial action, orders and regulations, and so on. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that in that jungle of well-meaning procedure, the term "swift and painless" can apply?

Mr. Foster: I am certain that it can. If the right hon. Gentleman reads the report of his intervention, he will note that nearly all the procedures that he mentioned will come into play only on appeal, or following suggestions for variation of the legislation. In the vast majority of cases, the simple procedures set out in the first part of the Bill will pertain.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when the planning officer visits the site, he will determine whether a complaint is frivolous or serious? That safeguard is provided.

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman is right. Having diligently read the Bill, he will have seen that there is provision for vexatious accusations to be dismissed early in the proceedings.

I return to my response to the hon. Member for Buckingham, who mentioned legal costs. I pointed out that in addition to savings in legal costs, there may well be significant savings in building costs. There is a further financial benefit and a benefit to the nation as a whole. One of the issues that has not yet been touched on in our deliberations is the effect of hedges blocking out light. That affects people's homes in terms not only of appearance, but of heating.

One study that I have seen shows that the reduction of passive solar heating results in people having to keep their heating systems on longer and to a higher temperature. That represents a significant additional cost, which may be comparable to the cost of adopting the procedure proposed in the Bill—£1 million to £2 million a year. There would thus be savings in legal, building and fuel costs.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, with whom it is always a great pleasure to joust in this place. He seeks to offer the House, and me, reassurance; to all intents and purposes, he says that the Bill is simple in conception, benign in principle and, in respect of its likely roll-out, seamless in practice. If that is so, will the hon. Gentleman further reassure me that I need not be unduly perturbed by clause 13(4)(b), which refers to making

"different provision for different cases"?

Why is it necessary for regulations to be rolled out subsequently in order to cater for those eventualities? Why can we not be told in the Bill exactly what it portends?

Mr. Foster: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Unfortunately, however, it suggests that I was slightly over-generous in referring to his diligence in the Chamber; had he been as diligent as I had assumed, he would have heard his hon. Friend the Member for Solihull answer that point in his introductory remarks. The hon. Member for Solihull correctly pointed out that, in the early stages of his consideration of the measure and in the work previously carried out by other organisations and by other hon. Members, it was clear that the key issue was the fact that high hedges blocked out light from people's houses. That was what he wanted to address. However, he noted that subsequently, when complaints are made to local councils, other issues may need to be considered. The proposed legislation thus has the scope to take such problems on board if they become apparent at a later date. That is a sensible approach. It is clear that the key problem is the one identified by the Bill, and I am delighted that it is to be addressed.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Foster: I note that the hon. Gentleman is keen to intervene again, and although I shall be delighted to give way, I must point out that I am well aware that other hon. Members want to speak in the debate.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I did listen to the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor), and I am slightly wounded by the gratuitous unkindness of the hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster); I am not oblivious to the Bill's potential to cover issues that have not yet been anticipated. My point is simple. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if matters have to be dealt with by regulation, they should be subject to full debate on the Floor of the House?

Mr. Foster: The hon. Gentleman will have no difficulty in obtaining the answer he seeks; he will see from my record both on the Floor of the House and in every Committee on which I have served that I have always argued that regulations must first be given the approval of both Houses of Parliament, after debate whenever possible. My record on that issue is clear—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman says that he is much happier; I am glad about that and I hope that we will have his support if there is a Division.

Urgency is important. I read with some interest the press release issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on 10 August last year. The Minister for the Environment himself stated:

"We recognise that over-grown garden hedges have caused distress to thousands of people and we take these problems very seriously. Our consultation has confirmed the overwhelming support

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for tougher controls. And that is why we will work up new laws to give local authorities in England powers to intervene in neighbourhood hedge disputes. Legislation will be introduced as soon as Parliamentary time can be found."

It has taken a little time and it has had to be based on a private Member's Bill, but I am glad none the less that in the meantime the Welsh Assembly has asked for similar measures to apply in Wales, and delighted that the DETR was prepared to help the hon. Member for Solihull in the preparation of the Bill, and by producing the extremely good guidance notes.

The problem is extremely important; it deserves to be addressed as quickly as possible. That view is shared by many people throughout the country and, sadly, by far too many of my constituents. I have received numerous letters on the subject. As I bring my remarks to an end, I remind the House of what the problem is like for the individuals who suffer from it.

A constituent living in Upper Weston, in Bath, refers to an 81-year-old widowed mother who suffers from the problem. My constituent states:

"The trees are now approximately 40 feet high. They overhang the garage roof and garden by about 8 feet. They have drawn moisture from the ground beneath the garage and have caused its wall to subside close to the boundary. They are constantly dropping dead material which clogs the garage gutter, blows around the paths close to the house back door, clogs drains. Much of the back garden which once formed a useful vegetable plot and also gave innocent pleasure is now shaded and cannot be used for growing. The tree closest to the house and kitchen window has grown to about 15 feet. It is taking light from the kitchen and my mother has to arrange for it to be clipped back from her path (obviously, she cannot do this herself). She is constantly expressing her concern about the height of the trees as a danger to her property . . . As matters stand the only redress we have is to take the owner to court for loss of light and for root trespass for damage to the garage, this would possibly stop some of the nuisance but would involve costly litigation which an elderly widow does not wish to incur."

Two of my constituents from Lower Swainswick wrote:

"We would like to support all those people, who are in the same situation as ourselves, that require a change in the law, to control the height of leylandii trees.

There are three 80 foot leylandii trees on boundary line in neighbours garden, which is trespassing and cutting out light from our house, putting it at risk and devaluing our property.

We would welcome a law that would make people control these trees."

Finally, a constituent from Combe Down wrote:

"I am an unfortunate victim of the 'Leylandi, Cypress scourge'. My neighbours persistently and gloatingly overgrow my garden. The biggest problem is the height of these monsters.

The government has at last promised legislation, which is required now and not at some distant future—hopefully before the election . . . Swift action is required."

Today, with the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Solihull, we have the opportunity to provide that legislation and to take the swift action that should have been taken many years ago. We should at least do that today; I hope that the House will support the Bill.

10.58 am

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): The hon. Member for Selly Oak had the good fortune to be successful in the ballot for private Members' Bills. I congratulate him not on that, but on having the good sense to use that opportunity to introduce the Bill.

Mr. John M. Taylor: I chide the hon. Lady not at all, but she has the good fortune to be the hon. Member for Selly Oak; I happen to be the hon. Member for Solihull.

Dr. Jones: I beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon—that was a grave error on my part. Our constituents will no doubt know who we are.

I also congratulate my constituents, Michael Jones and Clare Hinchliffe, and their organisation Hedgeline, who have done so much to change the attitude of hon. Members towards the problem of high hedges. The Bill, if given a fair wind today, will end the battle against what the *Daily Mail* described as the "curse of the leylandii". My constituents and the people throughout the country who have been in touch with them have been instrumental in changing the attitudes of Members.

When I first took up the issue shortly after being elected for Selly Oak, the response from Ministers in the then Department of the Environment suggested that they regarded it as a frivolous and unimportant matter, which did not warrant any special attention. I therefore pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), who, during his tenure as Under-Secretary for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, will have done much to ensure that officials apply themselves properly to the measures necessary to combat the nuisance that hon. Members have so ably described this morning.

Indeed, my hon. Friend accompanied my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) and me in October 1997 as part of a delegation to the DETR. He subsequently sent a letter saying:

"It was apparent to me then from the attitude of officials that this would be an uphill struggle."

"This" referred to introducing legislation to tackle high hedges.

The process has been slow, but we have arrived. A consultation paper was issued in November 1999, when the hon. Member for Ashford (Mr. Green), who is in his place, attacked it as half-hearted. He said:

"The people most affected will regard this as passing the buck. It will be another two years at least before there is any chance of any legislative solution."

It has not quite been two years, but he was almost right.

I tabled early-day motion 133 of the Session 1999-2000, which welcomed the publication of the consultation paper, but emphasised that only legislation would provide a solution to the complaints that hon. Members received throughout the land. I am pleased that it had the support not only of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman), who is currently shadow Secretary of State, but of the hon. Member for Mid–Worcestershire (Mr. Luff), who said:

"I've had quite a lot of letters—many from *Daily Mail* readers—about this . . . I am not terribly fussed what solution we choose. But it cannot be beyond the wit of man or woman to devise a solution that would make people's lives better."

The Bill that the hon. Member for Solihull has promoted will deal effectively with the problem. I hope that if there is a Division, the hon. Members for Tunbridge Wells and for Mid–Worcestershire, who are in the House but not the Chamber, will support the Bill.

The consultation paper gathered an unprecedented number of responses from members of the public. I do not believe that so many ordinary people have ever responded to a consultation paper. More than 2,700 people responded, and 93 per cent. of respondents supported legislation. There is a clamour for the introduction of the Bill. Given the cross-party support for the measure, I hope that it will pass on to a Committee stage, when it will receive detailed scrutiny. If that happens, many people throughout the country will breathe a sigh of relief at the prospect of a solution to the nuisance and distress that they have suffered because of oppressive high hedges.

11.5 am

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Recently, a Labour Member said that he supported a private Member's Bill because he was one of the promoter's oldest and dearest friends. I am in a difficult position. I freely confess my long-standing affection and admiration for my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor). He and I go back further than perhaps either of us would care to remember, and we have undergone adventures and episodes together. I must struggle not to allow my affection for him to get in the way of my judgment about his Bill. That will be difficult because I face not a dilemma but—perhaps—a trilemma about the Bill, its provenance and its aim.

It is clear from our debate that several people throughout the country have written to hon. Members about the subject of the Bill. So far, more have written from Solihull, than from Bromley and Chislehurst, although I have received one or two letters on the matter—one this week. I therefore agree with hon. Members who have mentioned constituents' letters. The hon. Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) read out a moving letter on the subject. The problem therefore exists, but should we feel obliged to legislate to deal with it?

A recent tendency, which probably arises more in consideration of private Members' Bills than other measures, has emerged. However, it also arose on the Bill on the disqualification of clergy. In that case, an individual wanted to be a candidate for election to the House, and the Government felt moved to change the law of the land. I had difficulty with that. I do not agree that because several people have a problem, we must legislate in a hurry or even slowly. It is not a sufficient reason.

My second difficulty is that the Bill is substantial. My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull described the Bill, in a typically elegant phrase, as "conceptually simple". The hon. Member for Bath said that the measure was straightforward and painless. I take issue with both descriptions. The Bill demonstrates the difficulty that arises when we try to find a simple solution to a simple problem. The Bill contains 20 clauses—a reasonably large measure by any standards. Of course, it is not the sort of mammoth Bill that the Government produce almost weekly and try to shove through Committee in an untimely manner. The House dealt with such a matter earlier; we shall have to return to it next week. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull would not disagree with the description of the Bill as "substantial".

My hon. Friend is trying to deal with an apparently simple matter: people feel upset and irritated or have their health affected by the actions of their neighbours. That is not new territory. Let us consider the phenomenon of suburbia. My hon. Friend's constituency is an elegant and outstanding example of that, as is Bromley and Chislehurst. They are similar. Suburbia, with its detached and semi-detached houses, can demonstrate the difficulty of neighbours living cheek by jowl, sharing party walls or boundaries and fences. The problem of hedges is a further example of that, albeit relatively recent and, it emerges, fairly extreme.

In seeking to solve the problem, we must be careful to strike a balance—here I defer to my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull, who is a solicitor of some eminence and great experience—between what we call, in layman's terms that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) would probably understand, the traditional sanctity of private property and of the domestic dwelling, whereby the Englishman's home is his castle, and the reasonable behaviour of neighbours. That is what my hon. Friend's Bill seeks to do. I fear that, in seeking to do that, things might have become somewhat over-complicated.

The Bill helpfully sets out to define high hedges.

Mr. Bercow: The House has to decide whether the Bill satisfies the criterion of proportionality. That criterion must be satisfied for Parliament to judge it right to legislate. In that context—I make no valuation; I am simply asking the question—does my right hon. Friend agree that we would do well to bear in mind the words of Walter Lippman, who observed a long time ago that, in a free society, the state does not administer the affairs of men, but administers justice among men who conduct their own affairs?

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I wish that that were so. He and I share a longing to return to the age when such ideas prevailed. My fear is that we are now too readily moving—if we are not already there—into an era in which people expect and demand that their every problem should be dealt with by someone else: the local authority, the Government, or the European Union, God help us.

We are losing, if we have not already lost, the idea of robust, responsible, free citizens, which we have striven to protect for centuries in our common law and in all our customs and traditions. People are no longer prepared robustly to look after their own interests, but look constantly to someone else to solve their problems

Mr. John M. Taylor: My right hon. Friend makes his case in a principled way, and I thank him for his earlier kind remarks about me. He prayed in aid the English common law as part of our robust framework of affairs. Does he accept from me, speaking as a lawyer, that one problem is that some parts of that common law are worse than others—and one of them is the law of nuisance? The aggrieved citizen, in circumstances such as those we are discussing, hardly dares go to court citing the English law of nuisance because it is so uncertain.

Mr. Forth: Of course I defer to my hon. Friend on that matter. I acknowledge that, largely because of that, we are seeking a process of administrative redress, such as that

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proposed by the Bill, in which we try to circumvent the courts. I do not want to digress into what would be an interesting—and, I might even claim, relevant—debate about the relative merits of remedy through the courts and what I would call administrative remedy. I do not wish to push my luck in that direction, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall stick to the thrust of the Bill, while acknowledging what my hon. Friend has said.

We find ourselves, of necessity, having to define high hedges, which the Bill does. It would not be appropriate at this stage of the proceedings to raise too many questions about whether the definition is sufficiently sound—I am not an expert in the matter—but when one sets out, in a Bill such as this, adequately to define what one means by anything, never mind high hedges, there is always potential for getting into difficulty. I can envisage that, if the Bill becomes law, some people in the horticultural or arboricultural business might look at the definition and ask themselves whether they could circumvent the provisions. I wonder, therefore, whether the definition is adequate. However, I am on dangerous ground, so I shall say no more on that matter. I merely flag it up as a potential problem.

The meat of the Bill lies in the succeeding clauses, one of which deals with

"Procedure for dealing with complaints".

Some hon. Members appear to envisage a halcyon era in which innocent victims of ghastly hedges will go, light-footed and light-hearted, through a rather easy complaints procedure. I think that they are being over-optimistic.

First, the complainant must approach "the relevant authority", which will be the local authority. It has been helpfully pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull and the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) that the complaint will probably be dealt with by an expert officer. At the outset, the authority will have to decide whether to proceed with the complaint. That is an initial hurdle, at which the complaint's seriousness or frivolity will be judged by someone. I foresee, even at that stage, the possibility of the aggrieved citizen saying, "You are not taking my complaint sufficiently seriously." Right at the beginning, it will be possible for the citizen to feel that their case is not being properly dealt with by the authority.

Clause 4(4) provides that the authority must take into consideration all kinds of interesting matters, for example:

"the extent to which the high hedge in question is capable of affording (or, if reduced in height, would still be capable of affording) privacy to an occupier of the neighbouring land".

Although my hon. Friend has said throughout that he was concentrating on the matter of light—height and light, as he put it—the matter of privacy is also written into his Bill as a relevant consideration. The hon. Member for Bath mentioned solar panels on roofs, but the matter is not as simple as that, because it is a requirement of the Bill that a judgment is made on whether privacy is a consideration—and, in my view, rightly so. Right at the beginning of the Bill, therefore, there are provisions for matters involving difficult judgments. It is not just a question of asking, "Are these hedges? How high are they and do they block someone's light?" No, the matter of privacy also has to be taken into consideration.

The Bill goes on to state that the authority must take into consideration

"the extent to which the hedge contributes (or, if reduced in height, would still contribute) to the amenity of the neighbourhood".

We are introducing an aesthetic element. Not only must someone go round with a light meter saying, "Let me see, does this hedge block the light?", but the authority must consider whether privacy is properly protected and make a judgment about the amenity of the neighbourhood.

Finally, the clause contains a measure that I suspect my hon. Friend slipped in out of amusement—I will not say self-interest, because he no longer practises as a solicitor, which is a great loss to the legal profession. That provision states that the authority must take into consideration

"any legal obligation . . . relating to that hedge."

My hon. Friend is therefore admitting to the possibility that there could, in some circumstances, be legal obligations relating to the hedge, or its location, function or purpose.

Mr. Pound: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the Building Research Establishment is working on precisely such objective criteria—whether out of prescience or anticipation of his making these remarks, I do not know—in order to address that issue? Would not that go some way towards satisfying his tortured, anarchic soul?

Mr. Forth: It may or may not. The hon. Gentleman is asking me to buy a pig in a poke, and I am not inclined to do so. Moreover, I will suspend my judgment on whether so-called experts at some institute or other—no matter how eminent—will be able to produce objective criteria to deal with matters such as privacy and amenity, to say nothing of light. The hon. Gentleman is obviously a more trusting soul than I am. We shall beat that out of him if he spends considerably more time in the House, as I hope he will. I simply flag up the point to show that the matter will not be as simple as hon. Members suggest.

Dr. Lynne Jones: Are not those issues regularly dealt with by planning officers when dealing with planning applications?

Mr. Forth: Yes, and that is what I am afraid of. The hon. Lady says that such matters are already dealt with by planning officers so that is okay. I do not know how many constituency cases involving how planning officers handle such issues she deals with, but I deal with a lot. Although I always have a struggle with my conscience as to whether I should deal with them at all, I usually give in and try to help my constituents. To my mind, saying, "Don't worry folks, it will all be dealt with by these expert planning officers" is not a convincing argument.

Perhaps the planning officers in the hon. Lady's constituency or in her local authority area are so expert that they are proof against complaint and dissatisfaction. Perhaps her postbag is devoid of letters about local planning matters. All I can say is that I suspect that in Solihull, Buckingham, Ashford and Bromley and Chislehurst, to say nothing of Bath, the odd letter about such matters pops up in the odd postbag.

Dr. Jones: Of course I occasionally deal with such cases, but I deal more with complaints about nuisance

hedges. From the logic of the right hon. Gentleman's argument, is he suggesting that we should have no planning procedure whatever and that people should be able to erect buildings whenever they like without involving planning regulations?

Mr. Forth: In an ideal world, yes. I have in mind the image of an ideal world in which there are no planning officers, no local authorities, almost no government and a lot of responsible, happy, free citizens living together in responsible relationships, but we have not quite got there yet. My task is to judge whether I believe that the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull moves us in that direction. Indeed, we all have to make such a judgment.

I want briefly to refer to certain proceedings. I have said that I believe that the front end of the process is in no way as simple as hon. Members suggest. Variation or withdrawal of remedial notices would also be involved and any appeals against remedial notices would be very important. It has been pointed out that the Secretary of State would not personally be involved in appeals. I am rather grateful for that, given the current incumbent of the post, although my hon. Friend has told us that he believes that the Secretary of State would probably appoint experienced inspectors to undertake the appeals process on his behalf.

The suggestion is helpful because it would bridge that gap, which worries me, between the localised initial stage of the process, which would ultimately be the responsibility of the local authority and its elected members, and the Secretary of State, who would be too remote to provide a degree of reassurance that the appeals process could be properly conducted. I accept my hon. Friend's assurance that the mechanism that he suggests would almost certainly fit the requirement, but we get back into difficulty in clause 8, which states:

"The Secretary of State may by regulations make provision with respect to"

examples of where regulations would be required. Let us not imagine that the matter would be free of bureaucracy. Everybody craves a simple, quick and easy solution from the Bill, but they may end up somewhat disappointed.

I pass over determination or withdrawal of appeals. The enforcement of remedial notices of course raises another series of issues such as fines. Let us not imagine that the process would be pain free. If such matters sadly and regrettably became a point of bitter dispute between neighbours—one or two letters that I have received suggest that they can do so—the initial complaint, the likely appeal, the need for remedial notices and perhaps a degree of obstinacy that might not otherwise have been expected may all render the process a lot more difficult than might be imagined. We are being way over-optimistic if we are simply saying, "It is okay folks, we will put a new Act on the statute book and this will all be resolved fairly easily." I fear that the Bill may not produce the anticipated results.

The hon. Member for Bath used a phrase that those of us who are in the Chamber every Friday have come to recognise. He said that the Bill has the support of a large number of Members of all parties and of all shapes, sizes and descriptions. Although he did not say so, I should not be surprised if it is supported by Members of all genders as well. The problem is that every time this Session Members have claimed widespread support for a Bill among other Members of Parliament, they have usually cited an early-day motion, which is a piece of political wallpaper that pleases a lot of MPs because it enables them to sign a bit of paper and feel that they have done their job properly.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees that the real test is the attendance of Members of Parliament at the House of Commons. They must hold themselves ready to support a Bill by voting in the Lobby. Frankly, I am not otherwise impressed. I am not remotely impressed when I am told that so many Members have signed an early-day motion. I am not even impressed if I am told that all sorts of people have pledged their support. The pledge of support that matters in the legislative process is a Member of Parliament walking through the Lobby—showing support in the only way that counts.

Mr. Bercow: My right hon. Friend always and rightly poses an exacting test for his parliamentary colleagues. Does he agree, however, even if one were rather less rigorous in one's demands and expectations and did not insist or expect that a Member should attend the Chamber for a debate on a Bill before deciding whether to support it, that it would not be unreasonable to ask how many of those who supported a Bill on Second Reading had read it?

Mr. Forth: That would be an exacting test. I suspect that the only person—not just present, but perhaps throughout the House of Commons—who would pass would be my hon. Friend.

Mr. Pound: There are at least two.

Mr. Forth: I hope that hon. Members are not volunteering to be put through a rigorous examination of their knowledge of the Bill.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) *rose—*

Mr. Forth: Except for the hon. Gentleman, to whom I give way.

Mr. Dismore: If I catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall show that I have read the Bill, as I have detailed comments to make on some of the principles behind it.

Mr. Forth: I exonerate the hon. Gentleman from my remarks.

I want to make two final observations. First, the Bill might be in an interesting position regarding the passage of time and the possible calling of an election should it be given a Second Reading and be considered in Committee. Let us bear it in mind that this Parliament has another 14 months to run. The Leader of the House, no less, verified that for us yesterday at business questions; in fact, she boasted about it. So, should the Prime Minister cut and run, either because he is disappointed by the Chancellor's Budget or because he is in a panic about foot and mouth or any other matter, the premature calling of an election would bring the private Member's Bill procedure to an abrupt and unfortunate end, and we should all remember whose fault that would be.

[Mr. Forth]

Secondly, were the Bill to be given a Second Reading, it would require considerable scrutiny in Committee and on Report. I deliberately have not dwelled at any length on the detailed provisions. As you know, it is not my practice to do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, I have highlighted examples that might create difficulty and I have mentioned, just in passing, some issues that might require further attention. I go no further than that. Some Members have suggested that the Bill deals with a small, narrow matter, but I believe that it deals with an important one. I think that it has the potential to go much wider in its effects than focusing on a specific problem.

With those brief comments, I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull well. He has chosen an interesting subject, given that he came so high in the private Members' Bill ballot. He has made good and proper use of the time available to him, and has judged the Bill well and interestingly. He must some time give me a little tutorial on how to write explanatory notes.

11.30 am

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): I congratulate the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) on introducing the Bill, which I support. It covers important principles with which I strongly agree, and would help to avoid some of the neighbour disputes that every Member has to deal with from time to time.

In Britain, we are often happy to allow people to do something, but are reluctant to legislate to prevent them from doing things. We are too slow in producing legislation to restrain people from infringing their neighbours' liberties. A big question of liberty underlies the Bill, and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) touched on it. He is perhaps a spokesperson for the libertarian right, which would allow people to do what they like with as little intervention by the state as possible.

I am drawn to some of the great writers on politics. Hobbes talked about life in the state of nature being "nasty, brutish and short". He said that imposition of a state and regulation of human life was important, and I agree with him.

Mr. Pound: I thought Hobbs was a cricketer.

Mr. Hopkins: It was another Hobbes.

Other great writers on liberty have dealt with these subjects at length, such as John Stuart Mill and, more recently, Sir Isaiah Berlin, who spoke of liberties conflicting and said that the liberty of the pike does not mean liberty for the minnow. A pond with one pike has many unfree minnows.

Mr. Bercow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hopkins: Yes.

Mr. Pound: Speaking of minnows.

Mr. Bercow: As the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) observes entirely correctly, we are speaking of minnows, so I thought it appropriate to rise to my feet. On first principles, will the hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) explain the pertinence of Isaiah Berlin's conception of positive and negative liberty in so far as it applies to the Bill? It is important not to misrepresent anyone in these matters. Will he confirm that the key point about Mill's advocacy was the distinction between self-regarding and other regarding acts? The erection of a high hedge would probably be regarded—certainly by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor)—as an other regarding act.

Mr. Hopkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I should like to debate these points. J.S. Mill agonised about whether one could intervene to prevent someone from damaging himself, and it was Isaiah Berlin who referred to liberties conflicting. The point about positive freedom is that the state intervenes to promote the freedom of the weak against the strong. I believe that the state, by choice and by careful legislation such as we promote in the House, can protect the liberties of the weak against the strong. I entirely agree with that proposition, which is why I sit on this side of the House rather than on the other side.

I have had some experience of neighbour disputes about arboreal matters. When I was young, I lived in a flat with an elderly landlady, who asked me to cut a branch of a neighbour's tree that was overhanging her garden. I made the rash assumption that she had consulted her neighbour and I got on my step-ladder with a saw. The neighbour came out of his house in a state of extreme agitation. He was very angry and tried to push me off the step-ladder. I was not a lawyer at the time, but I can think of several laws that could have been invoked. I felt that something had to be done to regulate relations between neighbours. Time and again, neighbours in my constituency have fallen into conflict with each other for various reasons, resulting in bitter disputes for which the law is often inadequate. Therefore, I support the principles underlying this important Bill.

I should declare an interest, because I may be the only Member present who has a leylandii hedge next to his garden. My neighbour keeps it trimmed at a reasonable level. We are extremely good friends, and he has not caused any dispute. If he were to allow his hedge to grow to a height of 30 ft or 40 ft, or whatever height they can grow to, I am sure that it would cause difficulty between us. I may be able to afford a lawyer, such as the hon. Member for Solihull, to take my side, but if I were an old-age pensioner living on a state pension I would not be able to do so and would be in extreme difficulty. If people could call in the local authority to help, that would be a good use of a local authority. That is how it should be.

Mr. Dismore: Presumably, if my hon. Friend were an impecunious pensioner, the community legal service would give him assistance. However, that would not be possible if the £0.5 billion package of cuts proposed by the Opposition were to go through.

Mr. Hopkins: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The community legal service is promoted by the Government.

My neighbour's fence was attractive when it first grew, because the row of cypress trees reminded me of my holiday in Tuscany some years previously. Sadly, my back garden's likeness to Tuscany ended at that hedge.

and there is no other similarity. He chopped the tops off the trees, so they are now beheaded and less pretty. The hedge is an agreeable barrier between our gardens. I am not sure whether he is trying to keep my garden out of his garden, but it is agreeable because he keeps it trimmed at a reasonable level.

My neighbour's hedge does not exclude light, as it points south-west and my garden gets the best of the sun in the afternoon, so it is not a problem. The Bill is rather more nebulous about how I could deal with the situation if it were much higher. I suggest that consideration be given in Committee to an absolute height limit of 3 m or 4 m—I think that 3 m is reasonable—to prevent, for instance, the obstruction of one's view of the neighbourhood.

Mr. Pound: I do not want to disagree with my hon. Friend in the generality of his comments, but does he agree that the noble cypress standing alone can present a wonderful picture? In my garden, with the advent of spring, fornicating frogs are frolicking in the pond in the shade of a noble Lebanon cedar. Were there a row of cedar, that would constitute a problem, but where one stands alone it can be a landscape feature. I urge my hon. Friend to row back from a height limit, because we should consider spatial location rather than crude geometry. Height can be all right, if the tree is in the right place.

Mr. Hopkins: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but I shall leave judgment on these matters to the Committee. There is a difference between a noble cypress standing alone and a dense row of them blocking light or blocking the view. In my garden, the only view that the hedge blocks is that of the aircraft taking off from our local airport, and I am not worried about losing that view. However, in other cases a view of attractive hills may be hidden by a high fence that does not exclude light, but makes the view from the garden much less pleasant.

I believe that there is a case for a height limit on hedges, perhaps at a higher level than the 2 m proposed in the Bill to avoid cutting out light. In Committee, I hope that consideration can be given to tightening up the Bill on overall height for other reasons besides blocking out light.

I cannot claim to have a background in the promotion of the Bill, but I congratulate all who have. I have an interest, however, and I hope that what I have said will be of some benefit and assistance.

11.40 am

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor). I think it is the fourth attempt to legislate after the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe): there were two attempts by my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham), who spoke earlier, and one in the other place by Lady Gardiner of Parks—an apposite name and title in this context. Regrettably, having heard what has been said today, I suspect that this Bill's prospects are limited.

I want to cite some cases referred to me by constituents, which highlight not just the need for the Bill but one or two problems caused by its current drafting. Mr. Brazil, of Garrett road in Edgware, wrote to me at the end of last year to say:

"My neighbour has a 'hedge' consisting of Leylandii conifers. These trees are 40 feet high and will eventually—I am told—reach 100 feet. My neighbour—despite repeated requests—refuses to keep them under control in any way. The trees mean that our garden is constantly in shade and is spoilt both for pleasure and beauty. There is also a very adverse effect on the value of my property should I wish to sell."

The Bill does not provide for that consideration, but I think that what Mr. Brazil tells me constitutes the fundamental reason why it is necessary.

Mr. and Mrs. Cullinan, of Rushden gardens in Mill Hill, wrote to me on behalf of half a dozen constituents. They raised similar but slightly different problems, again related to leylandii trees planted as a hedge. They wrote that the London borough of Barnet—when it was under Conservative control, I hasten to add—planted the trees some 15 years ago,

"when the property belonged to them; the responsibility for their maintenance is that of the present owner. The house has recently been sold and we think that it is being rented out. We have written to the owners asking for the trees to be removed or trimmed to a reasonable height and maintained.

The trees have grown steadily over the years and are still growing. Their estimated height is now 30 ft.

The previous owner was willing to trim the trees but not enough to make any difference to us.

These trees have caused damage to the shed of no. 13. Blocks out sunlight from the majority of the gardens and prevents plants from growing. The roots must be huge to support trees of this size.

As council taxpayers and voters we feel we are entitled to your support and at least somebody could even look at the trees.

We will seek legal advice but do not see why we should bear the cost of this, as they are not our trees."

The couple's problems relate to whether the local authority is responsible for the trees, the damage caused by tree roots and the issue of light, as well as the question of obtaining legal advice under the present system. I am happy to report that the property involved has a new owner who seems a little more sympathetic, but time will tell. Mr. and Mrs. Cullinan have had to put up with the problem for more than 10 years.

Mr. Prendergast of Deansbrook road in Burnt Oak, whom I met when I was doing the doorsteps a few weeks ago, raises a slightly different problem. He has a very small garden, but there is a single large conifer on the next-door neighbour's property, which completely blocks out the light in his kitchen. Having seen the property, I can vouch for the problems that Mr. Prendergast is experiencing, and I think that they illustrate one of the drafting problems to which I referred. The House of Commons research paper on the Bill sets out the problem succinctly. It refers to the difficulties that trees and shrub hedges frequently cause, threatening roofs, gutterings and drains, depriving unwilling sufferers of light in their houses, and depriving them of the right to use their gardens in the way that they choose. The paper states:

"Small gardens can be completely dominated by the high neglected hedge at the bottom of someone else's large garden."

Keen gardeners may be prevented from growing the plants they wish to grow by untopped and unmaintained fast-growing hedges. The burden of that continuing hazard can fall on people who are prevented by law from intervening to reduce the height of hedges.

I am pleased that the Government have seen fit to act. They have issued a consultation document, and have indicated that they would like to legislate when time

[Mr. Andrew Dismore]

permits. I am also glad that the hon. Member for Solihull has been able to take on the Bill. However, we need to be aware of the scale of the problem.

A 1999 survey of local authorities estimated that there could be as many as 17,000 existing problem hedge cases in England and Wales. The problem tends to occur when a hedge is not suitable for its location, and is not properly maintained. Once a well-maintained hedge is neglected and becomes overgrown, it too will create problems.

Much of the debate has focused on leylandii cypresses, which tend to be singled out for blame because they can grow by 1 m a year and reach heights of more than 100 ft. It is not the only culprit, however. People considering what to plant in their gardens should bear in mind the fact that other trees can also have a serious deleterious effect on their neighbours' properties. The Lawson cypress can grow by 60 cm a year, to 20 m, the western red cedar can grow by 75 cm a year, to 25 m, and even the common-or-garden privet grows by 60 cm a year and can reach a height of 13 m. I found that staggering. The yew tree can grow by 20 cm a year, to 13 m, and even holly can grow by 30 cm a year, to 10 m.

The 1993 report "Trees in Towns" found that the most common type of tree in urban areas, constituting 22 per cent. of the total, was the cypress type, such as leylandii. More important, cypress-type trees accounted for 50 per cent. of hedges that were higher than 2.5 m. People may assume that if they have a tree that is not a leylandii these arguments do not apply to them. They should understand that other types of tree can cause similar problems, and that what may be a dwarf now may become a giant triffid in a year or two.

Mr. John M. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman has clearly done a great deal of research. Does he agree that the inappropriateness of some trees lies in the fact that their genetic make-up has made them forest trees whose survival requires them to drive for the canopy as fast as they can?

Mr. Dismore: That is a valid point, although there is a right place for hedges consisting of such trees. Anyone who has visited a stately home on an afternoon off will have seen wonderful avenues of cypress trees or yew hedges—but that is the right place for them: they are not appropriate for people's back gardens, particularly in built-up urban areas where the trees may be striving for light. They are effectively competing with the houses for light, and, by definition, competing with the neighbours as well.

The Bill is welcome because it demonstrates that existing procedures are not adequate. Of course, the best solution is co-operation with the neighbours. A hedge owner simply might not be aware of the effect that his hedge is having on his neighbours. As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) suggested, a polite request for the hedge to be kept properly trimmed and maintained might be all that is needed. I am glad to hear that my hon. Friend has a good working relationship with his neighbour. Ultimately, that is obviously the best way in which to avoid disputes and prevent what is often a problem that can be solved relatively easily from escalating into one of the "neighbours from hell" wars that we see on television all the time.

The initial focus of the dispute can turn into a much greater problem involving many other issues.

It is important to stress the need for mediation. It is regrettable that mediation services are not available more widely. If both parties are willing to reach an amicable solution but differ over what that solution should be, mediation by an independent third party could help them reach an acceptable solution. Even if the hedge is part of a wider dispute, mediation could get to the root cause of the dispute. Of course, mediation requires both parties to act in good faith. It requires their good will if it is to succeed. The House will understand that it is not a legal solution, but a situation in which two parties are trying to reach agreement. There are 150 mediation groups throughout the country, but they obviously do not provide a solution to the problem nationwide.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) referred to the civil courts. I am a solicitor, but as far as I am aware I have not done a tree case. I regret to say, as my hon. Friend said, that the civil courts do not provide a viable solution to these detailed problems. The cost and time and effort involved in mounting a legal challenge constitute an unattractive option for many private individuals who have limited resources, regardless of whether they have the backing of the community legal service. If that service were abolished—the Conservatives would abolish it if they came to office—that support would not be available to individuals.

Mr. Hopkins: My hon. Friend is making the point strongly that we need a strong and simple law that can be invoked if necessary, but legislation that underpins mediation. If a neighbour knows that he is likely to go to court and is likely to lose, he will not grow his trees high in the first place.

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Part of the problem, as I said when I was talking about the types of tree involved, is ignorance. Once someone has planted a tree, he or she often becomes territorial: it is an example of an Englishman's home being his castle. If someone thinks in advance about planting trees there may not be a dispute, but thereafter the issue can become the focus of real problems. With court cases, the lack of certainty of a successful outcome makes people unwilling to risk legal costs. Such cases can become extremely expensive, and really do not provide a viable solution to the problems.

There is also the matter of easements. I studied the law of property nearly 30 years ago, although, not having practised in property law, I do not claim to be an expert. As I understand it from my legal research, easements of light do not extend to people's gardens. There can be a remedy only if the property itself is affected, and then only if the light in question has been enjoyed uninterrupted for at least 20 years. The common law right is not much help.

It has been suggested that statutory nuisance provisions in the Environmental Protection Act 1990 might provide a potential remedy for disputes over high hedges. Section 79(1)(a) states that keeping

> "Premises in such a state as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance"

amounts to statutory nuisance. However, to bring a case under the Act, there must be a direct risk of disease or illness. The problems that we are discussing can cause all

sorts of stress, unpleasantness and unhappiness, but in many instances it would be difficult to show that there was a direct risk of disease or illness. It might be argued that people's mental health might be affected in certain extreme circumstances, but it would be difficult to show that there was a statutory nuisance within the terms of the 1990 Act. The existing remedies are not adequate to deal with a real and growing problem.

I was pleased that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions issued a guidance leaflet, with the assistance of the horticulture and landscapes industries, which sets out alternatives to fast-growing species. It was designed to help people when they come to plant in their gardens. Again, however, it does not seem to have solved the problem. That is why I am pleased that the Government conducted the consultation to which I referred. Given that there were more than 3,000 responses, it is clear that such consultation was not only long overdue but welcomed by the population. The results of the consultation showed that 94 per cent. of respondents believed that new laws were needed to control hedges. The Bill meets that demand. Also interesting is the fact that 77 per cent. of local authorities support new laws. Some 72 per cent. of respondents chose the option of allowing local authorities to deal with the problem, and 67 per cent. of local authorities shared that view, although they wanted mediation to be introduced alongside new laws.

I shall flag up a problem that has been identified by the Local Government Association, which has welcomed the Government's proposals and, by extension, the Bill. There is a need for mediation that involves the disputing neighbours, and there is a potential cost. The LGA and all local authorities are anxious that the net result of the proposed legislation should not be to increase the burden on the local council tax payer or result in an impact on services. If legislation comes forward, they have a case in saying that they should be able to recover the costs that they incur in dealing with complaints. That prompts the question of who the costs should be recoverable from. If we do not deal with that, the local authorities will not thank us for giving them additional concerns without providing them with the necessary resources.

I have concerns about various parts of the Bill. Clause 2 has already featured, but I wish to emphasise some other aspects. First, there is the requirement that a hedge should have two or more evergreens adjacent to it. I have mentioned one of my constituents, Mr. Prendergast, who has suffered as a result of an evergreen tree—and it is only one, because his garden is very small, as is his neighbour's. The impact of that one tree on his property is probably greater than the impact of an entire hedge on other properties. I hope that the hon. Member for Solihull will reconsider the definition to ascertain whether we can find a way in certain circumstances, at the very least, to provide for a situation where one tree is causing real distress. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will consider whether that one tree could be caught within the definition.

I am concerned also about the 2 m above ground level provision and the height of the tree. That may seem petty, but there is a point to be made. I shall give an example. I have a small garden at the back of my Westminster flat. Behind my garden is a neighbouring garden, where the level of the ground is nearly 4 ft higher than that in my garden. Is the 2 m measured from the level of my garden or from the level of the other person's garden, because a tree may be only 1 m high in my neighbour's garden, but it will be far more than 2 m high on my side of the fence? That issue needs to be addressed, because a tree may not cause any problem to the person who owns it.

I wonder whether we should consider the problems caused by deciduous trees as well as those caused by evergreens. People like to use their gardens more in summer when deciduous trees are in leaf and block the light. In winter, they are less of the problem. There is a tall deciduous tree in my next-door neighbour's garden. In the winter, it does not cause a problem, but it blocks quite a lot of light in the summer. I have not been involved in a dispute about it, because it is a nice tree. However, we should consider what we could do about the faster-growing deciduous species. Instead of using the generic term "evergreen", perhaps a schedule could specify the species that are covered by the Bill. Will semi-evergreen trees be caught by its provisions? Certain fast-growing trees lose half their leaves in winter and are therefore classed as semi-evergreen.

Clause 4 refers to complaints being made to the relevant local authority. What happens if the landowner causing the problem is the local authority? I highlight that point because, in the case to which I referred earlier, the trees in question had been planted by the local authority.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: My hon. Friend will find the answer to that question in the explanatory notes, which show that the local authority could be liable.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention and I do not dispute that the local authority could be liable. My concern is that the local authority would be judge and jury in its own cause. That is potentially a breach of the Human Rights Act 1998, to which I hope to refer shortly.

Mr. Cunningham: Again, that point is taken care of in the explanatory notes. The Bill provides for an appeals procedure and an adjudication. My hon. Friend's point has already been answered.

Mr. Dismore: I am afraid that my hon. Friend has not convinced me that the point has been answered. By definition, an appeals process suggests that the decision should have been taken fairly in the first instance. An appeals process cannot correct in law a defect in the original procedure. That is trite law. There might be infringements of the Human Rights Act, and I shall expand on that point when I get to that part of my speech.

Mr. Cunningham: I shall describe to my hon. Friend a situation that often arises in local government. A planning authority may give a planning permission that is objected to by a member of the public. The case goes to a planning appeal and, if necessary, if someone want to take it to extremes, to a public inquiry. That parallels the position under this Bill.

Mr. Dismore: A judicial review is going through the courts at the moment. The whole process and, in particular, the involvement of the Secretary of State has been called into question under the human rights legislation. I shall refer to that point later, but I hope that the Bill would not add to the problem by giving a local

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authority jurisdiction in its own cause. That point will have to be considered as the Bill progresses. It is not a hypothetical problem. As one of my constituency cases shows, it has arisen before. In that case, the land had been sold on but if it had been owned by the local authority at the time, budget pressures might have led the local authority to decide that it would not cut its trees. Where would that have left the people involved?

Is the current provision for the complaints procedure fair? The Bill's phrasing suggests that, when a complaint is made and a local authority adjudicates on it, no provision will be made for a fair hearing for the owner of the trees in question. He can appeal and ask for a review, but that is not the same as being given a right of hearing before the decision is taken. Under clause 4, the authority will simply have to consider the complaint: it will not be required to consider any representations. Indeed, before the complaint is decided, it will not even be required to give notice of the complaint to the owners of the trees. That is a fundamental breach of natural justice, which I hope will be addressed if the Bill proceeds. I support the Bill, but certain problems may arise from it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) referred to the work done by the Building Research Establishment at the request of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The BRE is working with the Tree Advice Trust to come up with an objective test for light. I have problems with the definitions because the phrase "unreasonable obstruction of light" is a subjective test, yet we are also asking for objective criteria to be set. Perhaps that, too, could be dealt with more effectively in a schedule to the 1990 Act. Including concepts of reasonableness in the Bill will only create a field day for the profession of which the hon. Member for Solihull and I are members.

On the issue of light, the height of the trees, how far they are from boundaries and the point of the compass at which they are situated in relation to the house are relevant considerations. The time of year should also be taken into account because shade varies according to the season.

Page 3 lists a series of matters that the local authority must take into account, but the Bill does not specify how it should do that. There is no requirement for a site visit by local authorities or for them to consider photographs. If they are to get involved, they cannot merely take the complainant's word, which seems to be what is provided for in the Bill as drafted. They should at least pay a site visit—preferably when the sun is shining—so that they can see whether the problem is genuine.

Whether the hedge is in an urban, countryside or suburban environment should also be considered. What is suitable in the countryside is not necessarily suitable in an urban environment, where avenues of cypress trees or yew hedges can cause problems.

There is a difficulty in defining "neighbouring land." What if the land is not neighbouring? I mentioned a case that was referred to me by half a dozen constituents. The trees were not just a problem for the immediate neighbours. The shadows that they cast were so large that four or five other properties were also affected. Does the definition cover people who are further down the street?

Local authorities should consider whether tree preservation orders are attached to the trees, because there may be a good reason for some of them to be allowed to survive. There is no reference to the responsibility of local authorities in that regard.

Mr. John M. Taylor: Clause 4(4)(c) states that the local authority is obliged to take into account

"any legal obligation (whether imposed by or under any enactment or otherwise) relating to that hedge."

That would include tree preservation orders.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful for that clarification. It is an important consideration, and I am happy with the definition if it covers it.

On wildlife, I know from research that I have conducted that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds thinks that there is a problem with enforcement. It says that between October and April birds may well be nesting in the trees concerned. If we are going to issue orders for people to cut down trees or reduce their height, the Bill should ensure that the interests of wildlife are protected. What might be a valid order in the summer months may not be valid in the winter months if it has an impact on birds or other wildlife. I hope that we can incorporate some protection. I do not think that that would be a major change, but local authorities should bear that important consideration in mind.

We also have to consider the health of the trees. Although I am not an arboriculturist, I know that there are times of the year when it is not sensible to prune a tree because it is not good for its health. Another time of the year might be far better. I do not know whether the seasons when it is necessary to protect wildlife and the season when it is necessary to protect trees coincide. No doubt the hon. Member for Solihull has the answer.

Mr. Taylor: I do not have a pat answer, but as a long-standing parliamentary friend of the RSPB, I thoroughly accept the hon. Gentleman's point.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman.

I turn now to the health of the trees. As I said, I am not an arboriculturist, so I am not sure whether the tree-cutting season coincides with the season when concerns about protecting birds are paramount. My point is that local authorities should take into account the protection of the health of trees and wildlife in deciding when their orders should take effect,

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Robert Ainsworth): It is my understanding that the important point raised by my hon. Friend is covered in the Bill. He will know that there is a minimum period for the enforcement of remediation, but no maximum period, and discretion is given to the local authority. It can therefore take into account issues such as the health of the trees and of wildlife when insisting on enforcement.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that clarification. If the Bill becomes law, his comments can no doubt be taken into account in any proceedings under the Pepper *v.* Hart rule which may follow. It would be helpful if that protection were incorporated in the Bill.

We have all, from time to time, heard of officious local government officers who take the letter of the law to extremes, not necessarily because they have been told to do so by their political masters. Indeed, their actions are often entirely to the horror of their political masters, who do not know what is being done in their name.

I turn now to the 28-day period before the operative date of a remedial notice. As my hon. Friend said, there is no maximum period—that is left open-ended. Perhaps there ought to be elasticity in the other direction as well, because if the nesting season were approaching or if pruning at a particular time would endanger the tree's health, the people involved in a case might have to wait six months or more before it could be cut back.

I am also concerned about the problem of the continuing maintenance of trees. I am not sure whether any order made under the Bill could be continuous or whether it would be a one-off. No doubt the hon. Member for Solihull can clarify the point. The local authority could order a tree to be trimmed to a height of 2 m once, but the problem might recur the following year and in the years after that.

Mr. Taylor: There would be a continuing obligation to cut down a tree and maintain it at the reduced height. Furthermore, the obligation is registrable as a local land charge and would therefore bind a successor in title as well.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful for clarification on that important point.

I also want to explore the relationship between the owner and the occupier of the land. There are potential problems where the occupier is a tenant or leaseholder who wants to comply with a neighbour's request, but the absentee freeholder, of the kind we find throughout the country, takes a different view. Such a freeholder does not have to get on with the neighbours, and if he feared that the value of his property would go down if trees were removed, he might object to the occupier taking action.

That relationship needs to be explored further so that the person with the obligation—and, indeed, the power that overrides contractual relations between the tenant or leaseholder and the freeholder—acts in accordance with orders made under the Bill. It is all very well ordering occupiers to do something, but if they do not have the legal power to do it because of their contractual relationship with the freeholder, they may find themselves in a cleft stick. Should they comply with the order, which could result in the forfeiture of their lease, or should they do as the freeholder says, and thus run the risk of being fined? That aspect needs to be examined and corrected so that the tenant of the property has not only the obligation but the power to act, even if doing so is technically in breach of the lease.

It strikes me that clauses 6 and 4 should be transposed, because clause 6 deals with the notice being varied or withdrawn after, for example, representations have been made by the owner of the land affected. That is the Bill's first reference to the owner of the land on which the trees are situated having a say. We should be doing things the other way around: the owner of the land should have the power to make representations first, before consideration is given to varying or withdrawing the remedial notice.

Problems may arise from the 28-day notice rule. What happens if an application for a variation is made within the time limit, but the time limit expires before the application is heard? The Bill contains no reference to preserving the status quo pending the outcome of an application for review or an appeal. As the Bill stands, a person ordered to cut back his trees could subsequently succeed in a hearing on his variation request or appeal, but it would be too late because the trees would already have been cut back.

That is a potential breach of natural justice. The Bill should contain powers to preserve the status quo pending the outcome of a dispute, a review of a notice or an appeal. Otherwise, we risk being unfair to those on whose land the trees are situated—even though such people do not have my sympathy. It is part of normal planning procedure that the status quo prevails while an appeal is under way, pending its outcome. The same should apply under the Bill, subject to the appeal's proceeding.

If an appeal is successful but the trees have already been cut down, there is a risk of an action for damages being brought against the local authority. Under planning law, local authorities have to meet some compensation claims if they take remedial action to force compliance with planning law but it is ultimately found that their action was unlawful. The local authority and thus local council tax payers end up having to foot the bill. We must address that problem.

The points made by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) lead me to the subject of appeals. We appear to be creating a Clochemerle-type arrangement. Is it appropriate that the Secretary of State—whether or not he acts through his inspectors—should decide the height of a tree? I do not think so. That is a heavy-handed approach to problems that arise within local authority areas from time to time.

Often, such problems could be dealt with through a separate appeals committee of the local authority, with members who were not involved in making the original decision hearing appeals. Alternatively, such decisions could be taken by council officers using delegated powers, with appeals permitted to elected members. It is better to keep decisions local and ensure that the people dealing with the problems are elected representatives and therefore accountable for their actions in a way that the more remote planning inspector is not. Alternatively, appeals could be made to the magistrates courts in the same way as licensing appeals against local authority decisions are currently permitted.

We risk creating a superstructure around the Secretary of State that could create our first tree martyrs, who chain themselves to their leylandii when the Secretary of State's inspectors come to cart them off to the magistrates court. We must retain our sense of proportion and keep such issues within the scope of the local authority. A local authority appeal committee might well provide a better and more local means of dealing with the problem.

I should like to deal with some of the Bill's human rights aspects. We seem frequently to deal with the Human Rights Act 1998 on Fridays, because much of the legislation that we debate has a human rights dimension—none more so than this Bill, which could involve three different articles in the schedule to the Act. I am afraid that we often find that the articles could be mutually in conflict.

First, article 6, on the right to a fair trial, is involved in the procedures outlined in the Bill for the reasons that I have given. Under clause 4, the person who owns the trees

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would not be given a hearing when the decision was being made and possibly further down the line as well. The Bill contradicts article 6, and we must keep a close eye on the progress of the case currently going through the courts involving the judicial review of the Secretary of State's involvement in the overall planning procedures. That will have an impact on the arrangements in clause 4 if the decision in that case stands and is not overturned by the Court of Appeal or House of Lords. Given the case law at first instance in that case, which was heard at the end of last year, the Bill would infringe article 6.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst also referred to the need to respect privacy. That is dealt with in article 8, on the right to respect private and family life. There are conflicts on both sides because such hedges are usually grown to protect the privacy of the owner of the trees, but they may infringe the family life of those who live in the shadow of the trees and the way in which they conduct their affairs. So we need to consider article 8, and we have had a similar debate in relation to other private Members' Bills.

Mr. Hopkins: My hon. Friend makes a valid point about privacy, but surely that could be covered by achieving the right height—above the eyeline of most normal human beings.

Mr. Dismore: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, but being overlooked from upstairs windows is also a problem. There are rights and wrongs on both sides of any neighbour dispute. Although my sympathies very much lie with those who suffer from the problem of living in the shadow of high trees, we must reflect on the rights to privacy of the owner of the trees.

Mr. Forth: There is potential for a straightforward conflict, on one hand, between the right to light, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) referred, and on the other, the right to privacy of the owner of the trees. That introduces an element not only of conflict but of judgment. We are trying to judge which should have the greater weight—one person's light or another person's privacy. I think the hon. Gentleman agrees with my suggestion that the matter is by no means straightforward.

Mr. Dismore: The right hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. My sympathies lie with those on the receiving end. Perhaps that goes back to the philosophical discussion between the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North, but in the end, it is the job of the local authority either to mediate or to arbitrate on the issue. As with any planning decision, someone has to make a decision in the end. There are rights and wrongs on both sides, and the local authority should make a decision on them.

Mr. Bercow: May I take this opportunity to inform the hon. Gentleman that about a week or two ago, my mother was talking about writing to him on the subject of trees? Has she yet done so?

Mr. Dismore: So far as I am aware, she has not. However, her letter may have arrived at my constituency office in the past day or two and, obviously, I have been at the House for the past few days. I shall certainly keep an eye out for her letter when I go to my constituency office tomorrow morning. I am always very interested to hear from the hon. Gentleman's mother.

Mr. Miller: I hope that she is a good Labour voter.

Mr. Dismore: I am afraid that she is not a Labour voter, but the hon. Gentleman has endorsed, on behalf of his mother, one or two of the things that I have been doing in my constituency.

In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, North, my final point on human rights legislation concerns article 1 of the first protocol, which deals with the protection of property. It makes an overwhelming argument in support of those on the receiving end and deals with the right of everyone to the peaceful enjoyment of their possessions. In these circumstances, that would include the right to a pleasant afternoon in the back garden.

I shall draw my arguments on the Human Rights Act to a conclusion by asking the hon. Member for Solihull whether his Bill is compliant with it. We have had this debate in relation to private legislation, particularly the City of London (Ward Elections) Bill, when there was vehement dispute about whether or not it was compliant. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can deal with that point when he responds to our debate.

12.25 pm

Mr. Damian Green (Ashford): May I join those on both sides of the House who have congratulated my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) on introducing the Bill? It involves serious practical issues and, as we have heard in our fascinating debate, important matters of principle, philosophy and religion. I was struck by the way in which my hon. Friend opened his speech with the biblical provenance of his endeavour. Where I agree that legislation is necessary, and where I slightly part company with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), is in recognising that behind the Bill is the existence of original sin. We are all attracted to my right hon. Friend's ideal society of freeborn men and women interacting without any interference from the state—but sadly, that is made impossible by original sin and human behaviour.

The hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) had interesting exchanges about which form of moral philosophy can provide a basis for the legislation. I was struck by their exchange about Berlin, Mill and the utilitarian philosophers. I trust that they both agree that if one accepts a moral philosophy based on deontological, Kantian principles, the Bill has a degree of validity. I therefore hope that the House can bring itself to support it.

Moving from the philosophical to the practical plane, many hon. Members have pointed out the widespread nature of the problem. Clearly, it is serious; anything that embitters relations between neighbours must be deprecated by the House. Many hon. Members have numerous correspondents on this matter and the main pressure group, Hedgeline, has 3,500 members. Hedgeline

is probably right to say that tens of thousands of people are affected by the problem, so it is legitimate for the House to seek to act.

Many Members have said that they have had letters on the subject. I shall quote from one which I received from Mrs. Lucy Smith, the Devon and Cornwall co-ordinator of Hedgeline. I should be interested to hear the Minister's comments, as Mrs. Smith fears that

"the DETR . . . appear to be out of touch with the feelings of the very ordinary people who ask nothing more than to be able to sit in their gardens and see sunlight during the all too short summer months."

In many ways that is the nub of the problem which many of our constituents face and which the Bill seeks to address.

Hedgeline was founded by a constituent of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones), and I am extremely grateful to her for pointing out that some years ago, I said that it would be a long time before the Government took decisive action—if they ever did. It would have been immodest of me to point out that I had been exactly right in that prediction, but as the hon. Lady had the generosity to bring it up, may I say how much I endorse her analysis?

It is worth examining the Government's record. This is the first opportunity that I have had to welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box since he was appointed, but I am afraid that as the new boy in the team, he has been left with a difficult issue to handle. The Government's record is one of dithering and delaying. They seem to have adopted the principle of consult and ignore, as though they had said, "This is a big problem. We are very concerned, but we do not propose to do anything about it."

I have done an audit trail of the Government's words and actions. Ministers accept that since they came to office in 1997, they have received many thousands of letters and representations. They apparently spent some time thinking about those representations and, after only two and a half years in office, they managed some action: they produced a press release, which no doubt gave much hope to those concerned about the matter.

The press release, dated 12 November 1999 and headlined, "Meacher announces new initiatives to tackle nuisance hedges", begins:

"Making garden hedge disputes between neighbours a thing of the past is the subject of an information initiative and consultation exercise launched by Environment Minister Michael Meacher today."

I am sure that those who were concerned about the problem thought that all was well, but after the press release, nothing happened.

Following a gestation period of nine months, another press release was issued—this time in the middle of August, always a time that arouses the suspicion of those of us who are naturally cynical about Government's intentions. The second press release is even more decisive. It is headed, "Nuisance hedges to get the chop—Meacher", and announces:

"The scope for neighbourhood quarrels about overgrown garden hedges should be cut, following new measures proposed today to give local councils powers to intervene".

Anyone reading that would have thought that, three years into their term, the Government were taking action. Sadly, the second paragraph rather gives the game away:

"The Government is to work up new laws to be introduced in England as soon as there is space in the parliamentary timetable. Specifically designed to tackle nuisance garden hedges . . .".

I am sure that whoever wrote the press release was subsequently promoted for that creative use of the weasel words,

"work up new laws to be introduced . . . as soon as there is space".

Dr. Lynne Jones: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it has taken a long time to reach this stage. I hope that the next stages will be faster. Nevertheless, does he accept that the Government were at least prepared to put some effort into dealing with the problem, unlike their predecessors, who consistently refused to accept the existence of the problem and did nothing at all?

Mr. Green: I do not accept that. The Government have not yet done anything. We are discussing a private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull. The Government have done nothing to redeem their pledges to take action. The hon. Lady's constituent, Michael Jones, recognised that. After the decisive-sounding press release in August, by November last year Hedgeline was becoming suspicious.

Mr. Bercow: As my hon. Friend is dealing with consultation, and in order to complete the equation, can he offer the House a synopsis of the views of the Association of District Councils and the Local Government Association?

Mr. Green: Local authorities generally have welcomed the idea of legislation, but they have some reservations about the costs that local government will incur as a result. I shall deal with that shortly. The hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) read out the statistics of the response to the consultation exercise, which show not only that the overwhelming majority of local authorities welcome legislation, but that they regard it as urgently needed, as does Hedgeline.

Last November, Hedgeline's newsletter stated:

"It is possible that the new law may not appear before 2002, or later. This is too long a delay."

Hedgeline wanted a guarantee from the Government—the article was written before the Queen's Speech last year—that legislation would be introduced before the election and would appear in the Queen's Speech. The organisation was disappointed again. After all its efforts, I am sure that its members are happy that they can rely on my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull to promote this measure, which has been widely welcomed on both sides of the House.

In parenthesis, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is not unreasonable to point out that some of the parliamentary time since the Government's consultation exercise and the announcement of their determination to act has been spent on Bills that should not have detained the House—such as Bills on hunting, for which the Government have managed to find time during two Sessions of this Parliament. Furthermore, one of the differences between that measure and my hon. Friend's Bill is that Hedgeline does not have the resources to make a £1 million donation to the Labour party—as the anti-hunt lobby has done in its time.

[Mr. Green]

In considering the Government's approach to the matter, I agree with *The Times* editorial which states:

"Much less encouraging is his—

the Minister for the Environment's—

"failure to will the means. Now that sensible proposals are in place, swift action is needed. Yet he has promised legislation only when parliamentary time allows, and admitted that it might be left to a Private Member's Bill. It could be many years before nuisance hedges get the chop."

That is right.

Mr. Pound: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that leylandii planted in the spring of 1979 would have been more than 50 ft tall when the Conservatives left office in 1997? Is he not therefore being a little ungracious in criticising us for aiming to lop our humble four-metre-high growth when he ignored that vast tree during the 18 years of the previous Government?

Mr. Green: I am not sure whether there were that many leylandii around in 1979. I repeat the point that I made to the hon. Member for Selly Oak: throughout this Parliament, the Government have said that the issue was urgent and that they would do something about it, but they have miserably failed to do anything. They have produced consultation documents and press releases, but in the end they are relying on a private Member's Bill promoted by a Conservative Member. The hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) pointed out that he represents a slice of suburbia, where I dare say hedges are a big problem. The hon. Gentleman will have problems defending his Government's record on the matter.

The broad approach taken by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull in his Bill tackles a difficult problem seriously. Various detailed difficulties have been described in speeches from both sides of House. I merely add a few comments and questions.

It is right that the action to be taken will have a local authority basis. I suspect that anything more prescriptive nationally would prove inflexible. We need a balance between fairness—so that people know the rules—and flexibility. Those of us who have received letters on the subject realise that each case is different. To try to prescribe rules that are too detailed would lead to unfairness in individual cases.

The issue of costs has been raised, not least by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham. The helpful guidance notes, prepared either by my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull or by others—that distinction is not clear—state that the costs will be relatively low, and will fall quickly after the current backlog of 10,000 cases is cleared. It would be worth while if all those who engaged in further discussion of the Bill were to question that comfortable assumption. It is likely that as the Bill proceeds, and consciousness of its existence spreads, more complaints will be made. The comfortable idea of falling costs over time may not be right.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: Costs may be difficult to quantify, but, as I said earlier, a good indicator exists. Most planning departments have an adequate number of staff to police the measure. There may be isolated cases of additional staff having to be taken on, but the major local authorities have planning officers who are already constantly called out to examine such problems, but cannot do anything about them. The cost may be high initially because of the backlog of cases, but it will probably drop.

Mr. Green: The hon. Gentleman is partly right, but the view that the number of cases will fall may be wrong. Even if, as he suggests, planning officers already go out to advise people, they will have more work when they also have to make a judgment, and perhaps carry out an enforcement procedure. It is unrealistic to expect the Bill not to create more work for them.

Mr. Cunningham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again; I know that time is precious. Planning officers make a judgment now. They advise people to go through the civil courts, but they also tell people that they cannot do anything about the problem.

Mr. Green: Precisely. If the Bill becomes law, they will not be able to say, "We can't do anything about it." They will be obliged to do something about it. That obligation will increase their work load. I hope that the Minister will tell us whether the Government have made an overall estimate of the effect of the Bill on local government finance and whether there are any plans to compensate local government for the extra work.

A similar problem may emerge for the planning inspectorate. Again, the various guidance notes for the Bill imply that the measure can be implemented with a minimal increase in numbers. I should be grateful if the Minister would explain that, and state whether the Bill will necessitate more planning inspectors when the appeals process gets going. The sort of bitter neighbour disputes that precede legal action mean that legal differences tend to go to appeal. When people feel strongly enough to embark upon a legal process, they are likely to take it to the end, whoever is winning at various stages.

I also draw the Minister's attention to the role of the Building Research Establishment. Other hon. Members have alluded to the confusion about whether the tests will be subjective or objective. The guidance notes suggest that, ideally, the BRE will be able to establish an objective test that can be applied by individuals, so that they can look at their hedge, or their neighbours' hedge, and tell that its height breaks the law.

Mr. Forth: Does my hon. Friend agree that it will be challenging for the no doubt excellent and expert people involved to devise objective tests or criteria for privacy, amenity of the neighbourhood and light? How confident is he about obtaining the validity, objectivity and utility that the Bill's supporters would like?

Mr. Green: That is a genuine issue. I suspect that some areas are easier than others. I understand that the BRE will principally consider light; it may be able to establish some objective measures. I hope that the Minister will tell us whether that is the aim, and if so, explain the way in which it can be achieved.

My second question is about the timetable.

Mr. Don Foster: May I suggest that the hon. Gentleman is making rather heavy weather of this issue?

Does he not accept that the officers working in planning departments have much more difficult and complex decisions to address in their normal planning application considerations? For example, they have to take into account highly subjective matters such as the aesthetic qualities of buildings. The question of how one measures beauty is clearly far more testing than the issues that the hon. Gentleman is discussing in relation to the Bill.

Mr. Green: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is right. However, the provisions will place an additional burden on the inspectors. It is interesting that Labour Members think that nothing extra will be needed in terms either of expertise or of sheer numbers.

A further point relating to how the Building Research Establishment's work will be completed is the timetable. I understand that the draft guidelines will be produced by Easter, and the final version by the summer. If this Parliament runs its course, no doubt that timetable will be satisfactory. I would be grateful for the Minister's comments on whether the House will have the opportunity for full and proper investigation of the BRE guidelines when they are produced.

The Government have provided support for the Bill. Will the Minister tell us why they think that this way of addressing the problem is better than using the planning law? I think that I agree with the analysis that we have heard, but I would like to hear what the Government have to say. Will he also tell us why this method was thought preferable to adding the problems caused by high hedges to the list of statutory nuisances, which was the approach adopted by the private Member's Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham)?

Those are legitimate questions that will need to be addressed as the Bill goes through its further stages, as I hope it will. Costs, the level of parliamentary scrutiny and the sheer practicality of the legislation must all be examined. Nevertheless, my underlying point is that high hedges are a continuing serious problem worthy of the attention of the House, and I hope that my hon. Friend's Bill can make further progress.

12.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Robert Ainsworth): He that plants trees loves others besides himself—or so says the proverb. If that were universally true, we should not be here today.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) on introducing the High Hedges Bill, and am pleased to confirm that the Government welcome and support the measure. Unfortunately, some of the stories that we have heard today suggest that not everyone who plants trees has good intentions towards their neighbours. We have been told about the terrible conditions that have been inflicted on people by ill-advised planting or the lack of maintenance of boundary hedges. Leylandii have been mentioned frequently, but they are by no means the only culprits.

The old saying that an Englishman's home is his castle aptly captures the jealousy with which we tend to defend our territory and privacy. Our castle walls are the panel fences that we put up or the hedges that we plant. To ensure that our green defences are immediate, the fastest growing plants are selected. However, in putting up these barricades, we do not always think about the effects on those living on the other side of the hedge.

The effects will vary from case to case, but the most frequently mentioned problems are reduction in light to homes and gardens; the blocking of cherished views, especially of the countryside or coast; the difficulty of growing plants near to the hedges; and worries that roots might lead to property damage through subsidence. All those factors can lead to a general sense of oppression and being hedged in, or to a feeling that enjoyment of one's home and garden has been spoiled. A quiet word with the owner to point out the harmful effects of the hedge may be all that is needed to resolve a problem, but if such an approach is rebuffed, there is little that the person affected by the hedge can do to force his neighbour to negotiate or to obtain any relief.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Dr. Jones) said, the Government have responded to pressure from her and many other hon. Members. In particular, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham), my constituency neighbour, on all the work that he did over a long period to organise consultation. The response was overwhelming, and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions received more than 3,000 replies. To put that in context, the Department's consultation exercises usually generate hundreds rather than thousands of responses. As might have been expected, there was much public interest, and 91 per cent. of responses came from members of the public. A significant proportion of local authorities—about 40 per cent—took the time to let us know what they think.

There are striking similarities between the views expressed by local councils and the public. The vast majority of respondents, including 95 per cent. of individual members of the public who responded and 77 per cent. of local authorities, believe that new laws are the answer to the high hedge problem. As to what form such laws should take, a new complaints system run by local authorities is the clear favourite; it is supported by 73 per cent. of the public and 67 per cent. of local authorities.

The consultation shows enormous support for tougher controls on high hedges. The Government take such neighbourhood problems seriously, so last summer we announced that we would prepare legislation to give local authorities in England the power to determine complaints about problem garden hedges. The National Assembly for Wales decided that any new legislation should apply to Wales.

On territorial coverage, I should add that the Bill deals with devolved matters, so it is for the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly to decide whether to take action with respect to problem hedges. Following a separate consultation, the Scottish Parliament announced on 31 January that it has decided in principle that a statutory remedy of last resort is required. That would involve complaints to local authorities and enforcement action in appropriate cases. No commitment has been given as to when legislation will be introduced. I understand that Northern Ireland has no plans to legislate.

Mr. Bercow: Many people will enthuse about the principle, but, almost inevitably, the devil is in the detail.

[Mr. Bercow]

Accordingly, and given that there has been constructive dialogue between the Government and my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor), can the Minister offer the House information about the Government's basic thinking on the regulations that are intended to accompany the Bill? Specifically, I refer to clause 13, on which I made a few remarks.

Mr. Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman asks about regulations, which are a worry for hon. Members when they consider all sorts of Bills, not only this one. I can confirm that the regulations that would be made under clause 13 to extend powers would be subject to the affirmative procedure. Therefore, as the hon. Member for Solihull said, the hon. Gentleman should have no worries in that regard.

Unfortunately, despite the Government's commitment to introduce new laws to solve hedge problems in England and Wales, we could not find room for such a Bill in this Session's legislative programme. We are therefore pleased that the hon. Member for Solihull is pursuing the matter and that the Bill would apply to England and Wales. The hon. Gentleman has explained the contents, how the complaints system would work, how a local authority would be able to require an owner to cut back a hedge and what enforcement action would be available should he fail to comply. I do not want to cover the same ground, but I should like to outline a few reasons why the Government support the Bill.

First, the Bill is targeted at the types of hedge that are the main cause of the problem. Our consultation suggested that the vast majority of concerns relate to evergreen hedges that form tall, dense screens of foliage. It also showed that obstruction of light is the most frequent cause of complaint, and that the effects are primarily felt in residential properties. All those points must be satisfied before the procedure in the Bill can be triggered.

Another reason why we are attracted to the Bill is that it encourages people to resolve matters amicably. The best way to settle hedge problems is, without doubt, for neighbours to talk to each other and to agree a solution. The Bill proposes that local authorities need pursue complaints only after all other avenues have been explored. I listened with interest to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), as I have done many times before. He believes that there should be little or no government, and that that would make men free. That state existed a long time ago, when people had to carry spears and clubs, so such a state of affairs was not ideal then and I doubt that it would be now. I do not share the right hon. Gentleman's philosophy.

The Government will consider whether we can help people to achieve a negotiated outcome through advice and information on the new complaints system. One idea is for local authorities to have a pack to send out when anyone asks them for help with hedge problems. It could contain advice on steps that people could take to settle disputes between themselves, and could perhaps also include a sample letter for people to send to their neighbour asking them to reduce the size of their hedge, and a leaflet about any local mediation service.

In addition, the intention is to have an objective system for assessing obstruction of light, comprising a few simple tests that householders could use without specialist input. That is being developed for my Department by the Building Research Establishment, and would be incorporated in departmental guidance on the legislation. It may include facts such as the height of the hedge, its distance from windows or from the garden boundary, and whether the property faces north, south or east. We hope that that report will be available around Easter. If the Bill proceeds, as I hope it will, we will keep the House informed of developments on the report.

Mr. Forth: The Minister has been helpful in telling us that he expects guidance on the obstruction of light, but the Bill also refers to privacy and neighbourhood amenity. Is he hoping to provide guidance on those matters, or will we leave them to people's judgment, bearing in mind the fact that there is an appeals process, which may complicate the issue further?

Mr. Ainsworth: These are important issues, and the problems cannot be solved purely by objective tests. However, if we can get some objectivity into the tests—the obstruction of light may be a proxy for many of the other problems caused by these trees—we can give local authorities the same discretion as they have on planning matters. By and large, the proposed procedures are the same as those that local authorities already run through under the planning system. That is our intention. With a degree of common sense and discretion for local authorities, we are convinced that the overwhelming majority of these cases could be settled. The lobby groups and the hon. Members who have been raising this issue for a long time are also convinced of that.

In this way, hedge owners will be able to take a view on the possible outcome of a complaint to a local authority. If the result was not in their favour, such information would provide powerful encouragement for them to talk to their neighbours and agree on a solution, rather than facing the prospect of having one imposed on them by the local authority. If all else fails, however, the Bill ensures that the hedge is cut back when circumstances justify such action, thus providing the relief that hedge sufferers have long sought. It also provides effective enforcement powers to make certain that that happens.

The Government support the Bill because it could well alter general assumptions about what constitutes a reasonable hedge height. That might lead to a greater willingness to settle matters amicably. Owners might be more inclined to co-operate with their neighbours if they knew that the local authority could force them to cut back their hedges. People might also voluntarily reduce the size of their hedges. We hope that the Bill will help to prevent problems from arising in the first place, and that it will have a lasting effect.

Many hon. Members have expressed worries about costs. We estimate—we have tried to make estimates, as far as practicable—that a fairly high proportion of cases will go to appeal. We believe that there will be costs to the Department—a money resolution will be needed to cover those—and that there will be costs over and above what local authorities can charge complainants. We will have to try to settle that in the usual way when drawing up the revenue support grant settlement.

Mr. Bercow: I thank the Minister for giving way. He has been exceedingly generous.

I hope that the Minister agrees that the worst-case scenario today would be the House giving the nod to a Bill after inadequate consideration, or having missed something, only to be obliged to return to the matter later. Accordingly, although the Minister said that I should be reassured, may I ask for a further assurance on the subject of the regulations? Will he assure me that they will be subject to a consultation period of not less than three months, and that there will be proper notice of the requirement to give effect to whatever regulations subsequently flow?

Mr. Ainsworth: I have given the hon. Gentleman the assurance that I think he sought. Any regulations that flow from clause 13 will be subject to the normal affirmative procedure, involving a vote in the House, if that is called for by the hon. Gentleman or any other Member. I do not know how much further I can go. I would expect that to satisfy the hon. Gentleman; it satisfies most people in such circumstances.

As for our being expected to rush the Bill through, this is a Second Reading debate, and there will be a Committee stage. No doubt the hon. Gentleman can talk to the Whips if he wishes to be a member of the Committee, where his company and input will be appreciated as much as they are here.

The Bill represents a careful, measured and proportionate response to the problems caused by high hedges. It strikes a proper balance between the rights of hedge owners and those of their neighbours. Such issues of balance and proportion are central to any consideration of the human rights implications of the Bill. I am sure that Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), will wish to note that we have taken advice, and consider that the Bill will be compatible with the European convention on human rights.

We have had a full debate, in which many have taken part. That serves to show the concerns about the high-hedge problem, and to demonstrate that those concerns are widespread. The Bill is essential to bring relief to those who live in the shadow of high hedges, and I commend it to the House.

Mr. John M. Taylor: With the leave of the House, I will respond to the debate.

I thank all those who have taken part in the debate, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), who resolved the dilemma of his principles versus our friendship in favour of his principles.

I warmly thank the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham), who is in his place, for constantly encouraging and supporting me. The hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) conducted an extended examination of the Bill. I think that he will be kind enough to concede that I was able to deal with some of his problems by way of interventions. He asked whether a neighbour of a neighbour could complain—in other words, if an even longer shadow could be cast. I am advised that such a person could also complain. The complainant does not have to be the actual next-door neighbour. He will have heard the Minister, with the authority of speaking from the Dispatch Box, deal with the point about compliance with the Human Rights Act 1998.

I do not think that there is anything more for me to say. I commend the Bill to the House. I am bound to say from a rather self-indulgent point of view that I have rather enjoyed the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Copyright, etc. and Trade Marks (Offences and Enforcement) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

1.6 pm

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I will not begin the debate with the same biblical quotations as the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor) used in the previous debate. I suppose the only close connection between the Bill and the bible is to be found in the first chapter of the Old Testament. Only one person had copyright.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to bring the Bill before the House. I hope to be able to convince right hon. and hon. Members that it is worthy of support. It is about intellectual property crime—theft—which should concern us all. The Bill should be welcomed by industry and consumers alike. I believe that it deserves widespread support.

I am particularly grateful to the Alliance Against Counterfeiting and Piracy and to the Patent Office for their help in recent weeks. Both organisations have given me far better insight into the effects of intellectual property crime. The alliance is an umbrella group of many industry bodies concerned about the theft of their intellectual property, especially copyright and trademarks.

Last year, the alliance assessed annual losses to United Kingdom industry due to intellectual property crime and came up with the extraordinary figure of £8 billion.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I hope that the hon. Gentleman will attempt to explain where that figure comes from. I hope that I shall have the opportunity to expand on these matters, but it strikes me, having read the papers, that to conjure up a figure in this area of all areas is somewhat paradoxical, if not entirely unreliable.

Mr. Miller: I shall help the right hon. Gentleman by citing some examples that he will see in his constituency. Members of the public are being ripped off, and the scale of the operation is enormous. The figure alone is sufficient to justify a Bill that will help to tackle counterfeiting and piracy.

Not everyone is impressed by large figures. They argue that big business makes enough money to cover the losses, but that is not true. Many small businesses suffer the effects of intellectual property crime and some might not be able to survive as a result of it.

I have been contacted twice about the issue in the past couple of days. Trevor Bayliss is a well-known inventor and, like hon. Members on both sides of the House, he keenly supported the proposal to create the Academy of Invention. The idea was supported by Lord Hunt of Wirral, who used to represent the constituency neighbouring mine, and by the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan), who serves on that body's board. Trevor Bayliss urged me to make it clear to the House that the Bill has his support as an inventor. For a long time, he has wrestled with the problems of copyright theft.

I also received a letter dated 4 March from Branko Babic. Colleagues will remember that he was, in his words, "ripped off" by an American group that stole his invention, which cost him a significant sum.

I know that some regular attenders of Friday debates take a different view about the role of private Members' business. I respect their views, and it is an issue that the House should debate seriously at the appropriate time, but I urge those who take a different view not to take this opportunity to block the Bill by using the procedural vehicles open to them. I hope that I shall provide solid evidence to convince them that the Bill deals with a crime that not only affects ordinary consumers, but funds terrorism and organised crime. Such crime could result in the death of children.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The hon. Gentleman is doing the House a signal service in introducing this important measure. Nevertheless, I would like to be clear about its scope. It deals with counterfeiting and piracy, but will he explain for my benefit whether it also covers plagiarism?

Mr. Miller: Yes, it does. I shall give examples of DVDs and CDs that I hope will illustrate that point.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman has made the plea that we should let this nice Bill go through because it is very important and many people want it. The House decided to devote much attention to the previous Bill, so we have but an hour and 20 minutes to consider what is by any measure a comprehensive and complex Bill. Does he believe that, regardless of the time available to us, a worthy Bill should necessarily be let through?

Mr. Miller: When I have completed my remarks and given the right hon. Gentleman and others the chance to speak, I hope that he will agree that the Bill should go through so that the matters of detail can be considered in Committee.

It is not a complex Bill. It merely proposes tougher action against criminals. Surely the House is in favour of tougher action being taken against crime. The problem reaches as far as organised crime and terrorists.

The £8 billion of losses covers a wide range of products. It includes clothing that is sold on market stalls, DVDs, CDs and videos. The scope of the scam extends to car components, which should concern the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) given the relevance of Ford to his constituency. There is a worldwide scam of car components manufactured in Taiwan and China, which get on to the market, damage the vehicle industry in this country and put drivers and pedestrians at risk.

There is a big market in bogus perfumes, but many other products are involved, including cosmetics and alcohol. The nature of the products is such that they create a chain with a high added value. As it is so simple to produce and package an item that looks like the real thing, the figure that I have mentioned can easily be reached.

Some products are of an extremely high standard and it is difficult to tell them apart from the genuine article. The people who produce them rip off patent holders, inventors and legitimate businesses. Other products are downright dangerous and threaten life. For example, a couple of years ago car brake pads were found to have been made from compressed grass. It is unbelievable that they found their way on to the market, placing not only

the driver who purchased them at risk—perhaps more fool him—but others too. We cannot allow such products to enter the market.

Mr. Forth: The hon. Gentleman has to satisfy the House as to why such examples would not be caught by the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 as not being fit for purpose or by other provisions that are on the statute book. It strikes me that we might over-provide legislation when a proper enforcement of existing laws and regulations should do the trick. I should have thought that his example would be covered by that.

Mr. Miller: The right hon. Gentleman is right, but I want the punishment to fit the crime. I am concerned about crimes that lead to people's deaths. I do not believe that existing legislation is sufficiently strong. I demonstrated that last week at the Bill's press launch. Hon. Members may have seen the example that was shown on the BBC website. I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the Serjeant at Arms; I was not trying to be a latter-day Guy Fawkes when I set fire to a child's T-shirt in Canon row. The item was a sweatshirt with the character Kenny from Channel 4's "South Park". I do not know whether hon. Members are familiar with that programme.

Mr. Forth *indicated assent.*

Mr. Miller: I see that the right hon. Gentleman has been initiated in it. He will know that Kenny regularly gets killed and comes to a sticky end. Well, I killed Kenny last week. Although this may seem frivolous, the sweatshirt was bought for £5.95 and looked like the genuine article. It went up in a ball of flames and produced acrid smoke. It disappeared in 30 seconds. The toxic smoke would have killed and the melting plastic would have produced atrocious third-degree burns. We cannot allow such products to be in the marketplace. We have a duty to take every step to help purchasers understand that buying them puts their families at serious risk.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): The Opposition support, in principle, the Bill's objectives. Does the hon. Gentleman have a considerable number of examples of prosecutions that have occurred under existing legislation in which there has been a genuine feeling that the two-year sentence imposed was too short?

Mr. Miller: There have been cases of vehicle suspension units collapsing because fake wishbones supplied through what seemed to be a legitimate source then turned out to be counterfeit. The maximum penalty open to the court in those cases was two years' imprisonment. Given the risks not only to the individual driver but to the wider community, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees that that penalty was not adequate. The industry and trading standards officers are saying that the current legislation does not have sufficient teeth to do the job and to act as the deterrent that we would like.

Mr. Bercow: Although it is for the hon. Gentleman to develop his own argument, I am interested in what he has to say about the gateway to terrorist offences, which is an important point. Further to the point my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) raised, has the hon. Gentleman done any research into recidivism on the part of people who have received those rather modest sentences? Have they reoffended in similar ways?

Mr. Miller: I do not have those details, but when I develop my argument on the point that interests the hon. Gentleman, he will understand the need to have available to the court a wide range of penalties that separate the Rodney and Del Boy characters from organised criminals and terrorists.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): I am broadly supportive of what the hon. Gentleman seeks to do. Does he accept that while there is widespread revulsion at the crimes that he is describing, it is vital that we improve the detection rate for those crimes? Is he saying that increasing the penalties will have a deterrent effect that will successfully reduce the number of crimes? Is that the intention of the Bill?

Mr. Miller: Those in the field, especially some trading standards officers, have expressed the view that their job would be made easier if there were greater penalties.

Mr. Foster: I wonder.

Mr. Miller: Well, that is their view, and they are the professionals.

Mr. Foster: The job of trading standards officers is predominantly to detect those crimes, and they clearly would wish that there were fewer such crimes. Can the hon. Gentleman tell us how those officers believe that their job would be made easier by the increased penalties that he proposes?

Mr. Miller: Simply because discussion in the House and in Committee will promote the tenets of the Bill and raise awareness of the scams that are operating, the risk that they pose to the public and the way in which they fund organised crime. The view in the industry and among the professionals who seek to enforce the legislation is that we can play a part, and that is what I hope we are doing.

Mr. Gibb: Returning to the case of the car suspension units, which sounds appalling, what sentence was handed down? Was it two years' imprisonment, and if so, has the culprit served the full sentence?

Mr. Miller: I think that the individual involved did not receive a prison sentence. That raises the question of Parliament's role in raising awareness of the problem. I am grateful to the Front-Bench spokesmen for the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats for stating their broad support for the general principles of my Bill. The more the House collectively states that current standards are not good enough, the more public awareness will be raised.

On a more light-hearted note, the problem has involved perfume, including one case in which urine was used as a stabiliser; extremely low-quality video recordings, including pirated tapes made in the cinema ensuring that the viewer sees the back of the heads of the people in the rows in front, which might be regarded as making the

[Mr. Miller]

experience of watching more real. There have also been software with viruses attached and children's videos recorded over old porn tracks, with the result that, every now and then, children get a glimpse of things that I am sure Parliament would prefer they did not see. Many other products are affected.

One could say that Parliament should not legislate in an area in which the principle of caveat emptor should apply. One could say that my Bill represents an attack on Del Boy and Rodney and that it will damage entrepreneurship. One could say that some manufacturers have made enough money out of their products and are thus fair game for the copyists. Such views are misguided—one need only see who lies behind the copying to realise that. Sweatshops, organised criminals and the so-called Real IRA are among those involved.

On 3 December 2000, *The Sunday Times* did the country a favour by publishing an article following some research its journalists had carried out focusing on software associated with the new Sony PlayStation. It states:

"Outwardly, the garish design on the cover of the hit computer game Street Fighter would fool all but the most fanatical player. Open it up, however, and the amateurish scrawl in black in on the disk shows that it is a counterfeit. The disk is one of thousands that the police suspect are being produced to raise funds for the Real IRA, the terrorist organisation responsible for the Omagh bomb that killed 29 people two years ago. According to a republican source, the fake disks, designed for Sony's new PlayStation 2 consoles, are being created in a secret factory in south Armagh to cash in on the pre-Christmas demand that has followed the machine's launch last month."

It was launched in November last year.

"Selling on market stalls for £30 each—while supplies of the £45 originals run dry in the shops—they stand to make £20,000 a week for the Real IRA, according to the source. Disks obtained by The Sunday Times from a republican source have been passed to the RUC, which is investigating. At least two men involved in the counterfeiting—one a 42-year-old racketeer from Dundalk—have close links to the Real IRA leadership, police confirmed. In a fresh drive to raise funds, the Real IRA has also moved in on the IRA's tobacco-smuggling empire. Security sources say the Real IRA is making up to £500,000 per shipment, money that is supplemented by extortion, video and record piracy and dealing in drugs. Much of it eventually translates into guns and explosives."

Mr. Bercow: Before he concludes his remarks, will the hon. Gentleman say something about the way in which the Bill will strengthen search warrant provisions? That is an important matter which deserves detailed explanation.

Mr. Miller: Clause 6 deals with search warrants. As the hon. Gentleman will see, it covers all parts of the United Kingdom—hence the rather complicated wording. Reasonable grounds have to be provided, as is normal, but a justice of the peace

"may issue a warrant authorising a constable to enter and search the premises, using such reasonable force as is necessary."

The hon. Gentleman will recall that we had a not too dissimilar debate when considering the Vehicles (Crime) Bill in Committee a while ago. That is a tidying up operation involving section 92 of the Trade Marks Act 1994.

Goods find their way to consumers by many routes. Some retailers are being taken in and are not aware that they are committing a crime, but many must know what they are doing. However, if they do not, and they are offered goods at discounted prices, they should always ask, "What is the source? Can we be sure of the supply chain involved?"

On 15 November last year, the *Daily Express* cited several products that it had identified with well-known brand names, such as Calvin Klein, Nike and Timberland. Some retailers will have great difficulty knowing whether they have purchased the real article. I want to ensure that, through our role as Parliament and through supportive mechanisms, trading standards officers and the Department of Trade and Industry, retailers are given good, solid advice on suspect shipments. I do not want to penalise the person who is genuinely had, just as I do not want to penalise the consumer who is had. I want to go back up the chain and hit the cowboys.

In January last year, the *Evening Standard* went on a little shopping expedition. In an articled headed, "Welcome to rip-off retailers inc.", it listed the goods that it had acquired. It said:

"in the drinks line bottles of 'Glencarnie' whisky and 'Kermanoff' vodka costing £5.50 each. The 'Glencarnie' bottle was labelled 'whiskey' on one side and 'whisky' on the other"—

the difference will be well known to Scots people.

Mr. Forth: What idiots would buy it?

Mr. Miller: The right hon. Gentleman may ask that question, but the labelling on those products is more subtle than might be imagined.

The article continued:

If it was computer games you were after, a copied version of the South Park Rally PlayStation Game, complete with a photocopied label, cost £10. An original would cost normally cost around £40".

Mr. Forth: At this point in the hon. Gentleman's argument, it is important for us to understand where those items were purchased. I am intrigued to know whether they were purchased in a legitimate retail outlet of repute, or from someone with a fold-up suitcase or a barrow on a pavement. Surely the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that if the average consumer buys a poorly labelled product from someone with a suitcase on the pavement, he can expect the same quality or consumer protection as he could if he bought it in a regular retail outlet.

Mr. Miller: I totally agree with the right hon. Gentleman. The particular example cited in the *Evening Standard* was bought at a car boot sale in Hackney Wick, London. My purpose in quoting that article, which lists products ranging from tobacco, whisky and vodka to CDs, is to invite Londoners to think about the events of last week. They may have thought they were simply purchasing cheap goods and that it was okay to buy them, but those purchases could be funding the terrorist atrocity that we saw in London. We must do more as a nation to raise awareness of that fact.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): The distinction between someone who sells goods from a suitcase and a reputable retailer is not always clear to the consumer. My hon. Friend will know that yesterday I observed a raid on several premises by trading standards officers and the police in south Birmingham. Court cases may follow, so it would not be appropriate for me to go

into detail. Suffice it to say that those raids were on a combination of private houses and shops. Clearly, in that case we were talking about shops, rather than suitcases. The end result of the raid was that counterfeit goods with a total value of about £67,000 were recovered. It is important to record the big business involved and the fact that, for the consumer, it is not always easy to distinguish between the reputable and the disreputable.

Mr. Miller: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention and for the fact that he has taken such an interest in my Bill. I wrote to all hon. Members and told them that, if they wished, the Alliance against Counterfeiting and Piracy would provide them with information about what was happening in their constituency. Several colleagues have written to me asking for that information.

The Bill has three main aims: to increase penalties for the crime of copyright theft; to strengthen search warrant provisions; and to give greater powers to allow rights owners to obtain forfeiture of infringing material. It amends the criminal provisions in intellectual property law and, more specifically, copyright law. It deals with rights on performances, fraudulent reception of conditional access transmission by the use of unauthorised decoders, and trademarks.

In general, intellectual property law provides private rights that can be enforced by rights owners using civil remedies. In addition, it is a criminal offence to make for sale or hire, or deal with, illegal material. That material includes pirate copies, which are copies of material protected by copyright, such as music, films and computer software which have been made without authorisation; copies of performances which have been made without the permission of the performer holding the recording rights—known as bootleg copies; and unauthorised decoders that allow people access to transmission such as cable and satellite television.

Mr. Bercow: Inevitably, because this is the hon. Gentleman's Bill, he knows more about it than anyone else in the House. For my benefit, will he explain in a sentence or two how search warrant procedures would be strengthened? I accept that they would be, but I am not clear how the Bill makes them stronger, and how it differs from existing arrangements.

Mr. Miller: I hope to come to that shortly.

To finish my list of examples, illegal material includes counterfeit material, which comprises goods, packaging and labels bearing a trademark that has been applied without the consent of the trademark owner. Those criminal provisions are altered by the Bill.

Clause 1 increases the maximum penalty for conviction on indictment for offences relating to making for sale or hire, or dealing in, material infringing copyright, illicit recordings infringing performers' rights, and unauthorised decoders. The new maximum penalty is an unlimited fine, and may include up to 10 years in prison to reflect the seriousness of those crimes and bring penalties into line with those for similar trademark offences.

Clause 2 allows the police to obtain warrants for all the offences that I outlined. Those provisions are additional to any powers available to the police under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, and should ensure that there are no impediments to a full investigation of offending behaviour in the indicated areas, which could remain if PACE alone applied.

As I explained earlier, clause 6 introduces further warrant arrangements and seizure provisions relating to counterfeit goods and articles for making them. Clauses 3, 4 and 5 introduce measures to allow the forfeiture of goods infringing copyright and articles designed or adapted for making such copies.

In view of the time, and as I know that other hon. Members want to contribute to the debate, let me pose a question: is the Bill a panacea? No, it is not. It is a start. The subject is incredibly complicated. There are other issues to be addressed, such as electronic transmission. Those who are on the mailing list for *Teleworker*, as I am, will see an interesting article by David Flint about copyright problems in cyberspace. That is a massively complicated problem, far too big to deal with in a private Member's Bill, but I know that hon. Members on both sides of the House have indicated their desire to engage in the international discussions that may be necessary to develop law in that regard.

My Bill is a step in the right direction. By increasing penalties and improving definitions, I want the House to raise the profile of the crime and stamp out some of the activities that are going on. A partnership is needed between business and the consumer which, together with the courts, Customs and Excise and trading standards officers, can make a difference. Let us put aside party differences, and differences about private Members' Bills. Let us show the responsible side of Parliament, and demonstrate that the House is no friend to any criminal.

1.42 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): The Opposition do not oppose the Bill in principle. In a free society, the preservation and enforcement of property rights is vital to that freedom. It is the essence of the rule of law. The enforcement and protection of property is key to the success of a capitalist society.

In an article in *The Sunday Times* a few months ago headed "The importance of title", Luke Johnson, the entrepreneur behind the Pizza Express chain, stated:

> "The issue of ownership and title to property is a major reason why the Western world has made economic progress and why developing countries struggle to get richer."

He went on:

> "It is estimated that only 25 of the world's 207 nations have a contractual basis for property matters."

He observed that

> "in countries where ownership is uncertain, assets cannot be used to raise debt. Lenders will not extend credit".

The consequence of that is that there is no investment, or insufficient investment, in those countries to bring about the wealth creation that is needed. He commented at the end of his article:

> "All over the Third World, large proportions of the population are the equivalent of squatters: always at risk of eviction or having their property seized. In such shifting circumstances, long-term enterprise is impossible."

In defining property in that article, Luke Johnson did not confine it to real estate. He included intangible intellectual property, such as patents, licences, franchises and copyrights. Without the protection of intellectual

[Mr. Nick Gibb]

property rights, the incentive to innovate, design and discover is reduced, as the rewards for those endeavours are confiscated by others.

Mr. Miller: That is what attracted me to use the opportunity of private Member's legislation to develop the Bill. One of the ways in which we can help Britain's innovators and inventors is by closing some of the great gaps that the hon. Gentleman highlights. The House needs to take a strong lead.

Mr. Gibb: The hon. Gentleman is right. It is encouraging that the Bill has come from his side of the House—the left in politics, broadly speaking. Traditionally, the left has had a less "pro" attitude than supporters of the free market towards property. It is encouraging that a Labour MP is promoting the Bill.

Mr. Bercow: I agree with my hon. Friend about the welcome genesis of the Bill. However, does he agree that the reason is simple? It is entirely proper that where there is a choice between support for property or acceptance of piracy, most people would support property.

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend is right. Property is crucial to the functioning of a free society and to the rule of law. If people's property rights—especially in intellectual property—are not protected, the incentive to create such intellectual property is diminished through its confiscation by others who thus diminish its rewards. That disincentive applies whether such confiscation is carried out by Governments or by criminal individuals. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) is right in principle to introduce measures that help to protect those rights.

The Opposition have some concerns about the drafting of the Bill. It would be more appropriate to discuss some of its more detailed proposals in Committee, but they are of sufficient importance to air during Second Reading. I shall do so as briefly as possible.

The Opposition bow to no one in the Labour party when it comes to understanding the importance of property rights in securing a free and prosperous society. However, we take great pains to ensure that we do not undermine either those rights or others, such as the right to privacy and the free enjoyment of property unhindered by excessive intervention by the state. Those rights—those civil liberties—are the prime responsibility of Members of the House. I make no apology for saying that the Bill as currently drafted needs careful scrutiny to ensure that it does not unnecessarily or hastily extend the rights of the state to intervene in the activities and property of innocent individuals and legitimate businesses.

Mr. Miller: I completely agree.

Mr. Gibb: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support; we seem to have a consensus on the issue in the House at present.

The principle and motivation behind the Bill are fine and good, but we need to consider the detail of its provisions. My first concern is that, as the Bill extends the power of the state to obtain search warrants and gives greater powers of forfeiture, it should really be a Government Bill. I am sorry to say that, with all due respect to the hon. Gentleman, we all know that the measure is a hand-out Bill.

The explanatory notes were prepared by the Department of Trade and Industry, which also carried out the regulatory impact assessment. In view of the important powers given to the Government in the measure, it should have been introduced by them, so that Ministers were accountable for its drafting and its passage, and so that the Government could be held accountable by the public at an election, if the public felt that the Bill went too far—or, indeed, not far enough.

The Opposition share the concerns of the Bill's supporters about copyright protection and counterfeit goods, but we must be absolutely sure that existing legislation is inadequate. The explanatory notes summarise the Bill as follows:

"The Bill seeks to rationalise these criminal provisions by removing some of the differences between them.

The notes go on to state:

"There is considerable overlap between the offences relating to the different material indicated above (and other criminal offences such as those in trade descriptions law and law relating to fraud) in that offending behaviour invariably falls within the scope of more than one offence."

It seems that the drive behind the Bill—its whole purpose—is to rationalise and simplify.

The explanatory notes contain no discussion or elucidation of the way in which lack of rationalisation impedes the work of the authorities or the police. No careful analysis has been carried out of existing legal provisions and the way in which they hamper or hinder the police and the enforcement authorities.

There is no evidence of the courts handing out a series of two-year sentences in circumstances when higher sentences could be imposed if a 10-year maximum penalty existed. Earlier, I mentioned the case of the wishbone car suspension, which the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston gave as an example. I assumed that he was making the point that a two-year prison sentence had been imposed because of the inadequate state of the statute book. However, even in that case, no prison sentence was given.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is making an important point, which was raised with the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston during his opening contribution. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to show at some stage during consideration of the Bill that the current length of sentence is effectively a charter for recidivism, or a catalyst for copycat behaviour? Neither proposition has yet been demonstrated.

Mr. Gibb: My hon. Friend is right. That is not a reason for refusing the Bill a hearing in Committee, but in Committee, we must establish that existing provisions are inadequate, and that the Bill increases them only to the extent necessary to reduce counterfeiting crime.

Putting longer sentences on the statute book does not always act as a deterrent; their mere existence does not deter. They act as a deterrent only if they are imposed. I am therefore worried about the Bill's provision for an increase in penalties from two years to 10 years.

I am also worried about the strengthening of the search warrant provisions and the greater powers involving forfeiture of people's property. Those new state powers are significant, but the only reason given for them in the explanatory notes is to rationalise the law. That is insufficient reason for increasing the powers available to the state authorities so significantly.

Mr. Miller: The Alliance Against Counterfeiting and Piracy provided the following example:

"the court cannot grant a search warrant even in the face of evidence that a person is selling, letting for hire or offering for sale, in the course of a business, an article which infringes copyright. However, the court can grant a search warrant if that same person distributes the same infringing article in the course of the same business."

Such contradictions need tidying up.

Mr. Gibb: I hope that we can cover those detailed issues in Committee, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will give examples of sentences that were given and served, but should have been much longer.

Paragraph 16 of the explanatory notes states:

"Additional enforcement effort by public sector enforcers is not expected to be the consequence of the provisions in the Bill".

That leads to the question of what constitutes the purpose of the Bill. After stating that there will be no additional enforcement effort, the paragraph continues:

"Cuts in manpower are not planned though, as the expectation is that any savings as a result of the Bill will be directed into additional enforcement effort."

The same paragraph states that there will be no additional enforcement effort, but that there will be such an effort as a result of saving people's time. There is a considerable degree of confusion in the Bill and the explanatory notes—and confusion, as hon. Members now know, is a sacking offence.

There is also confusion in paragraph 6 of the regulatory impact assessment, which states:

"The possibility of increased prison terms is unlikely to give rise to additional costs as in practice longer sentences for intellectual property crime are often already possible by prosecuting for another offence such as conspiracy to defraud (or trade mark offences) where at least seven years in prison is already possible".

We often delude ourselves that simply passing a law or introducing a whole raft of new regulations will solve any problem that we identify. The reality, in most cases, is that the policy, in the form of Government action and Government priorities, needs changing, rather than the law. In Britain, we have a rather amateurish unprofessional approach to the management of the state sector. We pile ever more unworkable burdensome regulations on to business, while education continues to decline, our hospitals are filthy and inadequate, crime is rising and clear-up rates are falling.

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): Come on, Nick.

Mr. Gibb: Well, that is what the public think about public services; it is certainly what I think of them.

Dr. Howells: It ill becomes the hon. Gentleman to cast aspersions on the NHS in that way and to describe all our hospitals as filthy. We have some brilliant hospitals, and he well knows it. I have heard of over-egging, but that was almost obscene.

Mr. Gibb: For a moment, I was being political. However, what I said reflects people's concern about the state sector services. The point that I was making was that all the problems in the state sector stem not from inadequate laws but from wrong priorities and wrong policy from Government, regardless of party. This is a "state versus the individual" issue.

It seems odd that we are discussing tough new 10-year sentences for copyright theft when 30,000 convicted criminals are being released from prison early, 1,300 of whom have been convicted of robbery and given sentences of only 26 months, but served only 11 months. There is also early release for people convicted of manslaughter, attempted murder, wounding, actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm, drug dealing, cruelty to children, sex offences and burglary. I am not making a party political point about the early release scheme, because even under the Conservative Government, the average sentence for burglary was usually much less than 18 months.

The courts are not passing tough sentences for real serious crime. My concern is that the House can introduce whatever maximum sentences we like—provision for long sentences for this kind of crime is already on the statute book—but the courts will simply not hand them down. Perhaps we ought to examine the priorities of the courts and the criminal justice system, rather than placing another string of laws on the statute book.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend is making an important point about the gulf that exists between what statute law provides in relation to sentencing and what the judiciary, in its robust independence, decides to do. Will he comment along similar lines about whether he believes that sufficient constables will be available to discharge the duties placed on them by the Bill? I refer to the important new powers in new section 297B(4) of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 which is added by clause 2(4).

In Bromley, there are 50 fewer policemen than there were four years ago. It was suggested earlier that Bromley was a hotbed of counterfeit products. How on earth are the police going to protect the people of Bromley if fewer police are to be given more responsibilities under the Bill?

Mr. Gibb: My right hon. Friend has made a point that I was about to raise. We must assess our priorities in tackling crime. In Littlehampton, in my constituency, a 13-year-old boy received 24 stab wounds one night a few months ago. We do not have enough police to patrol the promenade in Littlehampton during the night. Yet here we are piling more duties on to the police, such as collecting fraudulent "Star Wars" videos. We need to reassess our priorities, and we must consider that issue in detail in Committee.

Here we are proposing a 10-year sentence for copyright theft, but no one would receive such a sentence for counterfeiting a Louis Vuitton handbag, in which case the statute would have zero deterrent effect. Worse, the disrepute and contempt in which our criminal law is held by the law-abiding public would be deepened, as would

[Mr. Gibb]

their cynicism about this country's law and order system, and politicians and politics in general. Alternatively, 10-year sentences would be passed, which seems disproportionate given the light sentences being delivered for much more serious offences such as mugging and burglary that directly affect people's quality of life.

Mr. Bercow: I have thought through that precise point, which is an important consideration, but in fairness to the promoter, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller), does not my hon. Friend accept that—unless he proposes to truncate the independence of the judiciary by introducing mandatory sentences—the hon. Gentleman is at least entitled to argue for his Bill in Committee and to show to Members' satisfaction that it is likely to improve matters without a requirement for mandatory sentences?

Mr. Gibb: That point needs to be raised, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston will raise it in Committee.

We must think about the timing of the Bill. For every 100,000 members of the public, 10,111 criminal offences are committed every year. There were 129,000 recorded incidents of violent crime in 1979. The figure is 703,000 today. The British crime survey records 2.1 million instances of violent crime in 1981 and 3.2 million today. Clearly, crime is increasing hugely, so we need to ask ourselves whether it is right to divert scarce resources to deal with such property crimes.

Recorded crime clear-up rates are also down to less than 25 per cent.—only one in four crimes is cleared up. We need to consider the priorities carefully. Should we, as a nation, put ever more resources into tackling motoring offences, when we have some of the safest roads in Europe? Such a question needs to be addressed when we propose adding to the list of offences and penalties. Yes, we need to protect intellectual property, but last weekend, in Bersted in my constituency, an elderly lady of 82 was tied up for five hours by young thugs and £60,000 worth of her antique furniture was stolen.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I have given the hon. Gentleman some latitude, but he should now return to the Bill. His examples are straying further and further afield.

Mr. Gibb: I shall obey your stricture, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but the point that I was making goes to the root of my concerns about some of the provisions. People are not protected against such crimes. Stealing £60,000 worth of furniture is a property crime, and the lady was tied up for five hours. That should not happen. We should protect such people before we protect Louis Vuitton.

I hope that such issues will be considered in Committee. I also hope that the Committee will examine the proposed new powers of entry for the enforcement authorities. The concept that a man's home is his castle is an ancient one that goes to the very heart of our legal system. William Pitt said:

"the poorest man in his cottage bid defiance to the Crown. It may be frail—its roof may shake—the wind may enter—the rain may enter—but the King of England cannot enter—all his force dares not cross the threshold of the ruined tenement."

We in the House should tread warily before extending even further the exemptions from and exceptions to that ancient rule.

All hon. Members are concerned about the protection of intellectual property rights. We are perhaps a little less concerned about protection against false "Star Wars" videos or false Chanel perfume—both of which were referred to in the explanatory notes—than about protecting people against fake goods that cause injury to children. We are more concerned to protect patents for important, expensively developed drugs than to protect the income of Paul McCartney and producers of overpriced CDs. None the less, private property rights should be protected by the law, just as we give protection to people in their own homes.

Dr. Howells: I have rarely heard such nonsense. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the famous people and brands that he has mentioned are not worthy of protection? They offer employment to tens of thousands of people in this country, and are involved in a global trade in which this country should play a great part. In his diatribe against the Bill and all it stands for, is he saying that that does not matter? The Bill is about intellectual property rights, but I suspect that he does not understand that issue.

Mr. Gibb: No, it is a matter of priorities. We have extensive laws that protect intellectual property, which are correct and should be strengthened. We live in a society in which violent crime is out of control and people are scared in their homes at night. Is it more important to protect the income of Paul McCartney and manufacturers of overpriced CDs than to protect elderly ladies in my constituency who are alone at night?

Mr. Miller: Will the hon. Gentleman reflect on the example that I gave of the Real IRA, and similar examples involving Russian organised crime?

Mr. Gibb: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the only way to deal with terrorism in this country is to have a huge army of trading standards officers looking out for all the sources of income used by terrorists—or should we clamp down on the terrorists themselves? The Government are releasing terrorists, so they should consider their policy on terrorism and not use consumer protection legislation to deal with the problem.

The Conservatives support the principle and thrust of the Bill. We want to protect all intellectual property rights, which go to the heart of a free capitalist society. I hope that the Bill will receive a Second Reading so that we can debate these issues at greater length in Committee.

2.7 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): My hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) was coruscating in his critique of the Bill. His manner was a little more acerbic than I had expected. He is a good personal friend outside the House, but I am bound to say to him that he was a little uncharitable towards the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller).

I have crossed swords with the hon. Gentleman a number of times, not least during the passage of the Vehicles (Crime) Bill. I irritated him, and he irritated me. I think that there is a powerful rationale for the Bill, and

I respect his good intentions. I think that there would be widespread, if not universal, agreement about the importance of counteracting counterfeiting and piracy. Probably the only people who would dissent from the principle that we should do something about it are those who are engaged in that practice and are deriving enormous profits in the process.

One can argue the toss about the rigour, detail, exactitude and scope of copyright and patent law. There is genuine room for disagreement about how extensive it should be, and an argument about the balance between the protection of the creator or originator and the legitimate entitlements of others who seek to enter a market. I do not think that the hon. Gentleman and I would disagree about the scope for a discussion on that subject.

However, the central purpose of the Bill, which is to counteract a widespread and apparently growing phenomenon, is cogent. I was taken aback by the figure of £8 billion a year that the hon. Gentleman gave.

Mr. Miller: So was I.

Mr. Bercow: Moreover, we must bear in mind the £1 billion annual loss to the Exchequer in revenues forgone. These are not trifling matters, and they ought to be weighed carefully when we consider whether to give the Bill a Committee stage.

I have several concerns. The first relates to the scope of the Bill. When I asked the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston about plagiarism, he said he thought it was broadly covered. I am not criticising him, but I fear that the Bill does not cover what many would regard as the offence, or the injustice, of plagiarism. A few moments ago, with characteristic thoughtfulness, the Under-Secretary of State showed me a note—presumably provided by those whom we are not entitled to identify in the House, still less to name, but who are employed in his service—informing me that plagiarism itself was not covered. However—this is important—if someone copies another person's work with a view to commercial distribution, that offence will be covered.

The worry in relation to plagiarism is that, if the provisions were too widely drawn, the Bill might cover someone copying another's work in a school, further education college or higher education institution. That is certainly not the intention, and, as I have said, I do not criticise the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston; but I think it important to understand what the Bill does and does not cover. What it does cover is very significant.

I have a couple of concerns which, although they certainly should not prevent the Bill's progress today, will need to be properly scrutinised in Committee. One relates to clause 2(4). Not for the first time and probably not for the last, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton somewhat anticipated me on this point, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). My thunder was slightly, although not entirely, stolen.

Subsection (4) refers to the execution of a warrant issued under subsection (1). Subsection (4) of the proposed new section states that

"a constable may seize an article if he reasonably believes that it is evidence that any offence under section 297A(1) has been or is about to be committed."

I think it important that, in conferring powers on the police, we do so confident in the knowledge that they will have the wherewithal—in terms not merely of resources but of intelligence and know-how—to practise those powers effectively.

As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will understand, I do not mean to cast aspersions on the police in any way. Nevertheless, these matters involve considerable detail and, as far as the criminal is concerned, no little sophistication. The hon. Gentleman said earlier that his Bill, in essence, was not complicated: he said that it was conceptually simple, or words to that effect. That may be true, but the hon. Gentleman made the equally valid point that the overall challenge of counteracting counterfeiting and piracy was enormous, and that a great deal of complexity was involved.

I rather appreciated the hon. Gentleman's self-effacement and modesty. So often, a Member proposing a measure will give the impression that it is a panacea. The hon. Gentleman wisely played down expectations, and said that of course it was not a panacea; it was a first step, or a start, which would no doubt be built on in the future. It is important, however, for us to be sure that the police will know how to give effect to the powers conferred on them by the Bill.

My observation at this stage—it may be that the hon. Gentleman can reassure us in Committee—is that if there is considerable complexity involved, and if a criminal has made an extremely clever copy of an original work, such as a CD or a DVD, how can we be confident that a police officer, with the many and varied responsibilities that fall within his or her remit, will be competent to judge whether a particular article is evidence of the commission of an offence under the highly complicated and detailed Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988?

My understanding is that the Bill is designed to amend the 1988 Act, which was passed under the Conservative Government. I remember, partly because I had a modest commercial interest through a client at the time, that it was a formidable piece of legislation. I make the simple point—I do not want to dilate on it or to exaggerate its significance—that we need to know that it is reasonable for us to expect the police to grasp the detail sufficiently to exercise the warrant in a way that is prudent and in a fashion that does not do violence to the legitimate rights of those who have not at that stage been convicted of any offence. I would not go beyond that today, but I think that it is a legitimate point. I hope that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston will respond to the concern in Committee. That is my first main anxiety about the likely effectiveness of the Bill as unamended.

Secondly, I shall pick up on what my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton said about sentencing, about which I have a little anxiety. I am no wet, do-gooding, hand-wringing, feeble liberal. It will be well understood in the House that I am not an enthusiast for such an approach. Many a time and oft, I have excoriated the Government for their institutionalised wimpishness in countering crime. I am not soft on sentences. However, it is important for the integrity of the House, which I would like to see restored and enhanced, that we do not place upon the statute book provision for sentences willy-nilly and without proper regard to their likely impact.

[Mr. Bercow]

On that point, I was a little less satisfied with what the hon. Gentleman had to say. That is no reason why we should not get on, as I hope and expect we will, to consider the Bill in Committee. I think that the hon. Gentleman owes it to himself, to the industry, to the House and to potential victims of the commission of such crime to let us know exactly what he expects from the penalties that he envisages.

The hon. Gentleman is suggesting penalties of 10-year custodial sentences. That is a significant sentence.

Mr. Miller: A range of sentences.

Mr. Bercow: Indeed.

There is a precedent—I accept that the figure has not been plucked out of thin air—because a number of offences that come within patent law already attract such sentences. In a sense, what the hon. Gentleman is proposing is by way of co-ordination of sentencing policy or—dare I use the term?—perhaps he has in mind harmonisation.

We must know whether the imposition of such sentences would be likely to deter the recidivism that might now be apparent, or would act as a disincentive and deterrent to commit copycat offences. I am not sure. I do not want to be in the business of knee-jerk sentencing policy, or the passage knee-jerk legislation with what might be described as provision for symbolic penalties, which it is not seriously envisaged will be implemented in practice. We need to know more about these matters than we know now.

There is a related concern, and here I fear that some people, including the hon. Gentleman, will think that I am being somewhat feeble, but I hope that I am not. In terms of justice and equity, we must have a sense of proportion about penalties for these offences and how they relate to those applied for the commission of other arguably more serious and certainly more violent offences.

Even if the 10-year penalty were not applied under the terms of clause 2 but a substantial penalty exceeding four years' imprisonment were applied, it would necessarily follow that the culprits would not be eligible for early release under the Government's home detention curfew scheme. I admit that that causes me a flutter of anxiety about the Bill.

I would feel more comfortable about the Bill if the hon. Gentleman can reassure me that the proposed sentencing policy is open to change. However, I am concerned by the idea that someone committing such an offence could be banged up for a lengthy period with no opportunity for remission. After all, members of the Labour party—possibly including the hon. Gentleman himself—have regularly complained about overcrowding in our prisons. This country has a very large prison population by comparison with the rest of Europe, so we should take great care not to add gratuitously to it.

Mr. Miller: I understand the hon. Gentleman's point and I welcome the thrust of his remarks. I assure him that I am prepared to countenance debate and amendments in Committee if the Bill meets with the approval of the House.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that reassurance.

My final point relates to the summary of the regulatory appraisal. The hon. Gentleman knows that many of us are unhappy about regulatory impact assessments and the Government's attitude to them. Paragraph 17 of the explanatory notes refers to possible additional costs, but it is gloriously vague and unspecific. Frankly, that is not good enough. I am confident that the hon. Gentleman can do and will do a lot better, but paragraph 17 states:

"Additional costs to the public sector are not expected except with respect to consumer awareness where some expenditure has already been committed."

I am sorry, but that is not very reassuring. What is the "some expenditure" that "has already been committed"? What is the strength of the expectation that additional costs will not be incurred?

Sometimes the Government go much further than that and say that there will be no increase in costs at all. We all know that it is a case of "What are those pigs I see flying in front of my very eyes?", and that, in due course, the costs will increase as surely as the passage of the seasons. When we consider the Bill's detail rather more thoroughly in Committee in the way that the hon. Gentleman's advocacy of it warrants, I hope that we shall receive more satisfactory answers.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the introduction of the Bill. A serious evil is apparently growing, it imposes enormous costs, it needs to be tackled and he was right to draw it to the attention of the House. I hope that we shall have a thorough debate about the detailed manner in which we give effect to the laudable principles that he has articulated.

2.23 pm

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): I am pleased to speak about the Bill and confirm that the Government support it. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) on introducing it.

I welcome the interesting and useful debate that has taken place. It has highlighted very well the need for the Bill and exposed the inadequacies of the arguments of the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), who clearly has no conception of the importance of intellectual property rights and the part that they play in any advanced economy. He gave a disgraceful performance when he attempted to pooh-pooh some of the best products that are made in this country. In doing so, he attempted to trivialise my hon. Friend's argument that the crime should be treated seriously.

Mr. Bercow: Will the Minister give way?

Dr. Howells: No, the hon. Gentleman has had his penny's worth.

The Bill is aimed at giving enforcers better tools to allow them to tackle a crime that should concern us all, even if it does not worry the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton. Intellectual property crime may not mean much to many people—as we have seen—but most people have heard of counterfeiting and piracy. I prefer to use the term IP crime because other terms often lead people to believe that it is a Robin Hood crime, which is how the hon. Gentleman described it. He thinks that the offence does not matter because the products are overpriced and the criminals, even if they are terrorists,

should be allowed to get on with selling their products. We believe that counterfeited goods and piracy are a disgrace.

We are all victims of IP crime. We have heard a good deal about that today.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr. Howells: I hope that my hon. Friend will permit me to continue.

Legitimate business may, and does, lose money because of IP crime. Consumers are also seriously affected by it. I have been involved in various initiatives over the past couple of years to highlight the consumer angle, because it is not widely understood. Consumers often think that they are getting a bargain when they buy a fake, but the bargain could have cost jobs in their local area or helped to fund serious organised crime. In addition, it could do them much physical damage.

I am pleased that the Bill will close some of the loopholes in the law on IP crime. Intellectual property is a reserved matter and as such the Bill will extend to the whole of the United Kingdom. In supporting it, the Government are mindful of the implications for human rights. I have taken advice and consider it to be compatible with the European convention on human rights.

The Bill is a harmonising measure. It reaches across the criminal provisions in different aspects of intellectual property law which relate to offences of making for sale or hire, or dealing in, illegal material. It copies the best provisions and transfers them to existing legislation, so it contains nothing new. It builds on existing best provision and is a worthwhile measure.

It is entirely appropriate that the penalties for offences relating to certain copyright cases are increased so that the maximum matches those that are available for trademark offences. Although there is much overlap between copyright and trademark offences, it is right that even when there is no trademark offence, an unlimited fine or up to 10 years imprisonment is available for the most serious offending behaviour. My hon. Friend made that clear. The copyright offences that the Bill covers can be as serious as trademark offences.

I am in a generous mood and I know that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) wants to speak, so I shall finish by commending the Bill to the House.

2.27 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me the time between now and 2.30 pm to explain my view on the Bill. I shall do my best to get started on my remarks.

I have identified several problems. The first concerns the relationship between genuine and copy or fake products, which lies at the heart of the Bill. It is not clear whether we are dealing with consumer protection, safety, or profit and investment. There has been some confusion if we are talking about all three. There has also been a lack of validity in the size or scale of the problem. We have been given figures, but very little—if anything—to support them.

The explanatory notes give rise to several issues. On the first page, there is a reference to maximum penalties, police search and seizure powers and forfeiture of illegal material. Those are serious and grave matters. Any Bill that attempts to tackle such issues would require the most thorough examination on Second Reading, in Committee and beyond.

We also have the options that are helpfully laid out in the regulatory impact assessment. Although one could never tell from this debate, there was a process for considering different options for approaching the problem that everybody has so far agreed is very serious. However, we have not received an explanation for the rejection of some of those other options by the promoter of the Bill and, by implication, the Government—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 23 March.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

PENSION ANNUITIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 16 March.

EXORCISM OF CHILDREN (PROHIBITION) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 6 April.

VACCINATION OF CHILDREN (PARENTAL CHOICE) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 16 March.

DIVORCE (RELIGIOUS MARRIAGES) BILL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [2 February], That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 23 March.

OUTWORKING BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 16 March.

CLIMATE CHANGE BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 16 March.

ADOPTION OF SEWERS BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred till Friday 30 March.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [28 February],

That the Motions in the name of Mr. Secretary Straw relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if they related to instruments subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) in respect of which notice has been given that the instruments be approved—*[Mr. Sutcliffe].*

Hon. Members: Object.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Foreign Language Teaching

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

2.32 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): I am grateful for the chance to discuss the Nuffield report on the teaching of foreign languages in our schools. I think that it was Bismarck, who spoke many languages, including French, Italian, Russian and English, who said that speaking many tongues was something that head waiters should do. Charles V, the 16th-century emperor, said that he spoke Spanish to God, Latin to his confessor, Italian to his mistress, French to his men and German to his horse. I shall make a plea for a more modest aim: that we in Britain seek to improve our knowledge of foreign languages so that more of us can speak at least another language.

A monolingual Britain will not survive in the global economy. For the first time in our nation's existence, we have given up insisting that an effort should be made to speak other languages. England has lost an empire but still believes in the imperialism of English. That is a huge mistake because already more than half those accessing the internet are no longer doing so in English. In the United States, Spanish-speaking Hispanic citizens are poised to overtake African-Americans as the country's biggest minority group. Of course, as we know, President Bush campaigns in good Spanish.

There are more than 100 million German-speakers in Europe. As language follows money, the growing economic dominance in central and eastern Europe of Germany, Austria and Switzerland means that more and more German is spoken in that region. We know how far French reaches in Africa and Canada, and Spanish and Portuguese dominate in Latin America. In Asia, Chinese is increasingly becoming a second language.

English is the world's most popular choice for a second language, but as the rest of the world is now learning English or another second language, why are we so foolish and arrogant as to believe that we do not need to speak other tongues? It was not always thus. Throughout our history, our kings, queens and Prime Ministers have spoken and written European languages. Until recently, it would have been unthinkable for an "educated" man or woman not to have some knowledge of other languages.

That was not merely a question of elites; skilled workers would often finish an apprenticeship by working abroad, although, as we know, apprenticeships have gone. Young men would go off to become police inspectors in Hong Kong and learn fluent Cantonese. Army sergeants and corporals would give orders in different tongues to local troops in far-flung parts of the old British empire. Administrators and business people working in different parts of the world would master other languages.

It is a huge error to assume that English will suffice in 21st-century business. On every page of yesterday's "Appointments" supplement to *The Times*, in which executive jobs are advertised, appeared calls for "fluency in French, German or Spanish", "fluency in at least one foreign language essential" or "language skills—a plus". I cannot stand the awful term "UK plc" but our economic future as a nation will not be secured until we can speak in more than our own tongue.

As a Kipling fan, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will recall that he wrote:

"what should they know of England who only England know?"

We will better understand our own nation, its needs, what it can offer and what it can do if we know other languages and cultures. Britain, despite the xenophobia of the current Leader of the Opposition, will not become a "foreign land", but we shall become less and less British and less and less able to contribute to the shaping of the modern world while we wallow in the pretence that we do not need to understand other languages.

We have a monarch and a Prime Minister who can make a speech in fluent French, but our great multinational nation is turning its back on the source of speaking a foreign language—namely, the teaching of languages in our schools. In 1992, 31,261 school students sat A-level French; last year, only 18,221 did so—a drop of more than one third. The number of A-level German students was 11,338 in 1992, but 8,692 last year. There has been a modest increase—500 or so—in the number of A-level Spanish students, but overall during the 1990s the picture was clear: we were turning our backs on learning the great languages of Europe.

Currently, nine out of 10 children stop learning languages at the age of 16, and more than 95 per cent. of all A-level students do not study a language at all. That, in turn, affects our universities and teacher training institutions. Today, there are barely 10 dozen men training as language teachers and sitting the education certificate in our teacher training colleges. In every university there is concern about the teaching of foreign languages, because students are not coming up from schools. I know that the Government want to improve language teaching in schools, but there are simply not enough teachers with the necessarily specialist training and knowledge.

Last year, the Nuffield report into the teaching of foreign languages was published; it provides a damning indictment of the indifference in Britain to the provision of adequate language teaching in our schools. Sir Trevor McDonald and Sir John Boyd and their team produced an excellent report, to which I want the Government to respond in a far more positive way than they have so far.

This year is the European year of languages. Ministers at the Department for Education and Employment—I pay tribute to Lady Blackstone—and at the Foreign Office, notably our excellent Minister for Europe, have gone out of their way to stress the new importance that the Government attach to foreign language training. I can reveal that Ministers have been told that they must learn a foreign language if they are to carry out work for the Government in Europe. Thanks to diligent homework, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary now speaks remarkably good French, and I understand that Linguaphone is ready to offer its excellent cassettes to enable Members of Parliament to learn a foreign language as we drive home to our constituencies. I believe that no official should be promoted to high office in the civil service without some experience of work overseas and proficiency in another language.

However, until we grasp the nettle of building language teaching into our core school curriculum, we shall continue to lag behind our competitors and partners. That must begin at primary school, when children are not as self-conscious as they are in secondary school. In our country, the road to successful language teaching begins—or should begin—before the age of 11.

[Mr. Denis MacShane]

We have some interesting initiatives. In my constituency, the year 6 pupils—the 10 and 11-year-olds—at Coleridge primary school are taught Spanish for an hour a week by a teacher from Clifton comprehensive school, thanks to the special provisions of the mini education action zones that the Government have introduced. The head teacher, Mrs. Hall, tells me that her year 6 pupils enjoy their Spanish lessons, especially as the project is linked to a school visit to Spain later this year.

There are many other such language clubs in primary schools throughout the country. I understand from the Government that there is some language teaching in about a quarter of all primary schools, but none of it is formally built into the core curriculum. I have discussed that with head teachers, and the problem is that limited time is available for another compulsory primary school subject, given the obligation—wholly necessary, in my view—to teach the literacy and numeracy hours. However, it is my hon. Friend the Minister's task to find an answer to that problem, not to claim that it cannot be solved—we are a Labour, not a Conservative Government.

At least two primary schools in each constituency should offer a consistent, taught, foreign language. That needs to be followed up by secondary schools teaching foreign languages, and they should do so in the full sense, providing a knowledge of grammar, literature, culture and history—not simply a Berlitz guide, useful for tourist conversation. I very much hope that the move to specialist schools recently announced by the Government will facilitate such a development.

I recall that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment told my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner)—alas, he is not in his seat today—that he hoped that Latin would return to the secondary school curriculum, and my hon. Friend recited, "Amo, amas, amat". That shows that our finest working class leaders had a grounding in Latin, to become effective socialists. So we need structure, grammar and precision, and Latin is not the worst way to prepare a 21st-century generation of young Britons for the programme of renewal that our nation needs.

Entrance to university should require some knowledge of a foreign language as a minimum requirement, as is common on mainland Europe, and business can play a leading part in that. In France, the quality of foreign language knowledge has increased enormously in the past 20 years, because the French Government mandated a training levy for all firms, and one of the best ways to spend that money was in teaching the languages in which French business earns more and more of its income.

Exhortation is not enough. A Minister from the Department for Education and Employment will reply in this debate, but action is required in other Departments to compel firms to provide adequate language training for their employees. The internet can help, but I should like the DFEE and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to discuss with our European partners how education Ministries in France, Berlin, Rome or Madrid could provide e-mail or web tuition designed for individual students. The excellent French and German ambassadors in London, Mr. Bernard and Dr. von Ploetz, have formed a double act—a duet, speaking perfect English as they offer their countries' services to any institution in Britain that would like to improve French and German teaching.

Learning languages is a lifelong business, but it must start in schools, and at an early age. Many school trips are to mainland Europe, but I fear that the children act as a crowd, giggling together in English. I wonder how much real knowledge of a foreign language they ingest. I should like the Minister to take on board my suggestion that the schools that apply for specialist status to teach foreign languages should be given priority over other applicants for specialist school status.

I will not act as a Solomon, declaring which languages should be taught. We have an immense wealth of languages in our country. In south Yorkshire, there are 70 or more languages among the boys and girls arriving in our schools. Many of my Kashmiri constituents and their children have a knowledge of Urdu. That is truly impressive. Can we not build on that cultural linguistic wealth? We are members of the European Union, which is soon to be enlarged to take in the great nations and languages of central and eastern Europe, but I make a plea that the dominant languages of Europe—French, German and Spanish—should be the priority.

As Goethe put it,

"Whoever is not acquainted with foreign languages knows nothing of his own."

Shakespeare would never have been Shakespeare without his Latin and Italian. Gibbon could never have written "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" sitting in England and speaking only English. In a great speech just after the war, Winston Churchill said:

"Prenez garde, je vais vous parler en francais".

In doing so, he brought a message of Englishness that was all the more powerful because he paid his audience the compliment of delivering it in a foreign language.

If we want our country to grow again and attain the top ranks of nations—and remain there—we will have to speak more than English. I commend the recommendations of the Nuffield report to the House and I hope that the Government will be able to advance its proposals.

2.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): May I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) on gaining the opportunity to discuss this important issue and, in his customary way, delivering his views entertainingly and convincingly? I, too, have taken up the language challenge as part of the European year of languages and have made a small start on learning Spanish. When I took my husband to Barcelona a couple of weeks ago, I made good use of that fieldwork opportunity.

I share my hon. Friend's view that modern foreign languages are key to our social and economic success and that they enable and encourage an understanding of other cultures and of our responsibilities as global citizens. My hon. Friend rightly identified the key issues, which are how to promote language learning in primary and secondary schools; how to ensure that we promote further study of languages; and the importance of lifelong language learning and links to business. I shall cover those areas in my response and talk about how we intend to take forward the Government's work in relation to the Nuffield report.

I know that teachers are enthusiastic about languages at primary level. They tell me that they are concerned to convey to young minds the importance of absorbing the culture of other nations. By doing that, children come to see that understanding a language means more than just learning words and phrases. We do not have a statutory curriculum for modern foreign languages at key stage 2, but languages in primary schools are popular with children and teachers as a voluntary option. That is so, not just outside the curriculum, but inside it, using classroom time. The Government are keen to support and enhance activities in primary schools on the practical and can-do basis that my hon. Gentleman urged.

On that basis, the Department for Education and Employment has supported the early language learning initiative and guidance for teachers at key stage 2 between seven and 11, and it has supported a new scheme of work produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for primary French and the development of further materials for primary German and Spanish. The QCA's materials have been very successful in the short time that they have been available and feedback from teachers has been positive and supportive. Five thousand copies of the scheme of work alone have been distributed since their introduction.

The early learning language project is a unique project within a subject area and a unique collaboration with the centre for information on language teaching and research. It started in September 1999 and has 18 pilots, covering about 150 schools. It has already enabled the development of an early years languages framework, which builds on the schemes of work and other curriculum support and guidance. It will develop high-quality curriculum materials for teachers; indeed, it has already done so. It will develop and disseminate models of good practice; establish a network of practitioners using information and communication technology; and review and co-ordinate training for teachers of modern foreign languages in primary schools.

I am sure that my hon. Friend is pleased that, last week, I announced a further £200,000 to extend the early learning good practice project, which is managed by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research. We want to build on that and to develop beacon primary schools and teacher training initiatives with partners in France, Germany and Spain. We will also carry out an audit of language resources available to primary schools, and promote their use through the national grid for learning and other appropriate media.

We need to make sure that the language skills acquired in primary schools are not lost when pupils transfer to secondary schools. We must ensure that primary and secondary schools work together. That is why our key stage 3 strategy, covering all the foundation subjects and aimed at raising standards in the early years of secondary education, will play a crucial role in improving the teaching of modern foreign languages. This year, we will pilot a new programme of training and support for teachers in foundation subjects, including modern foreign languages. That support will be available in more than 200 schools. We will aim to extend that nationally from 2002-03.

As my hon. Friend said, all secondary schools have a role to play, but there is a special role, which he outlined, for specialist language colleges, both in links with primary schools and in raising standards in secondary schools. The Government want the links between language colleges and primary schools to be strengthened. We have made that a key part of our response to the Nuffield inquiry. We want to strengthen links such as those made by Sir Bernard Lovell school, Gloucestershire, which has established a network of 30 primary schools in England, France and Italy.

Specialist language colleges are leading the way in performance improvements in language learning. The first language colleges became operational in 1995. Under the Government, their number has grown to 108 across 81 local education authorities. The colleges are tasked with raising standards of teaching and learning in modern foreign languages, fostering an international ethos and cultural awareness throughout the school, encouraging the active participation of business community sponsors in school life and—this is important to help us raise standards—encouraging the dissemination of good practice and the sharing of resources through closer contacts between language colleges, other schools and the wider community.

The results for GCSEs in language colleges have been particularly impressive, with the average percentage of pupils who gained at least 5 A to C grades showing an increase of 3 per cent. in one year alone. That is greater than the average improvement in specialist schools as a whole and in all schools nationally.

My hon. Friend knows that our recent Green Paper, entitled "Schools—Building on Success", proposes that we expand the number of specialist schools to 1,000 by 2003 and to 1,500 by 2006. We expect the number of language colleges to increase as part of the general growth in the number of specialist schools. We believe that there is a sound basis on which to raise standards in secondary education and build important links with primary schools. We are keen to create links between many more primary and secondary schools, to allow primary schools to develop their teaching of modern foreign languages.

My hon. Friend rightly mentioned teacher recruitment. He will be pleased to hear that, as we announced this week, applications for post-graduate teacher training places are up 7 per cent. over last year for modern foreign languages—an encouraging sign and a result of the strong action taken by the Government to attract people into teaching. My hon. Friend may be interested to know that, from September, we will be running a pilot to offer teacher training places in modern foreign languages for primary specialists as well.

My hon. Friend expressed concern about A-level entries. The new AS qualification introduced in September 2000 should encourage the take-up of modern foreign languages post-16. Students also have the opportunity to take language units as part of vocational A-levels and GNVQs. We are evaluating whether the reforms have encouraged more young people to continue to study a modern foreign language at advanced level.

As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, last year, the Nuffield report on modern foreign languages was produced, and the Government responded to it in January. However, our response did not end then. To underpin it, we are currently working on the national strategy for languages. That strategy will be inclusive and will explore especially how we can build on the good work in primary schools that I described; explore new ways of bringing languages into the classroom; and build on the language

[Jacqui Smith]

elements of our key stage 3 strategy. We shall also develop a strategy that makes greater use of adult vocational learning to promote languages and that engages business, persuading it of the importance of languages within the work force.

Mr. MacShane: My hon. Friend knows that the distinguished permanent secretary at the Department for Education and Employment, Sir Michael Bishard, has announced his retirement. Will she pass a message to the Secretary of State that Sir Michael's replacement should be someone who has some overseas experience and speaks at least one foreign language fluently? I do not ask my hon. Friend to respond, just to take the message.

Jacqui Smith: I will, of course, be a diligent messenger.

We need to develop a strategy for lifelong learning and for business involvement in language learning. We need to persuade business of the importance of languages in the work force, perhaps by increasing work placements abroad and by the appointment of regional language champions to work with senior business people and with educators to promote language learning to adults at work.

We need to maximise the use of information technology in language learning. We must use the European year of languages, of which my hon. Friend is a vocal supporter, to raise the profile and importance of languages while putting in place mechanisms to guarantee sustainability. We must ensure that our achievements during the European year of languages can be developed.

I want to make sure that we involve key stakeholders in the shaping of the national strategy for modern foreign languages. As my hon. Friend made clear, the issue cannot be dealt with by a single Department or even by Government alone. There will be many views on what we should do and we will take on board as many of them as possible when formulating the strategy.

Last week, I announced our plans to establish a national steering group, which I will chair, to oversee the development and implementation of our plans. I expect the group to include members drawn from the organisations that I mentioned and from other Departments, which have a key stake in improving our national capability in modern foreign languages.

It is clear from today's debate that there is considerable support behind the work that we are doing to offer quality resources and support—especially in those all-important early years—to people who want to learn a language. We must continue to place a high profile on language learning—from the cradle to the grave.

That is the real language challenge that faces us nationally. I assure my hon. Friend that we accept the challenge.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at two minutes to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 12 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Criminal Record Checks

1. **Mr. Phil Hope** (Corby): If he will make a statement on the cost of criminal record checks for volunteers in voluntary organisations. [151698]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): Criminal record certificates and enhanced criminal record certificates, which will relate principally to positions involving working with those under the age of 18, or with vulnerable adults, will be issued free of charge to volunteers—not only in voluntary organisations but in other situations too.

Mr. Hope: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply. As chairman of the all-party group on charities and the voluntary sector, and on behalf of the sector as a whole, may I say how pleased we are by the Government's response to the campaign? It is important that volunteers have free checks so that children can be properly protected. The sector fully supports criminal record checks, and there was concern that, in the international year of volunteering, children would not receive that kind of protection. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that when the system is introduced, the checks will provide the kind of security and information that those organisations need to ensure that children receive the best possible protection?

Mr. Boateng: The Government are grateful to the all-party group and to my hon. Friend, its chairman, for their work in representing the voluntary sector's concerns. I can give him the assurance that he seeks, but he will understand—as, I am sure, will other Members on both sides of the House—that the protection of children and vulnerable people cannot be served by a body like the Criminal Records Bureau alone. It is important to make sure that those responsible for recruiting workers in that sector themselves carry out the necessary checks of other references, and put in place the necessary arrangements for proper interviews and performance monitoring. We need a complete package to protect children and vulnerable people better, but this step is an important part of that, and we are glad to have taken it.

Mr. Donald Gorrie (Edinburgh, West): Can the Minister assure us that the certificates will be transferable, whether given by the Scottish Executive, the Home Office—in England—or, presumably, the Welsh Assembly, and that people who move to different parts of the country will not have to apply all over again?

Mr. Boateng: We are working closely with the Assembly and the Executive to make sure that there is a proper exchange of information. Those negotiations and discussions are continuing, and I shall certainly write to the hon. Gentleman to tell him of our progress.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): I thank my right hon. Friend and his colleagues for exempting volunteers from the proposed charges for the Criminal Records Bureau, thus inadvertently responding to a recommendation that the Home Affairs Committee is likely to send him. Will he pay particular attention to inaccuracies and omissions in the police national computer records of convictions, involving failure to record convictions against some people, as well as the opposite? When those checks are made, it is essential that they are as accurate as possible.

Mr. Boateng: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and the Committee for their work in that area, as is my fellow Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke). My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) has identified a problem that we are exploring with the Association of Chief Police Officers. We will make sure that we get things right, because we seek to achieve the degree of accuracy that he rightly pinpoints as important.

Mr. David Lidington (Aylesbury): I welcome the Government's change of policy, and the alacrity with which they changed course once they knew about the speech that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition made to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. Would that the Government always followed my right hon. Friend's suggestions with such alacrity.

The Minister talked about exemptions for volunteers. Will the Government exempt voluntary organisations generally, or just individual volunteers? In particular, will he explain why, a week after the Government's announcement, in a written answer on 15 February, another Minister of State, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), mentioned registration fees for the Criminal Records Bureau, which would involve employers and voluntary organisations paying a charge of £300? Have the Government not been rather shy about letting us know about that?

Mr. Boateng: If I may say so, the hon. Gentleman is being uncharacteristically churlish in his response to the announcement. I thought that he had a sunnier disposition—but perhaps it is the time of year, and the anticipation of potential approaching events. As he well knows, this is an exemption for volunteers, not for voluntary organisations. It is right that voluntary

organisations should pay a registration charge, and we are having discussions with them about that and several other related matters. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would give a broader and more generous welcome to the measures that we have announced.

Police Numbers (Sussex)

2. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): If he will call for a report from the chief constable of the Sussex constabulary on police numbers in Sussex. [151699]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): The Government have no plans to call for such a report. Sussex police have been allocated a total of 206 crime fighting fund recruits. According to the latest information provided by the force, about 42 of those will be recruited in the current year and the remainder in the following two years. For 2001–02, the Sussex police authority will receive funding support of £181.8 million, which represents an increase of £9.3 million, and is 5.4 per cent. more than the provision for 2000–01. The authority will also receive about £500,000 a year from the rural policing fund.

Mr. Loughton: It is a shame that the Minister should say that, because last month he revealed that there are now 273 fewer police officers in Sussex than there were in March 1997. That represents one of the biggest cuts in the country. His statement also masks the added problem of the extra drain on resources, in the Worthing area in particular, caused by a series of murder investigations, including that into the murder of Sarah Payne; by the investigations into the human trafficking of at least 40 Nigerian girls abducted from social services and sold into prostitution in northern Italy; and, most recently, by the investigations into the 20 armed raids that have taken place in Worthing in the past nine weeks alone. Those raids include those involving my local sub-postmaster, Jack Sahaid, who was held up twice at knife-point and once at shotgun-point in the space of a week, and who has shown great bravery and community spirit by keeping the sub-post office open.

When will the Minister intervene and do something to give back the police officers taken away over the past four years, rather than coming up with this constant guff about additional resources—which do not result in extra police officers—and about numbers being the responsibility of the chief constable? Many of my constituents—such as shopkeepers and sub-postmasters—are living in fear at the moment.

Mr. Clarke: It is not guff at all. The fact is that, as the hon. Gentleman knows, throughout the country crime is falling and police numbers are rising.

Mr. Loughton: Not in Sussex.

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman should stop heckling; he has already had his say.

In Sussex, as in every other police authority, it is up to the chief constable to decide how to allocate resources. The chief constable, his staff and his authority decided quite explicitly to increase the number of civilians in the force over a long period. More than one third of forces in the country now have more police officers than they had in 1997, and that will happen in Sussex as well.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Does the Minister not remember the present Prime Minister's pledge in 1995 that a Government led by him would put thousands more police officers on the beat? Given the fall of 2,500 in police numbers across the country, including 273 in Sussex—and not forgetting the fall by one third in the number of specials—is this not just another example of all spin and no delivery? When will the Minister give us a timetable—a short one—for restoring those police numbers in Sussex and throughout the country?

Mr. Clarke: That phrase does not improve with age. The facts are simple and straightforward. Since 1993, the number of police officers in Britain had been going down—until about a year ago when, following the decisions of this Government, police numbers started to go up for the first time.

A while ago we published figures that showed an increase of 444 police officers across the country up to September last year. Those trends are increasing and we shall be in a position to continue to increase them through the next year or two, as we continue to achieve a constant movement towards increasing police numbers. Many forces are already saying that they have the largest number of police officers in history coming in, in the short term, and nearly half the forces in Britain have more police officers than they had in 1997. The hon. Gentleman's arguments are nonsense, as he well knows, and he should get down to examining his own record as well as ours.

Metropolitan Police (Recruitment)

3. **Mr. Keith Darvill** (Upminster): What measures he is taking to increase the recruitment of police officers to the Metropolitan police service. [151700]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): The Government have provided generous funding to the Metropolitan police service to enable it to increase its police numbers. The Met has been allocated a total of 2,044 recruits under the crime fighting fund. That, combined with the resources recently agreed with the Greater London Authority, should enable the Met to increase its target strength by 1,050 officers, to 26,650, in the coming year.

Other measures to boost recruitment in the Met include the increase of about £3,300 a year in the London allowance paid to officers in the Met and the City of London police who joined after 1994, the provision of free rail travel within a 70-mile radius of London for the Met's officers, and the national recruitment campaign. Several outline bids covering the Metropolitan police area are also being assessed under the first round of the Government's starter homes initiative

Mr. Darvill: I thank my right hon. Friend for his reply, and I am grateful to him for reminding the House of the raft of measures that address recruitment and retention in the Metropolitan police service. Can he assure me that he will continue to monitor closely the progress being made to increase police numbers, and will he ensure in

particular that outer London police divisions, such as Havering, have their fair share of police officers? Despite the Government's creditable performance in reducing overall crime by 10 per cent., concern remains that police numbers still need to reflect the changing demands in localities, so that the Metropolitan police can continue to bear down on criminal behaviour.

Mr. Straw: I fully understand the needs of the outer London boroughs, not least Havering—an area I know well. As my hon. Friend knows, the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has removed an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy from the Metropolitan police service. That is releasing officers for front-line duties, as is his policy of dealing with unnecessary sick leave, which in turn has released more than 500 officers for front-line duties. The bare gross figures do not tell the full story about numbers, but I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that recruitment in the last month was running at double the level of a year ago.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Given the mix-up over Metropolitan police housing in the Greater London Authority Act 1999, does the Home Secretary accept that the motivation of pre-Sheehy and post-Sheehy officers in Metropolitan police housing may be adversely affected by the turn of events, and that retention as well as recruitment may be at stake?

Mr. Straw: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's concern, but as he knows, we are taking steps to put the matter right. The latest figures show a net increase in the number of officers going into the Metropolitan police service. In general, morale is greatly improving—all the data suggest that—and a major factor in that improvement is the provision of free rail travel for all officers.

Ex-Offenders

4. **Mr. Paul Clark** (Gillingham): What steps the Prison Service is taking to help offenders secure work on release from prison. [151701]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The Government are committed to reducing reoffending by those released from prison. That is why we are investing £30 million in a new Prison Service custody-to-work programme, with the aim of doubling the number of prisoners going into jobs on release over the next three years.

Mr. Clark: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. Does he agree that jobs—as he clearly said—and stable accommodation are two of the most important factors in ensuring that people do not reoffend? Does he acknowledge that current research suggests that only about 10 per cent. of offenders get a job, and that 40 per cent. have no stable accommodation on release? Crime is falling overall in Medway, but there is still a long way to go. Can my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that the Government are taking all the steps that they can to ensure that people do not reoffend?

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend is right. On a recent visit to Medway, I met a number of people engaged in the voluntary sector, not least those involved with resettlement. We know that only 10 per cent. of prisoners get a job on release, and that more than 40 per cent. are released without stable accommodation to go to. The thrust of the custody-to-work initiative will be to ensure that prisoners get advice and assistance in advance, so that they can get a new deal place or a job, and issues such as housing benefit and the need for a stable address are dealt with by the probation service and the Prison Service working in tandem rather than separately. We thereby hope to ensure that we make a real contribution, through resettlement, to reducing reoffending. That is the bottom line: protecting the public better by ensuring that such people go to work, and go to a stable address.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): The Minister will be aware that prison-based commercial activity can contribute to reducing recidivism, but will he consider the way in which such activity is being carried out at Kirkham prison in my constituency? I have recently received complaints from those in the poultry industry that a new commercial enterprise based at the prison is being conducted in a very uncompetitive fashion. Those running the enterprise from the prison are doing a lot of boasting that it is cheaper than those that operate commercially outside, because their labour does not have to be costed in at a commercial rate. Will the Minister examine the matter for me?

Mr. Boateng: I believe that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the right hon. Gentleman have had some correspondence on this issue. We are well aware of the difficulties that he has outlined, which highlight the problem—he may like to make that point to his right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). We must get the balance right between creating commercial enterprises in a prison context and ensuring that they do not have an unfair advantage over the wider community. We are making real headway in this area. The total number of prisoners employed last year was 19,000. The number in the public sector has risen from 7,600, the figure that we inherited when we came into office, to 8,500 today. We are getting there, but it takes time and effort, and we are determined to put both into the equation.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): I know that my right hon. Friend shares the view that providing education and training in prison is essential if prisoners are to be able to get jobs when they are released, and avoid going back to a life of crime and reoffending. The opportunities vary considerably from prison to prison, although improvements are being made. How much further does my right hon. Friend believe we can improve the opportunities, to ensure that all prisoners have education or training before they are released?

Mr. Boateng: My hon. Friend puts his finger on an important point. We still have further to go. We will increase spending on education in prisons by 17 per cent. over the next three years. Last month, my right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Blackstone and I introduced a new prison/DFEE partnership at Wormwood Scrubs. Such partnerships will be rolled out across the country, and should provide real benefits for prisoners and for their future employment.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Is the Minister aware of the evidence produced in yesterday's "Panorama"

programme that 90 per cent. of the people who leave Feltham young offenders institution reoffend? Does he agree that, although considerable progress has been made in educating the younger offenders, the vast majority leave without education or training, and are functionally illiterate and totally unprepared for the world of work? Could he explain how he is taking forward the programme to address that problem?

Mr. Boateng: I am well aware of the problem. Feltham will be one of the pilot institutions under the custody-to-work programme, and we have recently opened a new education centre there. It is true that the under-18 estate has had the benefit of real and substantial investment over the past three to four years. We have more to do for those between the ages and 18 and 20, and we are determined to do it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Given that only last month the Director General of the Prison Service described many of our prisons as "hellholes"; that under this Government slopping out has returned; that assaults on staff have risen by 25 per cent.; that incidents of self-harm have soared by 35 per cent.; that only 9,000 out of 63,000 prisoners work in prison workshops—representing a reduction of 4 per cent. on the previous year—and that more than half of all ex-prisoners typically reoffend and go back through the revolving door of the criminal justice system, why does the right hon. Gentleman not abandon his smug complacency and either adopt the Conservative policy of a full working day for a full working wage, or accept that a Government who have an insatiable appetite for public office should give way to an Opposition who have an insatiable appetite for public service?

Mr. Boateng: I really do not think that the hon. Gentleman does justice to this subject. My responses to this question have in no sense been complacent. We still have a way to go, but the hon. Gentleman caricatures the director general's speech and the current state of the Prison Service.

This morning I attended the Butler Trust awards ceremony at Buckingham palace. The trust gives awards to prison officers—men and women—so that they can address some of the problems outlined by the hon. Gentleman. It is inspired by the former Conservative Home Secretary's approach to these issues—

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): One nation!

Mr. Boateng: As my hon. Friend says, it is very much a "one nation" approach, seeking to build consensus rather than division into penal policy.

We are addressing problems long neglected under the last Administration. That is why under the present Government, industrial output in prisons is up, qualifications for prisoners are up, and crime is coming down.

Animal Experimentation (Intimidation of Staff)

5. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): What discussions he has had with trade unions representing work forces engaged in animal experimentation about the intimidation of such workers. [151702]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I recently had a very productive meeting with representatives from the Manufacturing, Science and Finance union, which represents many employees in the biotechnology, pharmaceutical and medical research industries. Officials were also in contact with the MSF when preparing drafts of the new measures to combat animal rights extremists that we have included in the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. We welcome the strong support that the MSF has given these measures.

Dr. Gibson: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer, and welcome his association with the MSF.

Many believe that the people concerned are a determined group who will stop at nothing to secure their aims. Does my right hon. Friend agree? Will he afford full protection to Home Office licence holders so that they can carry out vital research, and will he attempt to involve the Trades Union Congress in that process?

Mr. Straw: I entirely share my hon. Friend's concerns. I have had discussions with the chief constables of two areas where there is a high concentration of scientific research to assure myself that proper protection is being provided. One such discussion took place this morning.

My hon. Friend is right to say that unfortunately, as we know from the record, many of those involved in extremist animal rights movements are—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Poisonous.

Mr. Straw: Poisonous and worse—and willing to go in for any kind of totally unacceptable tactics against people who are simply carrying out lawful and important duties.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): I recognise the severity of the intimidation, and welcome the proposals in the impending Act. Will the Home Secretary nevertheless consider sympathetically the need for an emergency round-table conference of interested parties—including unions and other laboratory technicians, the pharmaceutical industry, the MPs affected, the police and, of course, Ministers—to reassure the public about what can be done, concentrating on how the existing law can be better used, and on whether new laws in addition to those in the Bill are needed?

Mr. Straw: What the hon. Gentleman proposes has more or less taken place already. I have had substantial discussions with representatives of the pharmaceutical industry and the major scientific and medical research establishments, as well as with the police, both about the concerns of those involved in animal experimentation and about the response of the police and the Home Office.

I have been very anxious, at an institutional level but above all at a personal level, to offer the support of the Government—and, I believe, that of the whole House—for the work that those people are undertaking. As I have said before, without that work, many important scientific and medical advances would never have been made and many people would have died prematurely or not been able to maintain the quality of their lives.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Is the Home Secretary aware that it is not merely scientists who have been the

targets of these vandals? The Horlicks factory in my constituency, for example, has been invaded by animal rights extremists. Will the Home Secretary congratulate Thames Valley police on their vigorous action against those responsible for the attack?

Mr. Straw: Of course I understand the concern: the fact is that those people are both bad and mad. I have no idea quite how targeting a Horlicks factory can help to propagate their aims; none the less, it was dangerous. I am very pleased that Thames Valley police responded as they did.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): The Home Secretary might like to know that only last week, there was another incident in my constituency, directed against individuals working in the pharmaceutical industry. This is intimidation verging on terrorism. Will the right hon. Gentleman join other colleagues in raising the profile of the issue even higher, so that the public understand that the animal liberation people are thugs and terrorists who will use no tactic other than violence against those individuals? Apparently, the animal liberation people are also threatening two of the Home Secretary's colleagues because of a reasoned argument about hunting. The situation is getting out of hand. What worries me is that, in relation to the importance of experiments on animals, and the awful way in which the animal liberation people behave, we do not have all the public on our side.

Mr. Straw: It is incumbent on all hon. Members to make the points that the hon. Gentleman has just made. We have to say that that type of intimidation and attack—including the recent attack on Mr. Brian Cass, the chief executive of Huntingdon Life Sciences, but also many other less well-publicised attacks—is totally unacceptable.

We have a job to do in this place. However, the organisations that campaign for changes in animal welfare law also have a job to do. I believe that they should be much more vigourous in wholeheartedly condemning those animal rights extremists, and separating their perfectly lawful campaigns for change in the law from those who shelter behind them. I am sometimes very concerned indeed about the absence of a clear barrier between allegedly respectable organisations and those who go in for outright extremism and terrorism.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): When the chief executive of Huntingdon Life Sciences came to an all-party group, some of us were dismayed to learn the extent to which the cars of even relatively junior staff members had been vandalised. What can be done to protect junior members of staff? May I also ask, in the light of the Home Secretary's last answer, whether the Government are happy about the lack of backing from some who might be expected to show more courage in this matter, such as the Royal Bank of Scotland?

Mr. Straw: To deal with the last point first, I am certainly not happy about the response of some of the United Kingdom's financial institutions, which I believe were pusillanimous in the extreme. If financial institutions give in to that type of intimidation, it will wholly undermine those who are on the front line of that very important scientific research. People in the financial institutions are far less likely to come under personal attack than those who conduct the experiments.

Although I realise that the institutions have responsibilities to their shareholders—undoubtedly that was the excuse used by the Royal Bank of Scotland, and by Barclays, which sought to withdraw provision as a registrar of one of the companies because it might be intimidated or harassed—they also have wider social and business responsibilities. The banks would be the first to squeal if, because of their pusillanimous approach, part of our scientific base, and therefore part of their income, were reduced.

As for my hon. Friend's first point, I happened by chance to have quite a conversation with Mr. Brian Cass as he was on his way to that meeting. I applauded his own personal courage in dealing with that attack. I am also aware of the attacks on those at a much lower level in such companies. The Government and the police are doing our very best to provide maximum protection. That is one reason why, two months ago, I announced a special grant of £1 million to Cambridgeshire constabulary to meet the extra costs of policing these problems.

Police Recruitment

6. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): What recent representations he has received on the entry requirements to join the police force. [151703]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mrs. Barbara Roche): We have received a number of representations from hon. Members, and correspondence from members of the public. Representations from hon. Members have been about the medical entry requirements affecting unsuccessful applicants to the police forces. Most of the representations from members of the public have requested that entry requirements, particularly those on eyesight or health, be reviewed. The entry requirements for police officers are currently being reviewed as part of a strategy to develop national recruitment standards.

Mr. Amess: Although I accept everything that the Minister has said, will she explain why this rotten, incompetent shambles of a Government have cut the number of serving police officers in Southend by nine over the past year and by 181 in Essex since 1997? Does she not understand that the reason why police morale is at rock bottom is that the Government let out 250 criminals who had assaulted police officers after they had served only a third of their sentence? What on earth does this rotten Government mean by being tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime? Was that simply a reference to the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson)?

Mrs. Roche: May I advise the hon. Gentleman that in future he should really say what he means? He should not be so shy.

Let us look at the facts. Resources are available for Essex to recruit up to 197 officers through the crime fighting fund. Essex is benefiting from the national

recruitment campaign. Essex officers may also benefit from the Government's starter homes initiative, which will do something to help police officers.

The hon. Gentleman might like to reflect on this point with his constituents. Under the previous Government, between 1979 and 1997, crime in Essex went up by more than 88 per cent. Crime in Essex has come down by 3.2 per cent. since May 1997.

Mr. John Cryer (Hornchurch): To return from Planet Zarg after the previous speaker, may I ask my hon. Friend whether there are any plans to introduce a multiple-point entry system for the police force?

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Tell us all about multiple points, Barbara.

Mrs. Roche: I would be very glad to if the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) would contain his enthusiasm for a bit. We are currently reviewing the requirement.

Antisocial Behaviour

7. **Mr. Crispin Blunt** (Reigate): If he will make a statement on the Government's policies to deal with antisocial behaviour. [151704]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 introduced measures to deal with antisocial behaviour, including the crime and disorder partnerships and antisocial behaviour orders.

We are introducing further measures in the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, including fixed-penalty notices, for a wide range of offences to help police deal immediately with loutish behaviour and to provide strengthened controls on drinking in the streets.

We are implementing in full the policy action team report on antisocial behaviour. The crime reduction toolkit on antisocial behaviour, which was published in January, gives practitioners comprehensive and detailed advice on good practice and partnership working.

Mr. Blunt: Is it antisocial behaviour to tell an untruth?

Mr. O'Brien: It is of course the case that telling an untruth may be honestly done or dishonestly done. People have to consider these matters for themselves.

Antisocial behaviour is being addressed by the legislation that the Government have put through the House. We are ensuring that the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 contains provisions that will deal with the real problems that concern the people of this country. They are concerned about law and disorder on our streets and about policing. That is why, under the Labour Government, crime is coming down and police numbers are going up, and that is why we are dealing with these issues, and ensuring that we do so effectively.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Will the Minister say what action the Government intend to propose to the House to deal with the antisocial behaviour of the shadow Home Secretary and a Conservative Whip, who, by their example, are saying to louts and hooligans that they should break the rules and break the law? Will my hon. Friend explain how louts, hooligans, drunkards and criminals can be expected to obey the law of the land if official spokesmen and spokeswomen of the Conservative party disregard, obstruct and set aside the decisions of the House of Commons?

Mr. O'Brien: My right hon. Friend is quite right: antisocial behaviour takes many forms. It is important that Members of the House set a good example—especially those who might one day aspire to high office. Opposition Front-Bench Members, especially the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) in some of her behaviour last week, displayed a regrettably bad example for the young people of this country. When the right hon. Lady comes to the Dispatch Box to condemn loutish behaviour on our streets, let us make sure that we have no loutish behaviour from her in this place.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): When Home Office Ministers look back over their four years of dealing with antisocial behaviour and crime, do they register the fact that, according to the latest opinion polls, nearly two thirds of the British public—more than in any other area of Government policy—think that the Government have failed on law and order?

The Government's senior policy adviser at the Home Office says that their performance has been incredibly poor; he cites clear-up rates that are the same as they were when those Ministers took office in 1997. At this late stage, may we at least have honesty? Gimmicks such as giving parking-type tickets to drunkards on the street and having curfews will not do much at all. To take away people's right to choose jury trial is positively an act in the wrong direction. If there was a commitment to real increases in police numbers and to real community safety forces that would give additional police service in each local council area—instead of all the rhetoric, all the window dressing and the many policies that have totally failed over four years—we might get somewhere.

Mr. O'Brien: The hon. Gentleman's rhetoric today is nothing short of amazing. The Liberal Democrats go around the country claiming to be tough on crime in one place and soft on crime in another. Every policy that the Labour Government—or indeed, any Government—have introduced to deal with crime and disorder on our streets has been attacked by the Liberals as being too tough on criminals.

Let me tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government's record is one of crime going down and police numbers going up. We are putting funding into fighting crime, while during this Parliament and in recent years, the Liberal Democrat party and especially the hon. Gentleman, as its spokesman on law and order, have been soft on crime throughout.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I welcome the policies introduced by my hon. Friend to combat antisocial behaviour. Does he agree that in crime hot spots, portable closed circuit television would help further to continue the reduction in crime? In many areas, there is a genuine fear that if the Tories had the opportunity to impose their

public spending cuts, such services would be reduced and crime would increase. Does my hon. Friend agree that portable CCTV would help to reduce crime still further?

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The massive investment made by the Government in CCTV—encouraging local authorities and the police to install such facilities throughout the country—has certainly had a powerful impact on crime. Indeed, my hon. Friend is right to say that portable CCTV has a place in the array of tools needed by the police to deal with the problems of crime on our streets. He is also right to say that, while the Labour Government have a record of putting extra resources into the police, ensuring that we provide them with the communications systems that they need and that we put resources into CCTV and other technology, if the Conservatives got into power we would see £16 billion worth of cuts in public expenditure. Those cuts would fall on the police too. Let there be no mistake about it: when the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and her party were in office, we saw cuts in policing from 1993, with cuts in the housing allowance; we did not see the sort of investment that has been made in CCTV under the Labour Government. Their record was crime up; our record is crime down. Their record was cuts in police numbers; our record is police numbers now going up.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): If the Minister can come out of pre-election auto-rant for a second, will he tell me whether any progress has been made on a practical suggestion about CCTV that I have made on several occasions and to which he has responded positively in the past? Where shops and garages trade during antisocial hours, there should be a requirement that they have adequate CCTV coverage in the places where people have to pay—where they have to queue in vulnerable situations and could be attacked by louts. Have the Government actually done anything about that, rather than saying that they think it is a good idea—which, of course it is?

Mr. O'Brien: It is indeed a good idea, and we are agreeing on resources for the retail crime reduction partnerships. It certainly would help if those late-night shops and various other facilities—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Outlets.

Mr. O'Brien: Outlets, as the hon. Gentleman helpfully suggests. If the various outlets were to have CCTV outside their premises, it would assist not only those who run them but the police; indeed, the Government are working with retail outlets in particular to try to ensure that we do that. I am a little concerned that small businesses in particular are reluctant to have extra burdens placed on them, and I am sure that the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) does not want to do that. We need to take action by a process of proper discussion and negotiation with the business community, rather than by merely imposing regulations, as he seemed to suggest. I am sure that, on reflection, he would agree that the previous Government imposed far too much regulation on small businesses. The Government are trying to reduce that over-regulation, and that is one of the areas where we can make progress.

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): My hon. Friend will be aware that no behaviour is more against the interests and legitimate aspirations of many of the communities that we represent than that of those who deal in drugs and then flaunt the wealth that they have accumulated in that fashion in front of the communities that their behaviour is impoverishing and destroying. He will be aware that the publication of the draft Proceeds of Crime Bill and the extra money in the Budget for tackling crime and drugs were very welcome in Scotland, as they were throughout the United Kingdom, but does he agree that steps must be taken to foster a culture of whistleblowing among those who deal with criminals and who allow them the opportunity, inadvertently or by deliberate omission, to launder their money and transfer it into the legitimate economy?

Mr. O'Brien: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. The draft Proceeds of Crime Bill will apply to Scotland, and the Budget announcement of an extra £220 million to tackle drugs was welcomed in Scotland, especially by my right hon. Friend the First Minister, who said that it was

"a landmark piece of legislation"

and

"a big step forward in the war against drugs".

I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that we need to ensure that there is effective provision to encourage whistleblowing.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Is it antisocial to say that someone has told an untruth who is found not to have done; and, if so, should an apology be made to the victim?

Mr. O'Brien: I think that I have dealt with that, but the right hon. Lady has not dealt with the behaviour that she displayed in the House last week. Frankly, she and I are here to ensure that when we deal with such matters, we present an image to the public of some responsibility. What she has displayed during the past week puts the House in a bad light and reflects badly on her. Indeed, it reflects very badly on any Member of Parliament who seeks to put himself or herself in a position of responsibility. Those in high office have a responsibility to set an example, and she has failed to do that.

Miss Widdecombe: Will the hon. Gentleman at least agree that mugging is antisocial? If so, what is the appropriate response to someone who mugs 56 clauses, 42 Opposition amendments, 10 Government amendments and six schedules? Is not the correct penalty for such a person five years out of office, with no early release? Is not someone who stands up to that mugging acting in self-defence and should not he or she be supported by the authorities of the House, who care about effective parliamentary scrutiny? Get to the Dispatch Box and apologise.

Mr. O'Brien: It is the right hon. Lady who ought to be apologising for her appalling behaviour during the past week. She comes here and starts to say that she is

concerned about crime, but she sets a bad example to the people of this country in the behaviour that she displays. People are responsible for their actions, and she is responsible for the bad example that she set in the House last week: She should be at the Dispatch Box now, apologising for her behaviour not just to me and Labour Members but to every hon. Member and to all those who elect us.

Community Policing

9. **Mr. Howard Flight** (Arundel and South Downs): What guidance he gives to, and targets he sets for, chief constables with regard to community policing. [151707]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): The only nationally required targets for the police service are those relating to burglary, vehicle crime and, for five major metropolitan areas, robbery. However, next year, all chief constables have agreed that they will report to their constituencies the measures that they are taking to increase visibility and accessibility in every ward and every parish in their police authority area.

Mr. Flight: Why have the Government neglected at least to provide guidance on targets for community policing over the past four years? The lack of police visibility and of community policing is perhaps the greatest concern of citizens in urban and rural areas. Why have the Government ignored that issue when they are only too willing to give guidance and directives on virtually every other?

Mr. Clarke: As the House knows, the Government significantly reduced the amount of guidance and performance indicators for the current year at the request of the police, and for precisely the reason that the hon. Gentleman suggests. To identify as we did the key crimes—burglary, vehicle crime and violent crime—was the right way to proceed. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman listened to my earlier answer, but I said that we have had a new departure in that chief constables have agreed with us that they all will report every year on the levels of visibility and reassurance that they offer to every parish and every ward in their police authority area. That is significant.

The hon. Gentleman's authority receives about £500,000 of the rural policing money every year and it will report every year on how that money is used to increase visibility and community policing. Later this year, we shall publish detailed advice and a toolkit of precise measures that can be used to develop that. That is a positive approach that is bearing very strong fruit already.

Retained Police Officers

10. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If he will introduce a category of retained police officers. [151708]

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): The idea of retained police officers is one of those that is being considered to increase visibility and reassurance in the current police reform discussions. Constables who serve probationary periods and sergeants may already work part-time, and the Police Negotiating Board is currently considering proposals and draft regulations that would extend that right to probationers and to the inspecting ranks. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that a range of creative approaches to the question of increasing the police presence is important and that is what we are actively discussing with the police at the moment.

Mr. Heath: I am grateful to the Minister for his response. Is it not the case that people in villages and small towns in rural areas across the country want sufficient police numbers so that there is a greater visible police presence? They want those police officers to be fully trained, fully equipped, in proper uniform and acting in the office of constable. Retained officers play a large part in providing rural firefighting services, and I am glad that the Minister is considering further the possibility of having retained police officers. Will he consider the matter with a degree of urgency to see what can be done for rural areas?

Mr. Clarke: We are considering the issue with a degree of urgency. As the hon. Gentleman knows, crime in Avon and Somerset has gone down by about 15 per cent. since 1997, but there is a great deal further to go. The types of measures that he has described that would develop an increased uniformed police presence—through specials, retained officers, targeted policing, patrols, different types of police station and so on—in every community are all part of the range of issues that we are actively discussing. We are already taking a number of different measures to encourage that approach.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): I may have to confess my ignorance, but are not retained officers really the same as special constables? [HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Well, let me make my point then.

There has been a significant increase in the number of police officers in Lancashire, and that is good. However, there has been a reduction in the number of special officers, and that is bad. About a fifth of special officers go on to become full-time police officers but, in recent years, the number of specials in Lancashire has fallen by about 150. What do we need to do to get good, public-spirited people—who do not want to be full-time police officers but who would like to do the job part-time—to join the specials? The specials have a role in bolstering police numbers when the police are overstretched, and we must do everything that we can to increase their numbers.

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is right about specials, and he gave the answer to the problem in his question. His figures reflect the fact that many people who have joined that force see it as a route to recruitment as a full-time police officer. The harmonisation of health and safety regulations several years ago encouraged that process and we are considering whether it is the right way to proceed. Parish specials, who are located in their local parishes or wards, do not have the same obstructions or responsibilities as the police and we are actively considering whether that might be a better approach.

For my hon. Friend's information, special constables are different from retained constables because they get no basic pay for performing that role. Retained specials would get paid, although at a different rate to the regular

police force. That is what distinguishes their pay from the part-time rate. We are considering the retained option but, frankly, developing our approach to the specials, whose numbers have declined over recent years, is a higher priority because there are many obvious positive aspects to that force.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The Minister has emphasised the importance that he attaches to increasing the number of special constables, and I agree with him. However, as I have told his right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on previous occasions, I believe that it is proper to pay them, and that would be a useful way of increasing the numbers. There is a parallel with the retained fire service in rural areas, which is paid. There is no reason of principle why special constables should not be paid an allowance.

Mr. Clarke: First, the right hon. and learned Gentleman will be glad to note that crime has decreased by 20 per cent. in Lincolnshire since the election. I know that he will celebrate that fact with the Government. Secondly, he is right to say that there are issues relating to how we could pay retained officers in the way that he describes and that there might be parallels with the retained firefighters.

Mr. Hogg: I said specials.

Mr. Clarke: I know that, but the right hon. and learned Gentleman also referred to retained officers. Whether we are considering volunteers, specials, part-time or full-time police officers or retained officers, we need to develop a new approach to maximise police presence in every community in Britain. That is precisely what we are discussing in the police reform process.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): As part of the reform, will my hon. Friend reflect on the experience of the Wandsworth and Greenwich parks police, which was established under a Greater London council provision to allow every London borough to have such a force for their open spaces and parks? Will he consider extending that power to all local authorities in England and Wales? In addition, will he consider extending the scope of the force so that it is not confined to municipally owned and controlled parks, but relates to other open spaces where the force could complement and supplement the work of a Home Office force?

Mr. Clarke: There is a range of different approaches, including park wardens. Local authorities can pay for police officers, which they do in some circumstances to help to encourage the policing of their parks. We encourage that in certain regards. However, I am slightly wary of encouraging the growth of a parks police force that is separate from the official office of constable. I was in Merseyside the other day and people asked me why they had a ports police and a Mersey tunnel police.

My hon. Friend's proposal raises some issues. It is important that there is co-ordination and organisation. Our crime and disorder partnership, which is a departure from the Opposition's approach when they were in government, attempts to establish the relationships that will encourage such a development.

Violent Crime

11. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): If he will make a statement on the Government's policy on violent crime. [151710]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): The British crime survey reported a 4 per cent. fall in violent crime between 1997 and the end of 1999, but violent crime is still too high and street robberies have increased. Our comprehensive strategy for dealing with violent crime is set out in "Fighting violent crime together: an action plan", which we published on 10 January. Violent crime encompasses a wide range of offences that differ from each other greatly in terms of both type and seriousness. Our overall strategic approach is based on improving support for victims, better policing, more effective punishment, dealing with the causes of violent crime and tackling the conditions that breed violence.

Mr. Fabricant: The Home Secretary says that violent crime is still too high, and I agree with him. Is he aware that violent crime in Staffordshire has increased by 43 per cent? Is he further aware that, according to a parliamentary answer that he gave, we have lost more than 240 police officers from the beat since 1997? Does he not see a connection? Is it not the case that the Home Secretary, who has presided over the Hinduja passports-for-money affair is not only seeing a breakdown of law and order in the country as a whole, but in his own Department as well?

Mr. Straw: I am aware that although crime in Staffordshire has increased by 4 per cent. overall in the last four years, that compares with an increase of 154 per cent. in the preceding 18 years of Conservative government. I am the first to accept that crime is too high, but I point out that crime levels throughout the country have decreased, and that includes overall violent crime as measured by the British crime survey. It does not include robbery, and we are concerned about that. We are taking action to ensure that robberies go down as well.

On overall police numbers, the Staffordshire chief constable has been provided with more than sufficient resources for an increase—

Mr. Fabricant: Don't blame him.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman may say that, but in 1994 chief constables were given the power to decide the number of constables that they needed, as opposed to civilian staff and equipment. The chief constable of Staffordshire chose significantly to increase the number of civilians. In 1997, there were 2,974 civilians and officers in Staffordshire, but at the last count, in September, there were 3,054 officers and civilians—an increase of 80. It is for the chief constable to decide how resources should be used. We have ensured that crime has fallen throughout the country and that the number of police officers is rising, and that is a significantly better record than that achieved by the Conservatives.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will be aware that at 8.30 this morning there was a train crash at Hither Green station in my constituency. Indeed, one of the trains involved was probably one that I would normally have used to get to Westminster. Although I am relieved that only nine people were relatively slightly injured and that the emergency services arrived very quickly and dealt with matters as professionally as we have come to expect, more than 1,000 people were on those two trains and many of them were probably standing. Have you heard whether a Minister intends to come to the House to make a statement about whether there will be an inquiry into what happened at Hither Green this morning?

Mr. Speaker: I am sorry to hear that bad news. I have had no contact from any Minister.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am grateful that you can consider this point, of which I have given you notice. On Friday morning, at column 527 of *Hansard*, the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), gave an undertaking to the House. He said:

"On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I confirm that the Government will be tabling a motion on Monday to the effect that has been indicated for the House to consider at that time."

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) drew attention to the importance of that undertaking, when he said, at column 530:

"I did not catch whether he said 'on Monday' or 'for Monday'. You will know, Mr. Speaker, that there is an important distinction."

At column 531, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Worcestershire (Mr. Luff) said:

"I apologise, Mr. Speaker. We need some clarification. I believe that the Minister indicated that he would be tabling a motion today for debate on Monday."—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2001; Vol. 364, c. 527-31.]

That relates to the motion that appears as No. 3 on today's Order Paper. Some of us consider the motion to be absolutely disgraceful, but that is an issue for tonight, unless, Mr. Speaker, you can give me satisfaction on my point of order. The Minister of State indicated dissent to my hon. Friend, indicating that the motion would not be tabled on Friday. However, it was tabled on Friday, meaning that Back-Bench members of the Committee to whom the proceedings refer, such as myself, who had taken the Minister at his word, did not remain here until the close of business. Having listened to the points of order on Friday, I thought I would have an opportunity to table amendments to the motion today. That has not been the case. Given the Minister's undertakings and the fact that the terms of the motion are outrageous, I ask that the motion not be considered today.

Mr. Speaker: What the Minister said on Friday is not a matter for me. A motion has been tabled, and an amendment has been put down. So far as I am concerned, that is the end of the matter.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Last Tuesday, you were kind enough to hear an application for a debate under Standing Order No. 24 on the situation in southern Serbia and Macedonia. Since then, the situation in the Presevo valley has got even worse. We now have news that Albanian extremists—the UCPMB—have refused NATO's invitation for there to be Serb troops in the buffer zones. In view of the fact that Peter Feith, Lord Robertson's special envoy, has been rebuffed, that Kalashnikovs—mostly Chinese—are to be found all over the area, and that ground-safety zones are being abused, have you had any request from the Ministry of Defence for permission to make a statement about those dangerous events in the southern Balkans?

Mr. Speaker: No.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. By way of brief background, I have been receiving telephone calls all weekend from Eddisbury farmers about the foot and mouth crisis. Following clearance on one suspected case just two miles from my home, Cheshire remains, as of this morning, a clean county—in stark contrast to the 1967 outbreak, when many farms across Cheshire were devastated.

Given reports that carcases from Devon are going to Cheshire for rendering at the Widnes plant, the backlog of burning on farms, the shortage of manpower, sleepers and coal, the need for the Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive and the insurance industry to check everything, and despite the superhuman efforts of vets, we need to know whether there will be a statement to address the serious concerns of Eddisbury farmers. They are receiving reports of carcases, lying on disinfected sawdust only, going through their clean county in lorries with open air vents and loose tarpaulins. Live animals are now coming from Scotland through affected areas in Cumbria to St. Asaph. Without assurances, the farmers of Cheshire, and those of Eddisbury in particular, are deeply concerned that, by such action, the clean county of Cheshire will be affected.

Mr. Speaker: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will be reporting to the House this week. That will give the hon. Gentleman an opportunity to raise these matters with him.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Further to the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), would you confirm, Mr. Speaker, that the Tories have completely misread the procedure? They have bungled procedurally, allowing the Liberal Democrats to jump in to do what they themselves should have done.

Mr. Speaker: I think that the hon. Gentleman is trying to draw me into the argument.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Further to the point of order of my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien), Mr. Speaker. My point concerns the procedure for getting in touch with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in relation to foot and mouth.

I received this morning a phone call from Mr. Jan Rowe, a senior member of the National Farmers Union, about the Blakeney outbreak of foot and mouth in Gloucestershire. It is particularly serious because the person who owns the sheep in the Forest of Dean also has sheep running on the

two main rubbish tips in Gloucestershire. I understand that hundreds of lorries go to and from those tips each day without any precautions being taken. MAFF will not be able to inspect the sheep until Wednesday.

I immediately phoned the Minister's private office, to be asked by an official, "Have you rung your local animal health office?" I said, "Come on, I am a Member of Parliament. These are strategic issues which need to be dealt with centrally." He then told me, "I will get somebody to phone you back." Nobody rang me back.

I then telephoned the foot and mouth helpline, which is based in Yorkshire. The gentleman who answered the phone said, "It is no good phoning us: we are inundated with inquiries. Our information is way out of date; we are three days out of date on confirmed outbreaks of foot and mouth on farms." I said, "Thank you. You have given me all the information that I need to raise a point of order in the House this afternoon." He said, "I hope you will, and vociferously"—which I am doing now. We need a dedicated person in MAFF to deal with such serious points on foot and mouth—somebody at a senior level who can give us answers.

Mr. Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's concerns have been noted.

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Following the premeditated and yobbish behaviour of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and three of her Whip colleagues, who disrupted Standing Committee F on Thursday, do you have any plans to issue guidance to right hon. and hon. Members, and to members of the Chairmen's Panel, about the power that a Chairman has to direct the Serjeant at Arms to deal with the withdrawal of non-members of Standing Committees if they are disrupting proceedings? Please tell us whether you plan to issue such guidance; page 704 of "Erskine May" suggests that the House has made orders relating to such incidents in the past.

Mr. Speaker: The Chairmen's Panel consists of experienced Members. They do not need more guidance. The Chairman of the Committee concerned showed that he has all the experience that is needed. I would be insulting the members of the Chairmen's Panel if I gave them any more guidance.

Mr. Blunt *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has already raised a point of order. He will have to wait until the end of points of order. Members are rationed to one at a time.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. My point of order concerns the behaviour of Members. You are old enough, as I am, to remember the Profumo inquiry. Over the weekend, there have been some serious allegations made in newspapers against the Foreign Secretary and his behaviour in the House. I shall not comment on those allegations. However, as the Foreign Secretary—

Mr. Speaker: Order. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to make any comment about a Member, he must write to me about the matter. At the time of the Profumo affair, I was 17 years of age and I had more things on my mind than that affair.

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Further to a matter raised earlier, will you clarify what options are open to the House when four Members deliberately flouted the rules of the House by refusing to remove themselves from Standing Committee F last Thursday? It is particularly shocking that the leader of the rule-breaking rabble was the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). She deliberately broke the rules to prevent the democratic passage of a Bill through Committee; I know that you personally disapprove of that action. What sanctions do we have to punish the right hon. Lady and to prevent a recurrence of her appalling behaviour?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should read Friday's record of events. That is the best advice that I can give him.

Mr. Blunt: On a separate point of order, Mr. Speaker, of which again I have given you notice. I have been passed a letter from the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on House of Commons headed notepaper. I gave notice to the hon. Gentleman that I would be raising the point of order. The letter is marked "in confidence" and it is addressed to two of his constituents. It reads:

"I am writing to ask for your help. The General Election is no more than six weeks away from being called. I can tell you confidentially that we have learned that Labour will be conducting extensive polling after the Budget on 7 March. If the results are positive, Tony Blair will call the Election on Monday 12 March."

It would appear that that polling has not gone terribly well.

The letter continues:

"As things stand, my agent will not be able to give our printer the go ahead for printing my election address. My agent tells me that we are about £1,500 short of our target to cover the cost. That is why I am writing to you to ask if you would make a donation towards my election address . . ."

I have two points of order. First, the hon. Gentleman has acknowledged to me that it was a mistake and that the letter should not have gone out on House of Commons headed paper. He is making arrangements to repay £1.20 to the House to cover the cost of the stationery. However, it is serious that a Member should importune people for party political funds on House of Commons paper. Is that sufficient recompense to the House, in your judgment?

Secondly, I presume that if the hon. Gentleman is writing to solicit funds for his re-election, his campaign to be elected as candidate for the Liberal party for Sutton and Cheam has begun, and that a record of his election expenses, including the cost of the letters, should also have begun.

Mr. Speaker: That is not a matter for me. Concerning the use of stationery and postage, the regulations have been broken. The Serjeant at Arms has looked into the matter and I understand that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) will repay all the costs of the stationery. That will be the end of the matter.

Air Travellers (Provision of Health Information)

3.45 pm

Mr. John Smith (Vale of Glamorgan): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require air carriers to provide information to passengers on health risks associated with flying and to contribute to research into such risks.

I introduce the motion with sadness and regret—sadness because it relates to the tragic death of one of my constituents last summer, and regret because I fear that we will not get all the airline companies to co-operate on such a matter unless they are forced to take action by legislation or the prospect of legislation.

My constituent, John Anthony Thomas, of Flemingston in the Vale of Glamorgan, was just 30 years old. He was in the prime of life; he was perfectly fit. He was a policeman and had just undergone a five-year police health check and had a clean bill of health. He returned from a dream honeymoon in Honolulu with his new wife and, a couple of days after returning, dropped dead with a pulmonary embolism.

That would be a tragedy for any family. When the Thomases asked me to get involved with the case, I thought at first that it was just one of those human tragedies that can affect anyone, and that there is not much that we can do about it—except that the family told me that had the consultant pathologist not mentioned that he thought that the death was due to a long-haul flight, the Thomases would never have made the connection between their young son's death and his recent honeymoon holiday.

For me, that rang alarm bells. If the Thomases found out only by accident, how many hundreds or possibly thousands of people have died from the same condition, without any such connection being made? Checks are not made in the NHS or in other hospitals to establish whether sufferers of deep vein thrombosis have recently taken long-haul flights.

I found out from my first meeting with the Thomases that it was the personal belief of the same pathologists that as many as 20 per cent. of deaths through DVT handled by the NHS could be due to air travel. If that is true, many thousands of people could be dying, unaware of the risks that they had taken. I, for one, knew nothing about the problem until it came up as a constituency matter, and I suspect that many citizens still know nothing about the possible connection between DVT and long-haul flights.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) has done quite a bit in the House on the matter, precisely because his wife had suffered from the condition following a flight. We do not know with certainty whether it is a major public health problem or whether it affects only a small minority of people. Some experts say that scores die from DVT; others say that thousands, or even many thousands, are dying from it.

We must establish scientifically and objectively the scale of the problem. I am delighted that the Select Committee in the House of Lords has introduced an extremely responsible paper calling for more research into this worrying and possibly major public health problem. My Bill attempts to prevent a repetition of mistakes made when we were in exactly the same position regarding the assessment of the implications of other public health problems. In the case of BSE, there was a long time lag before the effects first became apparent and we discovered that many people were dying and, indeed, may still die. In the case of the asbestos industry and the asbestosis connected directly to it, it took decades to make the connection. Some would say that the public health hazards caused by smoking and its connection with lung cancer took even longer.

My Bill proposes that we do not make the same mistakes again. We should undertake research now, but also take sensible, measured steps to ensure that people do not die or place themselves at risk unnecessarily during long-haul air travel. My Bill calls on the airline companies to provide up-to-date and accurate information on current health risks. Some airline companies that recently decided to do that because the public profile of the problem has been raised have, I fear, been slightly disingenuous. As I understand it, the information that they provide is misleading, inadequate and possibly dangerous.

It is said, for instance, that passengers on long-haul flights should stand in front of their seats periodically and exercise their legs and feet. If hon. Members do not already know it, that is virtually impossible in economy class seats where, one hour into the flight, most of the passengers are asleep, the seat in front is reclined, and one is more or less pinned to one's seat for however long the journey takes. The exercises are thus impossible. Worryingly, there are also other examples of inaccurate and misleading advice. I wonder what the airlines have got to hide and why they are providing inadequate information.

The second part of the Bill calls on the airlines to update information when, following research, we discover the scale of the problem. Plenty of information is available: the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy has produced a very good leaflet on steps that passengers can take and exercises that they can do to avoid the effect of so-called traveller's thrombosis. It is looking for sponsorship so that it can distribute those leaflets freely to all airline companies to ensure that all passengers can read the information and take precautionary exercise.

It is not just about exercise. One can take steps to minimise the risk, such as taking aspirin before the journey to thin the blood slightly, or wearing compression stockings during the flight to prevent blood pooling in the bottom of the legs and feet, which causes thrombosis and embolism. That is simple, basic advice and, as we learn more about the condition, airline companies have an obligation to distribute information to their passengers to reduce their risk of suffering from it.

Finally, the Bill aims to get airline carriers and companies to co-operate with any research into the scale of the problem. Again, there are worrying signs that our airline companies are not co-operating, and I must ask myself why. Worryingly, they are not providing ready access to passenger lists and medical records and are involved in limiting research. The Bill therefore includes three measured proposals which could make the difference between life and death.

I shall finish by quoting from a letter that I received from the mother of John Anthony Thomas last year. It was the first communication that I had received from her, and in it she said:

"I beg you Mr. Smith, please do not let my son's death be in vain and do all in your power to ensure airlines face their responsibility for the health and well-being of their passengers."

That letter came from a distraught mother. My asking the House to accept this motion is a direct result of that plea, and of my promise to her and to her family that I would do all that I could to prevent any future deaths.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. John Smith, Dr. Ian Gibson, Dr. Ashok Kumar, Dr. Doug Naysmith, Dr. Howard Stoate, Dr. Brian Iddon, Dr. Desmond Turner, Dr. David Clark.

AIR TRAVELLERS (PROVISION OF HEALTH INFORMATION)

Mr. John Smith accordingly presented a Bill to require air carriers to provide information to passengers on health risks associated with flying and to contribute to research into such risks: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 6 April, and to be printed [Bill 59].

Orders of the Day

WAYS AND MEANS

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [7 March].

AMENDMENT OF THE LAW

Motion made, and Question proposed,

(1) That it is expedient to amend the law with respect to the National Debt and the public revenue and to make further provision in connection with finance.

(2) Subject to paragraphs (3) to (6) below, this Resolution does not extend to the making of any amendment with respect to value added tax so as to provide—

(a) for zero-rating or exempting a supply, acquisition or importation;

(b) for refunding an amount of tax;

(c) for varying any rate at which that tax is at any time chargeable;

(d) for any relief, other than a relief which—

(i) so far as it is applicable to goods, applies to goods of every description, and

(ii) so far as it is applicable to services, applies to services of every description.

(3) Paragraph (2) above does not exclude the making of amendments with respect to value added tax—

(a) providing for refunds of the kind specified in paragraph (4) below;

(b) providing for that tax to be charged at a reduced rate of 5 per cent. on supplies of the descriptions specified in paragraph (5) below (and on equivalent acquisitions and importations); or

(c) making provision of the kind authorised by paragraph (6) below.

(4) The refunds mentioned in paragraph (3)(a) above are refunds of value added tax where—

(a) that tax is chargeable on a supply to, or an acquisition or importation by, a museum or gallery, and

(b) the supply, acquisition or importation is attributable to supplies of free rights of admission to the museum or gallery.

(5) The supplies mentioned in paragraph (3)(b) above are—

(a) supplies, in the course of a conversion of a building (or part of a building), of services related to the conversion if after the conversion the building (or part) contains living accommodation;

(b) supplies, in the course of the renovation or alteration (including the extension) of a dwelling that has been unoccupied for at least three years, of services related to the renovation or alteration;

(c) supplies of goods by a person making a supply of services within sub-paragraph (a) or (b) above if—

(i) those services include the incorporation of the goods into the building concerned (or its site), and

(ii) the goods are building materials within the meaning of Group 5 of Schedule 8 to the Value Added Tax Act 1994;

(d) supplies of children's car seats.

(6) The provision authorised by this paragraph is provision re-enacting, without altering any person's liability to value added tax or the amount of any such liability, provisions providing for that tax to be charged at a reduced rate of 5 per cent. on certain supplies, acquisitions and importations.—[*Mr. Gordon Brown.*]

Question again proposed.

Budget Resolutions and Economic Situation

3.57 pm

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): In opening this third day of the Budget debate, I make no apology for repeating the accolades that are due to the Chancellor for the way in which he has ensured that our economy is offering prosperity, stability and success for the future. By choice, not by accident, and by conscious and deliberate action, the Government have taken the necessary steps to ensure that the fruits of stability and competence can be reinvested to bring greater prosperity in the years to come.

In lifting debt from the shoulders of the British people and in enabling us to pay our contribution in lifting debt from the developing world, we can ensure that we apply the people's money to the people's priorities. Those priorities, in health, education, regeneration and employment, are critical to a decent quality of life and to a future to be proud of.

In ensuring that we can invest in improved services, and in avoiding the failures of the past, we are turning the fruits of employment and the reductions in benefit payments into an ability to re-apply them for further employment and for reducing the need for those benefits. We have already spelled out the reduction, from 42p in the pound to 16p, of tax revenue spent on debt and on the payment of unnecessary benefits. That is a foundation on which we can build by reinvesting in social cohesion, and today I shall spell out some of the measures that we are taking to underpin that investment to ensure that quality teaching is in place and that we can recruit and retain the teachers that we need.

Having ameliorated the worst evidence of poverty through the measures that the Chancellor has taken since the election in 1997, and through the future measures spelled out in last Wednesday's Budget, we can now begin to concentrate on investment to overcome the need for ameliorative measures by tackling the causes as well as the symptoms. By investing in education and skills, self-reliance and independence, by liberating the talents of all our people so that they can contribute to their own well-being and reach out and contribute to the wider community, by investing in future success and, in particular, by investing in jobs and community regeneration, we can make it possible for those who follow us to continue an upward spiral of investment in key services, rather than the stop-go policies of the past.

Tackling the legacy of neglect has been the major task of the Government; avoiding its recurrence will be the task of the next Parliament. That is why the extra investment of a third of a billion pounds each year in education and extra investment in skills is so important. It is linked with further cash for employment and for our wider welfare-to-work measures. The Opposition would cut, whereas we are reconstructing. The Opposition were prepared to sacrifice services, whereas we are using them not only to ensure the liberation of the talents of the individual but to contribute to economic well-being, because economic prosperity and social well-being go hand in hand.

In the Chamber a few weeks ago, the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), the shadow Secretary of State, painted a picture—a distorted portrait—of my leadership and that of my colleagues, describing it as centralist. She evoked the image of "Thunderbirds". I reminded Lady Penelope that her party introduced the national curriculum, centrally directed tests, the Office for Standards in Education, the predecessors to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Funding Agency for Schools. *[Interruption.]* Yes, I did pick up the issue of grant-maintained schools and, yes, Conservative Members introduced the Teacher Training Agency. Lord Dearing, to whom I pay tribute once again, managed to dig them out of a hole by slimming down some measures.

This Government have taken further steps to lighten the national curriculum, slim down the TTA, amalgamate the two predecessor bodies into the QCA, lighten the inspection regime and ensure that it falls less frequently on schools that are doing well and provide through the literacy and numeracy strategies the relevant support to make the tests attainable.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Secretary of State talks about lightening the administrative burden, but is he aware that teachers in Staffordshire, whether they work in a comprehensive school or not, say that they are bogged down by the administrative burden? Does he not understand the betrayal that teachers feel, especially given the promise that he and his team made in 1997, when they said that they would produce a new funding system, which was not delivered, whereby Staffordshire would not remain second from bottom in funding per pupil? The combination of burden, red tape and low funding in Staffordshire remains.

Mr. Blunkett: I am pleased that the legacy of low funding is nowhere near what it was when we took office in 1997. Direct funding to head teachers, which we enhanced last week to an average of £70,000 for a secondary school and an average of £24,000 for a primary school for running costs, will have helped schools in Staffordshire as it has helped schools across the country. The two-thirds reduction in paperwork over the past six months—the figure for primary schools is 40 per cent.—will have helped to reduce the time taken to access that paperwork.

Paperwork for literacy and numeracy—for example, the grammar guide, which was sent out last term—is not bureaucracy or administration, but direct support. I again make the point to the House that those who want to direct teachers to teach in a particular way and who want to toughen up on phonics should not also claim that teachers should not be directed on how to teach. Those who are prepared to abandon phonics, decent spelling and grammar and the literacy hour should stand up and be counted.

I have made the point before, but it is worth making again, that Conservative Members can hardly claim that they introduced the literacy hour, given that the hon. Member for Maidenhead famously said that 60 minutes is too long for the literacy hour, thus redefining a metric hour, which no doubt will be an interesting feature of any debate on Europe.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The Secretary of State referred to the Teacher Training Agency, and he always tries to convey the impression that he is a sound traditionalist, although it is obvious that Mr. Chris Woodhead, among others, is not so persuaded. Is the right

hon. Gentleman aware of the abominable observations of those three supposed specialists in the teaching of reading, Kimberley, Meek and Miller, who are on record as saying:

"Within the psycho-semiotic framework, the shared reading lesson is viewed as an ideological construct where events are played out and children must therefore learn to position themselves in three interlocking contexts."

What assurance can the right hon. Gentleman give that such drivel, which has done so much damage to the life chances of a generation of children in our state schools, is not continuing to spread like a disease?

Mr. Blunkett: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his reading of that piece of psycho-babble.

Mr. Fabricant: My hon. Friend quoted it from memory.

Mr. Blunkett: From memory! That is a remarkable achievement. I reinforce my congratulations. What a smart and able Member the hon. Member for Buckingham is, and what a smart Alec, too. As far as I am aware, the three authors to whom he referred had nothing to do with the literacy hour. Fortunately, the phrase that he memorised and quoted has not passed over my desk.

Mr. Bercow: I am glad to hear it.

Mr. Blunkett: I am grateful for the accolade from the hon. Gentleman, and I am glad to hear it, too.

Having disposed of that matter, we can get back to reality, which is the £200 million allocated last Wednesday—£100 million of revenue for running costs, and £100 million of devolved capital for heads and governors to use. Incidentally, that brings the amount of devolved capital available for investment in repair and renewal during the spending period 2003–04 to £600 million a year. That compares with £683 million, which was the total for capital investment in repair, renewal and new build for the whole of England in 1996–97. It clearly shows the transformation that has taken place as we move to an £8.5 billion investment in repair and renewal of our schools, which will help teachers to do the job better, will make the teaching profession more attractive and will ensure that youngsters get the environment they deserve.

Today, we are introducing new measures. Conservative Members raised the issue of administration and bureaucracy. I can announce a £35 million investment from the capital modernisation fund, which is entirely new money that was not announced last Wednesday. I am grateful to my Treasury colleagues for releasing £35 million for us to invest in a new management information system. It will enable us to ensure that we can collect, collate and transfer data, and thus avoid the statistical nightmare of constant data collection for different purposes. It will be possible to transfer data between schools and age groups, so that the unique pupil number and added value measures can be introduced more effectively; so that collated information on children in the primary sector can be transferred easily and quickly to secondary schools; and so that we can reduce the volume of form filling to about one working week per head per year, which will make a substantial contribution to reducing pressure on heads and teachers. I am pleased that we have been able to make a start on that.

I am also able to give details of the additional £200 million programme over three years, which was mooted in the Chancellor's Budget statement, for recruitment and retention measures for teachers.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): My party strongly supports the introduction of a bureaucracy-buster and the passing on of records, which is an excellent initiative, but how does the Secretary of State intend to commission the work? One of the great problems in the past has been that schools and education authorities have all gone their own way. Unless the software is consistent, the system will fall down when children transfer from one authority or school to another.

Mr. Blunkett: I entirely agree that there has been a problem, although, in the context of Government as a whole, my Department's record on implementing new technology—in the Student Loans Company or in the development of the national grid for learning—is not bad. In the latter context, we shall want to move quickly, in consultation with representatives of heads and with the e-envoy, to ensure that we get it right. Compatibility is an important factor.

The retention and recruitment package will build on steps that we have already taken. Whatever people may feel about the immediate problem of recruitment, there has been a remarkable turnaround in the attitude to teaching, especially among young people. I would not go so far as to say that teaching has become fashionable again, but a 19 per cent. uplift in applications for the next academic year and a remarkable increase in the number of inquiries constitute symbols of hope.

This time last year, there were 51,000 inquiries; this year, there have been 141,000. The 19 per cent. uplift in applications for September—which, of course, will not feed through in terms of teachers in the classroom for another 18 months—includes a 14 per cent. increase in maths applications, a 27 per cent. increase in science applications and a 7 per cent. increase in modern languages applications. That is a substantial and welcome improvement, which we must build on as quickly and effectively as possible; but we must also keep teachers in the classroom, which is why our measures are about retention as well as recruitment.

It will certainly not help if teachers walk away from children, leaving others to cover classes, denying the children an education and reducing their chances of future success. It will not help those children to do well in tests, GCSEs and A-levels. No one will gain unless those in classrooms act as professionals and ensure that cover is provided while we take the measures that have been demanded to lighten the pressure and ensure that enough teachers are in the classrooms. I thank all the professionals who have been doing that job—under considerable strain in some schools—and appeal to others not to make matters worse by walking away from children who need teachers to cover their classes.

This is a real problem, which arises from decades of under-recruitment and loss to the profession. Together, we need to do something substantial to ensure that, while we await the outcome of new applicants' training, a return to teaching is an attractive option.

Two years ago we introduced "golden hellos", and enhanced them for shortage subjects. We introduced training bursaries to give postgraduates an incentive

[Mr. Blunkett]

to train. We introduced the graduate teacher programme, which has been such a success in the development of in-school training, and the new training schools: it is working extremely well, as I saw for myself this morning when I visited Southfields community school. This time last year, on the back of the Budget of 2000, we put a further £180 million into the programme. I believe that we are beginning to turn the corner and that the success of our measures is shining through, but the time scales are agin us.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Along with others, I raised a number of problems relating to the graduate teacher programme during a recent Opposition day debate on the teaching profession. We mentioned the calculation of subjects that would qualify for the programme, and various other issues to do with the qualifications of those entering it. The Secretary of State undertook to tackle those problems; what has he done?

Mr. Blunkett: I was planning to deal with that matter later, but I shall do so now. The hon. Lady proposed to slim down the administration and application of school-based graduate teacher programmes. I am pleased to tell her that we will take the action that she advocated. I said that we would examine her proposals, and I meant it. We have accepted them and shall implement them. They are part of the programme that we are announcing today.

As we are on the subject, I can also announce that we shall substantially increase the graduate teacher programme by adding another 570 places, bringing the total number to 2,250. That will make a substantial contribution to enabling people with experience to receive a salary while training and to encouraging them. The increase will commence at Easter.

I am seeking to ensure that we do not treat the issue as a football to be kicked around. I am prepared to listen and to learn. I shall continue to offer everyone—Members and members of the public—the opportunity to offer ideas on how to deal with teacher shortages in some of our schools and some of our regions. I assure the House that we will work with people and take those ideas on board.

Mr. Willis: In our previous debate on the subject, the issue of the degree requirements for those who wish specifically to access key stage 3 teacher training was raised. Graduates who had not trained in a national curriculum subject were being denied access to training. The Secretary of State said that he would investigate the issue and report back. Has there been any progress on it?

Mr. Blunkett: Although I shall try to avoid reporting back on everything today, I shall do my best, so that hon. Members can tick off the boxes. I acknowledged that there was an issue, and we have investigated it. We have also agreed with the Teacher Training Agency and institutions that if the course content of a degree is sufficient to provide assurances that an individual has the necessary background and foundation to take on a specialism, that individual may access training for the specialism. In our previous debate, a psychology degree was cited as an example. If graduates are able to show that their psychology degree involved sufficient statistics content to enable them to undertake maths training, they should be able to participate in such training.

I hope that that assures the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) that we are trying to balance the desire to ensure quality with the relevance of an individual's background. We are trying also to offer upgrade courses in specialised subjects, so that there is not an automatic cut-off for applicants. Those who are particularly committed and interested should be able to take in-service courses, making it possible for them to transfer to those specialisms.

In some schools and some parts of the country, non-specialists have had to take on specialist teaching to ensure that cover is provided. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, as an ex-teacher, will be aware that that has happened for many years. As someone who taught in a college of technology, I was aware that it was happening around me. I shall never forget being asked to teach law. I said that although I had A-level law, I was not intent on teaching it. I think that many teachers have found themselves in a similar position.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we are victims of our own success? The simple fact that an extra 1.1 million people are in jobs, that wages are increasing and that there are pressures on housing markets in the south-east perhaps helps to explain why, although we are investing enormous sums in teacher supply, it is still difficult to square the circle. Although standards are rising, there are still many options for good teachers.

Mr. Blunkett: There are indeed. By trying to recruit more teachers, rather than fewer; by recruiting an extra 7,000 teachers in the past two years while seeking to reduce class sizes and ensure not only in-service training for mainstream teachers but training for supply teachers; by putting in place booster classes that are attractive to supply teachers; and by offering professional development courses that teachers find attractive, but which require cover, we are perhaps making a rod for our own back in trying to match supply and demand. That is particularly true in high-cost areas in which attractive salaries can be paid and there are additional costs. That is why the review body report recommended substantial uplifts of 30 per cent. in London weighting and outer-London weighting and retention bonuses of £5,000 a year to be rolled into a £15,000 package of retention over three years. That is why performance-related pay, which we introduced, is so critical. It offers not simply an uplift of £2,000 for good teachers but access to new pay scales of an additional £4,000. That will make a difference to retaining as well as attracting teachers.

This afternoon's package will deal with the problem of how we get people back into the profession now. The immediate £2,000 incentive—£4,000 for shortage subjects, which matches the bonus that is already in place for new recruits to the profession—will, I hope, be an attractive proposition, but it needs to be matched by other measures. Those measures will include an acceleration of the graduate teacher programme and a £35 million programme of funded measures this year, to be matched by at least £35 million in the next financial year. The money will go directly to head teachers and governors, without bureaucracy and administrative difficulty. There has to be co-ordination. We want a light-touch approach at local authority or area level, using the recruitment managers who are already paid for by the Department and are in place.

The money will enable head teachers to pay for additional housing costs and for care components, if needed, to help returners with the costs of child care and of caring for older relatives. It will enable travel costs to be met and changes to incremental scales to be offered. The scale on which a post is offered can be changed to meet the needs of a returner, whether that person has just had a family or took early retirement.

I was tickled to hear that one of the agencies had written to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, an ex-head teacher, to ask whether he would like to come back to the profession. I gather that he has reserved his position until after the election—a wise man. I have been out of the profession for so long that no one has sent me anything, but one never knows.

The new funding will be made available immediately, but through the review body we will simultaneously consult to avoid any misunderstandings or allegations that we did not consult. We will ensure that the money is made available as speedily as possible to those who return to the profession.

I hope that the measures will enable us to say to people on the edge of returning to the profession that this is an appropriate moment to do so. We will offer free update courses of six weeks and child care provision. We will also pay a bursary during those six weeks so that there is no disadvantage to the family.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): I congratulate the Secretary of State on what he and his colleagues have been doing to improve standards, particularly with regard to the recent intervention on behalf of schools in Thurrock. That was timely and much appreciated by parents and me.

Will my right hon. Friend undertake to revisit a problem with the allocation of scarce resources from the Department? I understand that the indices include the number of children who have free school meals and levels of employment. In my area, although unemployment levels are not high, a lack of wealth and opportunity is disguised by the large retail sector, which pays relatively low salaries. The numbers of the many children who are greatly deprived are not reflected in the indices of free school meals and unemployment. The allocation of funds needs fine tuning to reflect traditionally poor areas.

Mr. Blunkett: There is always a problem with crude measures versus complexity—between trying to set up simple measures of deprivation and the complicated evaluations that inevitably have to be dealt with through greater central administration. There is a dichotomy between what is fair and what is simple, as I can well understand, for example, in relation to the pupil learning credits that we announced in the Green Paper.

This afternoon's package will be aimed at areas where vacancies exist; it will be tailored both to particular geographical areas and to schools with the biggest problems. The money will follow the problem and will thus be related not to prosperity or hidden deprivation but to the specific problem that we want to overcome. As with other measures in the Green Paper, we shall apply some of the resources proposed in last week's Budget, together with the spending review allocations, to ensure that we can be flexible on other measures that will be attractive and fair to people coming into the profession.

As I said, some hon. Members are concerned about undergraduates taking BEd and BA courses. We want to use some of the Budget resources for experiments in the fourth year of such undergraduate courses to enable students to achieve qualified teacher status early and move into the classroom as appropriate, and to help them financially. I look forward to being able to move on that matter, on which there will be further consultation.

I hope that this afternoon's package will enable us, once again, to appeal to people to work together, rather than against each other, to solve a genuine difficulty. Success breeds success, as schools show through their higher standards and achievement; and, with the additional support and resources that have been made available, they will be able to tell others that teaching is an excellent profession to be in. We can see from the increased number of applications that young people believe that. We can reach out to former teachers and draw them back into the profession.

We cannot solve all the problems that arise from the success of the economy in parts of the country where prosperity puts enormous pressure on housing costs and offers alternative employment. However, we can take steps to match that. We are putting in place the precise measures that most people wanted, ensuring that recruitment, retention and reward go hand in hand. In a spirit of collaboration, we are challenging the main Opposition party to say whether it will match the funding that we are putting in place. The commitment of the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor applies only to money allocated to schools. However, there will be allocations from the DFEE budget for many of the measures that we are taking, including the information technology package to reduce administration. Given the extra resources that we are putting in, in the event of the Opposition miraculously finding themselves on the Government Benches, it would be interesting to hear where the cuts of £8 billion and tax cuts of £8 billion would be imposed. I doubt that Conservative Members will answer the question because no one in Conservative central office has worked it out yet. Everyone outside knows perfectly well that the sums do not add up.

The foundations that we are laying today will carry forward opportunity for all our children, investment in schools across the country, greater delegation of budgets and the freedom of heads to use them. We are introducing measures that directly address the problem of recruitment. We are overcoming the legacy of years of neglect that we inherited. We are very pleased indeed to have been able to do that. I am grateful to the Chancellor for enabling me to announce these measures this afternoon.

4.29 pm

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): Four years ago, this Labour Government were elected with the priority, "education, education, education." Four wasted years later, they have manifestly failed to deliver on that promise. That is clear to anyone who visits schools and listens to teachers complaining about the burden of bureaucracy; to head teachers complaining about Government interference; to governors complaining about the overload of red tape; to pupils complaining about disruptive children being kept in class, damaging their education and that of others; or to parents worried about teacher shortages that are creating difficulties in their local schools.

[Mrs. Theresa May]

Jenny Short, the head teacher of Loddon junior school in Earley, wrote in her open letter to the Prime Minister,

"As a head teacher of a junior school, I am at a complete loss as to how to cope with the staffing problems I now face."

She set out those staffing problems and continued:

"Whilst I shall continue to make every effort to cover absence in the event of illness, if this proves to be impossible, children will be sent home."

She has subsequently been in touch with me and said:

"I leave my school after five years and two successful OFSTEDs exhausted and disillusioned. Once we could choose our teachers carefully with due regard for the balance of age and experience, ability and expertise, personality and potential to fit in with our high standards and ethos. We could build on our successes, make real improvements . . . Now . . . the daily staffing crises reduce us all to firefighters where strategic planning and real improvements are impossible".

On a doorstep in Hurst during the weekend, a parent told me, "The Government promised education would be their priority. I haven't seen any evidence of it."

So as we consider the Budget's impact on education, what is the end-of-term report on the Government and the Secretary of State? "More red tape—done. Increased interference from Whitehall—done. Teachers leaving in droves—done. Larger secondary classes—done. More disruptive pupils in class—done. Grammar schools under threat—done. Abolition of grant-maintained status—done. Fiddled figures—done."

The legacy of the Government's four wasted years is a national crisis of teacher shortages, a demoralised teaching profession, schools threatened with four-day weeks, standards damaged and children's education suffering—for the Government, who came in promising so much, have delivered little, not just in education. The Secretary of State did not refer to any of the comments on the new deal that the Chancellor made in his Budget speech, because the Government have spent hundreds of millions of pounds on the new deal—a scheme that the National Institute of Economic and Social Research has shown has directly resulted in only 13,000 jobs.

The evidence shows that the new deal works when the private sector is involved, using its expertise and flexibility in the interests of unemployed people—for example, Reed Executive in Hackney and Pertemps in Birmingham. We have seen what the private sector can deliver. That is why we will replace the new deal with "Britain works", which will involve private sector expertise and will focus on getting people into jobs as soon as possible and helping them to stay in them. "Britain works" will be a better deal for unemployed people, for employers and for taxpayers. The new deal is a broken pledge.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does the hon. Lady agree that the shadow Chancellor's policy of keeping inflation below 2 per cent. would inevitably drive up interest rates, thus increasing unemployment and resulting in less money for education?

Mrs. May: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman consider the inflation rate at the moment. I understand that it is less than 2 per cent., so perhaps he should reconsider his intervention. He should look at the new deal figures, which show that the programme has failed to provide jobs for young long-term unemployed people; that the rate of decline in long-term youth unemployment has slowed under this Government in comparison with what was happening during the last years of the Conservative Government; and that where the new deal works, it does so because the private sector is involved. With "Britain works", we shall ensure that the private sector is involved, to get people into jobs.

Mr. Blunkett: Why has long-term youth unemployment fallen by 75 per cent? Why did the report of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research say that the new deal has added £500 million steady state a year to GDP? Why did it acknowledge that more than 200,000 youngsters have got into jobs faster? Why are 274,000 youngsters who had been unemployed for more than six months now in work when they were not when we came into office? And why are employment zones working so well that even the Conservative party cannot think of abolishing them?

Mrs. May: The figure from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research is 13,000 new jobs from the new deal. The report showed that hundreds and millions of pounds have been spent to find 13,000 jobs. Unemployed people deserve a better deal. They do not want to be put on training programmes only to find that they come off them when they go back on to benefit because there is no job for them. The new deal has become a revolving door for too many of the long-term unemployed, and that is why it needs replacing with a better scheme. "Britain works" will be that better scheme. The new deal is a broken pledge.

Let us consider the Government's education promises and look back on their early claims about extra education spending. Three years ago, in the first comprehensive spending review, the Government announced an extra £19 billion for education. We soon saw how wrong that figure was. As *The Guardian* said:

"Mr. Blunkett's claim to be spending an extra £19 billion has collapsed in empty rhetoric".

The Times reported:

"Mr. Brown added together increases over three years to produce his global figures of £19 billion more for education . . . This is misleading since it represents triple counting".

[Interruption.] The Secretary of State seems to be commenting on the author of *The Guardian* report, but perhaps he would like to comment on the rebuke that he received from the Select Committee on Education and Employment, which said that there was

"no cash bonanza of the type which newspaper headlines might suggest".

True to form, the Government have been up to their old tricks. They are perhaps getting a little better at hiding them—as they do in table C13, on page 202 of the Red Book. The Chancellor announced an extra £1 billion of spending on education, but a comparison of the figures on page 202 of the Red Book with the latest comprehensive spending review shows that, as a result of the Budget, the increase in education spending over the next three years is actually £200 million—not £1 billion. The answer is that one simply cannot believe a word that the Government say about their spending.

That is not the only way in which the Government are fiddling the figures. Ministers welcomed the School Teachers' Pay Review Body recent pay award for

teachers, but they did not tell anyone that they were not going to fund the increases fully. Local education authorities will have to find the extra money, and schools will see their budgets being cut to provide the pay for teachers.

Ministers claimed to put £65 million into school budgets this year for the new AS-levels, but how many schools have seen a penny of that money? Their teaching costs have gone up, their resources costs have gone up and their examination costs have gone up, but the Government have not provided them with the extra funding to pay for that.

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): May I remind the hon. Lady that I spent some years in local government? In every one of the 18 years of the Conservative Government, my local authority had to find a proportion of teachers' salaries—and she can check that point out. She should not complain about this Government when they are trying to do something to right that wrong.

Mrs. May: The Government are not doing that; that is the whole point. Local authorities today have to scrape around for the extra cash because the Government are not providing it. The Government hide and fiddle the figures so that schools do not know exactly what they will get, and fail to provide the funding that they promise for schools. The expectations of teachers and parents have been raised, but that is why they are now becoming totally disillusioned and fed up with the Government. They have heard so many promises on which the Government have completely failed to deliver.

We should not be surprised by that, given that, when the Government claimed to be introducing fairer funding, they said that more money would go direct to schools while at the same time specifying 89 categories of spending that local authorities could hold back from schools. The Government promised that they would change the standard spending assessment within a year of coming to office but they have done nothing about it. Few schools in the numerous authorities—such as Wiltshire, Worcestershire, Dorset, Leicestershire and indeed Staffordshire, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) referred—that have been disadvantaged by that calculation think that funding today is fairer. That is certainly not what I heard last week from heads in Wiltshire who face problems and budget deficits because of the difficulties caused by the Government's lack of funding. In any case, how much of the money announced in the Budget will be top-sliced from local authorities and redistributed to them as new money?

What about the way in which the Government tell schools how to spend their money? During a visit to a secondary school in Formby last week, I was told by the head, "I've got four pages of A4 which describe all the different funding streams that come into this school. One page covers the funding streams over which we have discretion; three pages cover the funding streams over which we have no discretion." The Secretary of State referred to the Chancellor's Budget announcement of an extra sum that will go directly to schools, but that is only true of about 1 per cent. of the money. Money should go directly to schools so that heads have the freedom to spend it in the best interests of children in their classrooms: they should receive 100 per cent. of it directly. Heads should have the freedom to spend the money on what they know is needed in their schools in the interests of their pupils.

The Secretary of State mentioned devolved capital. At a primary school in Woodley this morning, the head told me, "It's all very well talking about this devolved capital, but the problem is that I am only allowed to spend it in chunks of £10,000 and then only on certain priority areas. I can think of a lot of things I want to spend the money on, but I am not allowed to." We are far from the Secretary of State's claim that the people's money is being spent on the people's priority. Instead of the people's money being spent on schools' priorities, it is being spent on Labour's priorities.

It would be unfair to suggest that the Government have not increased spending on education, however. They have increased the amount that is spent on advertising in the Department for Education and Employment and the money that is wasted on bureaucracy. During the past four years, the Government have introduced 530 regulations. In the past year, they have sent out a directive a day to teachers. They have published well over 2,000 press releases and goodness knows how many of the Secretary of State's speeches have been published in glossy booklets. Increased spin—done.

At the top of the Government's list of achievements, however, is the increase in bureaucracy, red tape and paperwork that they have imposed on teachers. The Secretary of State mentioned reducing bureaucracy. In the Green Paper that was published a few weeks ago, the Government claim that they have reduced the number of pages of material sent to primary schools by 1,170 pages to just 490, but it was their fault in the first place that those schools were receiving nearly 2,000 pages of circulars telling them what to do.

What about the time that that bureaucracy, which keeps teachers away from the core job of teaching children, takes up? The Government say in the Green Paper that the standards fund will be changed and not all the money will go directly to schools. Some categories will remain as they are, but the system is apparently being changed to save time in schools. However, according to the Government, schools have spent three months filling in forms for the standards fund. That is hardly a reduction in bureaucracy.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend's concerns reflect those that hundreds of teachers throughout my constituency—from north to south and from west to east—have put to me over the past four years. Is she aware of a written answer given by the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) that said:

"The number of people leaving a profession may be taken as an indicator of morale."—[*Official Report*, 11 December 2000; Vol. 359, c. 65W.]

Given that the vacancy situation is three times worse in the capital than at national level and that one fifth of people who leave their posts are leaving the profession altogether, is that not the most damning indictment of the continuing failure of this Administration?

Mrs. May: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a telling intervention. It seems that the Minister of State, Home Office knows a great deal more than the Secretary of State for Education and Employment about what is happening

[Mrs. May]

in the education system today. The problem is that people are leaving the profession because of bureaucracy and red tape.

One has only to look at the 2 March edition of *The Times Educational Supplement*, which has a front-page heading, "Crisis? What crisis?" What annoys teachers, head teachers, governors and parents is that unlike the Minister of State, Home Office, the Secretary of State fails to recognise the impact of his policies on the morale of the profession and the crisis that his actions have generated in our schools. The headlines inside the TES say, "Morale plummets as shortages rise" and "Official denials only add insult to injury". The head teacher of New college, Leicester says:

"We'll reach meltdown unless a miracle happens by September."

The head teacher of the Malling school in Maidstone says:

"Don't even let me hear Estelle Morris say again 'there's not a crisis'. Come and spend a week in Kent."

That is what is happening in our schools under the Labour Government.

The Secretary of State tells us that everything is all right because the number of applications at the graduate teacher training registry has gone up. If we look back over the four years of this Government, we see that there are fewer applications than in 1997. Applications to teach maths have fallen by 21 per cent. since that year; applications to teach modern languages have fallen by 26 per cent. and applications to teach English have gone down by 19 per cent.

Despite all the cash incentives and all the money that the Government claim to be spending on the problem, teachers are still not coming forward. Teacher applications have fallen and teachers are leaving the profession because they are demoralised by the red tape and paperwork that the Government have imposed and because the Government's interference means that they can no longer get on with the job that they want to do, which is teaching children.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): Will my hon. Friend also comment on the management of the Department? I have just received two written answers to a parliamentary question. I asked the Secretary of State when he would reply to my letters dated 8 November and 21 September 2000 concerning the exclusion from holiday play schemes of children with medical conditions. I wonder if my hon. Friend can help me, because I have had two replies to the same question. The first says:

"I replied to the hon. Member on Friday 9 March".

The second says:

"I will reply to the hon. Member as soon as possible."

Both those answers have just arrived on my desk. Can my hon. Friend tell me which is correct? Do I have a reply or not?

Mrs. May: I am sorry to say to my hon. Friend that I know the Secretary of State's mind no better than it seems he or his Ministers do. My hon. Friend makes a telling point about the bureaucracy in the Department—the very bureaucracy that causes problems for our schools and teachers. I can only suggest to him that perhaps the people who were supposed to be responding properly to his question were too busy drafting yet another circular to send to teachers.

We know that because of the shortage of teachers many schools have been able to operate without sending children home only because of the large number of supply teachers from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and other countries. Unfortunately, those schools may soon find that they face another problem. An article in Sydney's *The Sun-Herald* yesterday said:

"Australian teachers recruited to work in British schools are quitting in increasing numbers because of poor behaviour by students and alien working conditions."

The headmaster of Chalvedon school and sixth form college in Essex, who recruited nine Australians, finds five months on that four of them have left. As another teacher said:

"Staff shortages are so severe that we are getting Australian teachers who get off the plane one day and are literally standing in front of a class the next".

That is the state to which the Secretary of State has brought our education system in his four wasted years in office.

Let us look at funding for schools and bureaucracy. We know that the Government will never give schools all the money or stop the bureaucracy, because they simply do not trust teachers or parents. The Secretary of State referred in his speech to liberating the talents of individuals. I hardly think that his proposals for advanced specialist schools in the Green Paper represent "liberating the talents of individuals". Advanced specialist schools will be able to

"volunteer to take on a number of innovative ideas".

Good—I am in favour of innovative ideas in education. However, as we read on, we learn that they can only do so

"from a menu developed centrally".

Yet again, the Government are obsessed with centralising and interfering, rather than letting schools get on with doing what they know is right for children in their classrooms.

As the former chief inspector of schools said:

"David Blunkett has presided over a set of initiatives that has wasted taxpayers' money, distracted teachers from their real responsibilities and encapsulated the worst of the discredited ideology that has done so much damage since the 1960s".

That is what this Government have done instead of delivering on education.

Mr. Blunkett: I should be ever so grateful if the hon. Lady would tell me whether she agrees with one or two of the initiatives to which she is referring, such as the excellence in cities programme, the new deal for schools, the national grid for learning and the reduction in class size—all of which were listed as initiatives over and above the two with which the former chief inspector of schools agreed. Does she think that all or any of those should have been initiated, or would she abolish them?

Mrs. May: The Secretary of State still does not get the point. The point is that schools should be given all of their budget and allowed to spend it on what they think is right for children—not on what the Government think is right. Head teachers constantly tell me that they want the ability

to spend the money that is due to their school in the way that they think fit—in the interests not of the Government but of children.

Mr. Willis: Will the hon. Lady clear up a misunderstanding, probably on my part? Will central funds be the same for each child in a primary school and for each child in a secondary school, wherever in the United Kingdom that school may be?

Mrs. May: No, the national funding formula will take account of some differential needs. I am happy to clear that up for the hon. Gentleman.

The next Conservative Government will get rid of the endless bureaucracy that takes teachers' time and resources and means that money is not spent in the best interests of children. We are absolutely clear that we will match the money that the Government are spending, and are proposing to spend, on schools. That will include the increases to which the Secretary of State referred in his speech today, which were announced in the Budget. Perhaps more important, we will tackle serious reform of education by devolving all budgets to schools and by ensuring that money which is currently held back by local education authorities and central Government goes to schools. That will mean hundreds of extra pounds per pupil for schools.

We are not just about devolving money. Head teachers should be given the freedom to do the job for which they were trained. A head teacher from Essex wrote to me recently:

"We as head teachers need more finance into the school with the freedom to be creative with it to suit our needs. We need less paperwork and more encouragement as a profession".

The Secretary of State seems not to understand when teachers' representatives tell him that the introduction of the various initiatives that he has described will not bring teachers back into the profession or help to recruit more of them. Potential teachers do not want to join a profession in which they will be the mouthpieces of bureaucrats in the town hall and at Whitehall.

As the staff at Willowbank junior school said to me this morning, they long to bring creativity and spontaneity, which are now being pushed out because of the imposition of targets by the Government, back into the classroom. The Government are imposing pressure on schools to do things in the way they want. Teachers and young people going into teaching want the freedom to use the skills that they have developed to inspire young people. The Government have yet to learn that inspiration does not come from a Whitehall circular.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. May: No. I have given way on several occasions and I shall not do so again.

We shall set schools free. Unfortunately, the Government and the Secretary of State cannot and will not see the need to do that. That is why they have failed to deliver. It is why we have teacher shortages, why children are being sent home early and why children are being taught by non-specialist and unqualified staff. It is why the Government will continue to fail.

We need a vision for education, and a Government with that vision. As long as we have a Labour Government who think that education is merely a tool for achieving politically set numerical targets or for meeting politically correct slogans, and as long as the Secretary of State agrees that teachers are learning managers, equipping children with "learnacy" skills, children's education will suffer.

Parents, children and teachers need a Government who value education in its own right, recognise the importance of instilling knowledge and encouraging creativity as well as teaching skills, and above all recognise the importance of inspiring children and young people to achieve. We will be that Government. We will set schools free, let heads manage and let teachers teach. We will raise standards in the classroom. Our children cannot afford another four years of Labour.

4.57 pm

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East): After that strange rant about what goes on in our schools, I want to move on, but I have a comment about the speech of the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May). When I visit schools in my constituency, I find that teachers and head teachers do not want every penny of spending devolved to them. They appreciate much of what the local education authority does for them and want it to continue to have a role.

I welcome yet another triumph of economic mastery by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I welcome also the money that will be given directly to schools. The move has been welcomed by schools in Lewisham in the past, and it will be welcomed again. However, I hope that the money will be used not only for the bread-and-butter issues of the day but more imaginatively to expand pupils' aspirations through creative projects that will further develop and enhance their future life styles beyond the classroom and after their lives in school.

I welcome my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's announcement about funding to increase the number of teachers. As he knows, teacher numbers have been a problem in Lewisham, and continue to be. We have a peculiar problem that stems from the inadequacies of the Conservative Government, both in 1989 and 1993, when they did not deal properly with the recruitment and retention of staff in schools.

I shall take an overall view of the Budget. Anthony Crosland, writing in the 1950s at a time of growing prosperity, talked about

"the declining importance of economic problems"

and the need for a greater emphasis on personal freedom, choice, happiness and culture in future. Commenting on the values of those pioneers of the Labour movement, the Webbs, he wrote:

"Total abstinence and a good filing system are not now the right signposts to a socialist Utopia; or at least, if they are, some of us will fall by the wayside."

Almost half a century later, we are again living through a period of growing prosperity. I hope that Tony—Crosland, that is—may yet be proved right. We have in our Chancellor of the Exchequer a true stakhanovite—a man who wears more hair shirts than anyone since Thomas More. We have a Chancellor who has given us economic stability and whose values are work and thrift.

[Ms Bridget Prentice]

In the Budget, he is continuing to make work pay and to make savings pay out more. People will benefit from the Budget if they contribute to the economic prosperity through work.

I do not deny that there are traditional battles that still need to be fought and won. It is an indictment of 18 years of Conservative rule that when we came to power, one in three children were living in poverty. There was hopelessness and despair in some of our inner-city housing estates, including those in my Lewisham constituency. We inherited a Britain in which our NHS, schools and other public services had been run down to the brink of disaster. That is changing, sometimes frustratingly slowly, but the comprehensive spending review and the Budget measures are together building us a better Britain.

We must aspire to do more. Although we are acting to end child poverty—more than 1 million children will be taken out of poverty thanks to the Labour Government's policies—to eliminate sink estates and to provide an education system and an NHS that are second to none, we should not lose sight of the fact that, for many people, the important issues of the future are more leisure time, happiness, the arts, architecture and the environment.

Of course Budgets are important. They can have a real impact on the economy. Over the years, Budgets have become major spectator events, closely watched and extensively commented on by the media. However, for those doing nicely or who are quite well-off—in other words, large swathes of middle England—the Budget is only a sideshow. More important to them are the preservation of the green belt, the quality of local restaurants and the performance of their favourite football team, and rightly so.

Budgets need to strike a balance between helping those in need and rewarding those who contribute to making society a better place. They should expand people's aspirations and creativity and, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his opening remarks, liberate the talents of individuals. That is why the changes in funding for churches and renovation have been particularly welcome in my constituency. Only yesterday, I visited St. Margaret's church in Lee to celebrate in choral evensong the magnificent renovations there. During the evening, many of my constituents commented on and welcomed that aspect of the Budget.

Budgets should expand horizons. People in Lewisham, like those elsewhere, want to be able to use their leisure time purposefully. They want their environment to be both preserved and protected. They are concerned about the built environment. They want to ensure that proper respect is given to our heritage, preserving all that is good from the past while also being interested in developing new ideas and constructs for the future. Budgets should aim to create an environment that allows for creative expression in the arts or sport. That is why the changes for museums in the Budget are so important.

The Government are committed to social inclusion. That involves not only work to alleviate poverty, raise standards in schools and reduce crime, all of which collectively improve the well-being of our citizens, but giving them the opportunity to enjoy the arts as both spectators and producers. As we create more wealth, we need to create an environment where more people can enjoy that wealth. Thanks to the Chancellor's successful economic management over the past four years, we can do that. As a modern democratic socialist, I believe that economic policy must be about helping those at the bottom of the pile and creating a good-time society. For that reason, I very much welcome the Budget.

5.5 pm

Mr. John Major (Huntingdon): "Education, education, education" was originally a cry from Lenin, who did not mean it. I suspect that the Secretary of State, who has just left, does mean it. He is sincere and, in his unavoidable absence, I should like to congratulate him on graciously adopting some of the proposals of my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May), who is shadow Secretary of State. That behaviour is as welcome as it is unusual, and I hope that future Governments of both complexions will be inclined to follow that particularly good example.

Turning to the Budget as a whole, I am pleased that the Chancellor has cut taxes and given back to taxpayers a small proportion of the money that he has extracted from them in the past four years. His generosity is not surprising: notwithstanding the problems of foot and mouth, a general election is pending and the public accounts show ample scope for tax reductions and, perhaps, modest expenditure increases. Yet, only a few weeks ago, when the Opposition said that, they were condemned as "irresponsible" by spokesmen from the Treasury and elsewhere. We now see how shallow those attacks were, for if the Opposition were irresponsible, why has the most prudent of Chancellors done what they recommended? In truth, my right hon. and hon. Friends were right to identify the scope for tax reduction. Not only were they right but, if the economy stays on course, there may be scope for even more tax cuts in future.

A principal reason for that remarkable leeway is the sheer size of tax increases over the past four years. We must disentangle fact from fiction. Prior to the Budget, there had been 26 increases in personal taxation and 19 increases in taxes on business in this Parliament. That number has risen slightly although, given the Chancellor's remarkable gift for sleight of hand, one must study the small print carefully to find out precisely how many tax increases there are. However, their sum total is enormous. The abolition of tax credits on dividends alone will cost shareholders about £6 billion in the current tax year. The reorganisation of advance corporation tax at the beginning of this Parliament has affected the quality of pension funds for millions of elderly people and cost those funds more than £5 billion during the course of this Parliament; it will do continuing damage until it is changed.

Even after offsetting tax reductions—of which there have been some, mostly minor, examples—the Inland Revenue's overall tax yield has risen by an astonishing one third during this Parliament. No wonder the savings ratio has fallen so badly. That is not a wicked Tory calculation; an independent survey shows the average family to be worse off than it was in 1996. The old tax-until-the-pips-squeak bruiser Lord Healey must be salivating enviously at the extent of the tax rises forced through by the Chancellor.

More people have been dragged into tax. An extra 2 million now pay tax; 28 million pay it, compared with 26 million three years ago.

Mr. Mackinlay: That is just nonsense. What about unemployment?

Mr. Major: If it is nonsense, it is Red Book nonsense. Those figures come from the Red Book. Before the hon. Gentleman mutters into his non-existent beard, he should read the Red Book and check. It is possible that the Chancellor has given us more duff facts; we are used to that. However, if they are duff, that is his responsibility, not mine.

There are 2 million more taxpayers and 700,000 more higher-rate taxpayers than there were four years ago. In addition, mortgage interest relief at source has been scrapped, although I do not object to that particularly. However, not only has MIRAS been scrapped, but stamp duty on home purchase has been increased and national insurance contributions for middle-income earners have risen sharply. So much—on the eve of the next general election—for the promises that the Labour party made to middle England and middle-income groups throughout the United Kingdom on the eve of the last one. Those groups may also care to note that the yield from inheritance tax has soared 50 per cent. during this Parliament. The Chancellor still has no concept—I genuinely believe that he does not understand its value—of letting more of the fruits of a lifetime of work filter down to the people whom the earner most cares about: his own family and the next generation.

It is no wonder, with such tax increases, that the ratio of tax to gross domestic product has risen 2.5 per cent. to 37.7 per cent. The Chancellor, despite all his promises, has not so much wooed middle England as assaulted it.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does the right hon. Gentleman know that, taking tax and borrowing together as a share of GDP—given that borrowing is deferred taxation—the figure went down two points from 38.2 per cent. in 1996–97 to 36.2 per cent. in 1999–2000, and down to 34.1 per cent. in the current year? The current figure is due to the spectrum auction of mobile phone wavelengths, but for the previous period, those two points represent the equivalent of an increase of 7.3p in income tax. In other words, the right hon. Gentleman simply borrowed instead of taxing, and tried to fiddle the figures.

Mr. Major: The hon. Gentleman ought to know that his Chancellor changed the way in which the figures are quoted in the Red Book, and the actual equivalent of what he has done is an extra 10p on tax. The hon. Gentleman may care to examine that matter. *[Interruption.]* If it is nonsense, it is the Government's nonsense in the Government's own figures. Those are the figures that I am using. I am glad to hear from Labour Members that they do not believe them.

It is ironic that the Government and the Chancellor have increased taxes so much. During the last Parliament, I remember vividly the present Chancellor and his colleagues, ever ready to find a catchy slogan, repeating the slander of 22 Tory tax rises, with no acknowledgment whatever of any offsetting tax reductions. To call their attacks disingenuous would be kind. They were patently untrue, and a forerunner of the manipulation of facts that has characterised so much—not all, but so much—of what the Government have said and done in the past four years.

The Government cannot deny that, because the figures for tax increases are now clear. The statistics cast light where the slogans cast deception. Before this Budget, the real increase in taxes over this Parliament was about 4.5 per cent. a year. Obviously, that figure is now a tiny bit lower, but not all that much. That compares with 1.8 per cent. between 1979 and 1997. I am indebted to the Institute for Fiscal Studies for pointing out that there were tax rises of 2 per cent. a year between 1979 and 1990, and of 1.3 per cent. between 1990 and 1997.

So much for the 22 Tory tax rises, or, indeed, the unsustainable proposition—unsustainable except by malice—that the previous Government wrecked the Tory tradition of low taxation. Some of my right hon. and hon. Friends who rather timidly accepted that fiction in the early part of this Parliament can now feel comforted that it was not true and refute it. They need not concede, but may safely move on and reassert our traditional tax credentials. Taxes were not unduly increased, despite the pressures of a recession that began in the 1980s and cast its shadow into the 1990s—although not, from the point of view of the health of the economy, much beyond 1992.

The Chancellor is ever ready to gloss over the excellent parts of his inheritance. He cherry-picks the bits on which he can make party political capital, and I do not blame him for that: most politicians do. However, he misses other bits. He is, after all, a very political Chancellor who wishes to be Prime Minister, and he is doing a bit of image building.

We need more facts and less of the fiction that we so often hear. The economy has been growing steadily since 1992, before—some hon. Members may not wish to hear this next point—sterling left the exchange rate mechanism. Unemployment has also been falling since that economic recovery began, and the very welcome job growth across the country—in both the number and the variety of jobs—has been consistent throughout the previous Parliament and this one.

Inflation, too, began to decline in the early 1990s and has remained low. It looks set to fluctuate only within historically narrow parameters.

Mr. Mackinlay: The Chancellor has been skilled, but I put that in perspective. Other factors have contributed, such as the ebb and flow of the economy, and I accept, to an extent, that employment growth was under way during the right hon. Gentleman's stewardship. I have intervened only because of his breathtaking assertion that people are somehow worse off than in 1996, which defies both belief and the litmus test of what one sees and feels. There was extensive unemployment, particularly among poor and unskilled people, during the period to which he refers, and although I do not apportion credit or blame in respect of employment, people are now in jobs. Demonstrably, they are better off.

Mr. Major: Demonstrably, the people in jobs are better off. That is undeniably so, but I was referring to the scale of tax increases. If the hon. Gentleman reads some of the independent research, he will see precisely why I made that comment.

[Mr. Major]

As it happens, I was about to give credit to the Chancellor. The economy is in good shape and he can take a great deal of satisfaction from that. I shall not be mealy-mouthed: he can take a good bit of credit for it as well. Were he to be similarly candid, he too would offer credit to his predecessors, because he has built on what they did and on a trend that was established five years before he went to the Exchequer.

For example, some hon. Members, but perhaps not all, believe that an economic miracle began on 2 May 1997. Let us take a date at random—1 May 1997. Growth was set to be 3.5 per cent. for the next year. Inflation was 2.6 per cent. and stable. Unemployment was falling rapidly and, although still high, was down to just over 1.5 million. The fiscal deficit was falling sharply—a point that the Chancellor invariably overlooks because it embarrasses his campaign to discredit his predecessors. The trend of a falling fiscal deficit was clear, and it was falling sharply. The right hon. Gentleman can take credit for not wrecking the trend, but he cannot take credit for beginning it, for it preceded him by four years.

I thoroughly welcome the fact that economic management has reached a maturity whereby the two major parties do not feel it necessary to reverse all the actions of their predecessor. That is beneficial to the British economy, and it will remain so for as long as that is the case. I may be wrong, but I think that the Chancellor took that too far in his first two years by adopting the previous Government's expenditure plans in toto. I can tell the House, and I hope that it is not a great shock, that we certainly would not have done that. We would have increased them in the two public expenditure rounds that followed, as we had in every public expenditure round since 1979.

Stakhanovite is one word; masochistic is another, which might perhaps describe more plainly the Chancellor's disposition. He has been an economic masochist over public spending. We hear a huge amount about public spending, and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment was at it as well this afternoon, but despite the hype about the unprecedented sums for health and education, the fact is that the Chancellor has raised taxes by far more than he has increased expenditure. The public have not noticed because one skill that the right hon. Gentleman has perfected is that of counting, and that includes the capacity to double count, overcount and miscount, which he has done repeatedly.

Again, I am indebted to the Institute for Fiscal Studies: total Government spending in this Parliament has risen at 1.2 per cent. a year in real terms. That is not only less than tax increases, but less than economic growth. It compares with public spending of 2.6 per cent. in the previous Parliament, which is a point that Liberal spokesmen have often made, although they are not often nice about the Conservative party. I am glad to see a nod of agreement, rather than a shake of the head, from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan), because that is undoubtedly the case.

I concede that much of that expenditure was not discretionary: it resulted from the unavoidable impact of the recession. However, it puts in a better context that hoary old myth about Tory cuts, which the Prime Minister is trying to recycle with his current spate of posters about potential future Tory cuts. Either he is ill-informed or scaremongering—probably the latter.

The Government's publicity on cuts is familiar: it is an echo from the past. It was an odd experience in the last Parliament to be taunted by the Labour party over so-called cuts while hostile monetarists attacked us for spending far too much money.

Mr. Willis: Nothing has changed.

Mr. Major: The hon. Gentleman may be right.

The health of the economy in 1997 and subsequently suggests that we may have got that balance about right.

During this Parliament, the Chancellor has benefited from the supply side reforms of the 1980s and the disinflation brought about by the policies of the 1990s. When he chants his mantra of boom and bust—I lost count of the number of times that he and the Prime Minister uttered such drivel last week—he should remember that the last unsustainable boom was well over a decade ago. That has not stopped the Prime Minister depicting my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor as Mr. Boom and Mr. Bust. *[Interruption.]* The Financial Secretary to the Treasury sniggers, but that is the politics of sneer and jeer. Neither of my right hon. Friends were policy makers at the time of the last boom, and one of them had barely been in the House of Commons.

There is a boom and bust today: a boom in tax raising and a bust in the competitiveness of manufacturing industry. Perhaps the Chancellor and the Prime Minister should concentrate on that boom and bust.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Major: I shall make a little progress, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer is a redistributive Chancellor. He tries to hide that fact, but it is evident, and from his perspective he should not hide it. He aims to redistribute to the less well-off, but in general he redistributes to the Inland Revenue. Even his well-intentioned schemes are not wholly successful. I do not disagree with all of them. Bits of what the Chancellor has done have been good social justice, and if I had been in government with the economy that he now has, I would certainly have taken some of the measures that he has taken, and I am not remotely shy about saying so. However, some of those schemes have not been successful.

The Chancellor abolished the married couples allowance last year, and this year—after a helpful 12-month gap for the Treasury and the Inland Revenue—he has introduced a children's tax credit to replace it. However, many people will not receive that credit, because it is means-tested and millions will lose either some or all of it on the means-tested taper.

The organisation of that tax credit is a shambles. As it is based on the highest-earning member of the household, it throws up huge and unacceptable anomalies. If one parent works and earns £42,000 a year, no payment of the

child tax credit is made, whereas if both parents are at work, with no one at home with the child, and earn £35,000 each, the full credit is payable. As a means of social justice, attacking poverty and helping low-income families with children, this scheme is nonsense on stilts. If the Chancellor were serious, he would have examined those problems and sought to correct them before introducing the tax credit in its present form.

The minimum income guarantee is the Chancellor's safety net against poverty, but it is so complex that more than one third of eligible pensioners do not claim it. The form is so complex and absurd that a large percentage of graduates might not claim it.

The 10p band extension is right in principle. I do not disapprove of minimising tax on lower income groups. However, the proposal is so niggardly and mean as to be almost pointless. The maximum gain from the Chancellor's measures in the Budget is 75p a week—that figure should strike a chord with Labour Members. Given pensioners' response to that amount previously, surely he should have done it differently.

Many of the main effects of all economic management, by every Chancellor of the Exchequer, become apparent some years after the announcement of the original tax and spending decisions. This Chancellor was lucky. He was lucky in his predecessors—lucky, notably, that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) and my right hon. and noble Friend Lord Lamont made the painful and unpopular decisions that contributed so much to the subsequent benign situation of which the present Chancellor has made such use in this Parliament. And—unless my memory is failing—I seem to recall that they made those decisions in the teeth of unrelenting opposition, not least from the present Chancellor and the Prime Minister.

I will not be in the House to see the Chancellor's legacy at first hand, but much of it is now predetermined. He inherited an economy of falling unemployment and low inflation, and he has maintained it. That was well done; but under his stewardship also, taxes have risen too much. The tax system has become far more complex. Manufacturing industry has declined further. Regulations have soared. Increases in business taxes are undermining competitiveness, and so in due course will the social charter, whose economic folly is not yet fully apparent but will become so.

It is, in truth, a mixed record—some good, some bad—for this luckiest and most fortunate of modern Chancellors of the Exchequer.

I cannot be certain, but this may well be the last occasion on which I shall speak in the House. Let me say that it has been a privilege beyond measure to be here, in this mother of Parliaments. I hope that the next generation of hon. Members, whichever of our great parties they may represent, will feel as I did when I first came to the House; I hope that they will feel that way in future, and I hope that we shall be able to end the miserable political climate of spin and counterspin that has grown up in recent years.

We need to separate fact from fiction, substance from soundbite, information from innuendo. The public—the electorate—the people who sent us here—deserve more than to be spoon-fed a cocktail of headline-grabbing feel-good stories. They deserve the truth, unvarnished sometimes, but the truth, and every Member of this House, whether Minister or Back Bencher, has the obligation—the duty—to provide it.

5.27 pm

Mr. Jim Cunningham (Coventry, South): I hope that that was not the last speech that the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) will make in the Chamber. We can agree with some of what he says from time to time and disagree with other things he says, but we must all recognise that he has made interesting contributions to the House over the years—and, indeed, ended up being Prime Minister as a result. I hope that we shall hear from him one last time: he may say things that Labour Members do not like sometimes, but that is the nature of politics and the nature of debate.

I welcome some of the initiatives announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I appreciate the £8.5 billion capital investment in education, as I am sure will many local authorities, and the capital investment in the new transfer of information scheme from primary to secondary schools. If that will reduce the amount of paperwork, it must be worth while. As I said earlier, some of us—sadly—remember the years when the present Opposition were in government. They may talk of red tape, but I remember teachers showing me cupboards full of paperwork that they were expected to go through. It is not all Labour's fault; there is much for which to blame the other side. The Opposition talk of freedom, and money going directly to schools. Who introduced local management of schools—again, the forerunner of bureaucracy?

Opposition Members talk about teachers being demoralised, but who was it who took away teachers' bargaining rights? I seem to remember that it was Conservative Members—although they seem to have changed coats now. I also remember, some years ago, a Conservative Secretary of State receiving a very rough ride at a teachers' conference. Although I agree with Opposition Members that there are some cases of low teacher morale—no one would deny that—the Government are making various attempts to raise it.

I welcome some of today's announcements by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, as they should help to lift teachers' morale. Training bursaries must be welcomed, because anything that encourages more people to enter the teaching profession must be good. I also welcome the increase in teacher training places to 2,250 as part of the direct funding package for education, which should commence in June. It is a good development which should also help to lift teachers' morale.

In many ways, the teaching profession was devalued by some of the measures implemented by the previous Administration in their 18 years in office. It is therefore perhaps not difficult to see why it is so difficult to persuade the profession to trust the current Government's efforts to help it.

Opposition Members have mentioned the Government's schemes to retrain young people and to get them into work. I remember three or four of the previous Government's youth schemes, some of which only served to disillusion young people. Indeed, those schemes may be part of the reason why we have a lost generation of young people. Regardless of what caused that disillusionment, it is indisputable that, because of this Government's action, 270,000 young people now have prospects that they never had before and 1.1 million adults have been able to take up full-time employment.

[Mr. Jim Cunningham]

Such progress was never made under the previous Government. I remember when, under that Administration, there were between 3 million and 4 million unemployed. That is quite a contrast with the current situation. Conservative Members accuse others of cherry-picking issues, but they, too, address them selectively. They take credit for the improvements, but blame everything else on the Government.

A few weeks ago, I raised the general issue of education standard spending assessments. Often when Governments of whatever complexion say that they are providing money in the SSA, it turns out that that money is not available. I am not accusing my colleagues of doing that, but simply telling them that that means of funding is well worth examining. The sooner we do that, the better.

Reorganisations—school amalgamations and closures—are under way both in my constituency and in other parts of Coventry. I am not so sure that the way in which we are dealing with those reorganisations is always right. A consultation exercise is being conducted and the public are essentially being told that alternative proposals will be considered. However, it is not always appreciated that the public may need assistance in developing and proposing such alternatives. Some members of the public have never before dealt with public authorities such as big education departments, which have great resources, or tried to persuade them to change policy. Although drastically declining school rolls sometimes require the amalgamation or closure of schools, I believe that that policy, and SSA funding, should be revisited.

Other matters, such as further education, were not dealt with in the Budget, but we cannot have an education debate without considering them. The Government have made some progress on further education, but it is still sometimes treated like a Cinderella eduction sector, squeezed between secondary and higher education. I ask my hon. Friends on the Front Bench to think about that. Very often, people who have not had the benefit of a university education find their niche in further education. I see the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), nodding his head.

I hope that in the next Parliament the Government will not be in favour of top-up fees. Universities are looking for a variety of means by which to raise resources. Only a couple of weeks ago, one of the universities in my constituency tried to introduce a system whereby students who did not have laptop computers would find it difficult to get into that university. I hope that the Secretary of State is looking out for such schemes and gimmicks.

We cannot have disparity between north and south of the border, and it is about time that we looked at the Cubie report.

The long-term care of elderly people will not go away and I hope that Ministers will consider it after the election, if not before.

It has been said that our manufacturing base has been threatened. We have a well-known problem with Rolls-Royce in Coventry. People have heard me ask my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to look at that, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has agreed to do so. An important lesson has come out of discussions with Rolls-Royce.

The decisions that resulted in the lack of money invested in research and development were made in about 1992, and earlier. I remember saying on many occasions that the money saved by people losing their jobs should be used for research and development. A colleague of mine, a prominent shop steward, once told a Minister, "You're going to have some expensive shelf-stackers at Sainsbury's." That gives an idea of what people feel about a lack of research and development and the consequences that that can have in Coventry, particularly for companies like Rolls-Royce.

We welcome the increases for pensioners. Whatever the merits or demerits of the link to earnings, we have to convince pensioners about our policy. I readily acknowledge that Ministers have some valid reasons for not going down the road to re-establish the earnings link. For example, the £200 winter fuel allowance would be taxed. Nevertheless, at many of the meetings that I attend, pensioner constituents voice a lot of concerns about their incomes and it would be remiss of me not to repeat them. I hope that the Government will take note of that.

Low interest rates mean that the economy expands, and that assists manufacturing industry, certainly in the midlands. That has to be welcomed. Interest rates are probably the lowest they have been for about 35 years, and low inflation—the lowest for about 30 years—plays a significant part in the economy. Short-term interest rates from 1997 have averaged about 6 per cent., while longer term interest rates should average about 5 per cent.

People will remember the problems of negative equity. Mortgage interest rates have dropped—they have stabilised, from an average of 11 per cent. between 1979 to 1997 to about 6 per cent. at present. That gives comfort to small businesses and to anyone buying a house, particularly young people. Low mortgage interest rates allow young people to plan ahead, which most of them want to do.

Manufacturing has started to rise—to about 1.6 per cent. That must be vitally important to the economy—especially in the west midlands. Productivity has been a subject for debate for 35 years or longer—certainly, during all my time in public life and in industry. It has grown by 4.4 per cent. That has got to be good, when we consider the years when it did not grow. I am sure that most people welcome that growth. We can all remember the days of boom and bust when exports were down and imports were up, creating balance of payments problems. Exports have risen by about 7.4 per cent. That has to be welcome—as is this year's surplus of £23 billion.

One of the things that the Conservatives lectured previous Labour Governments about was borrowing. The debt repayment is about £34 billion, so that is surely welcome.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman talks of the importance of debt reduction, although he does so very much at national rather than local level. If the issue is of importance to him—it is right that it should be—will he tell the House what assessment he has made of the impact on the size of interest repayments on local authority debt of the change in the rules on the use of capital receipts from the sale of council houses?

Mr. Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman should not throw that red herring into the debate. The issue of capital

receipts was always mixed, depending on which local authority one spoke to. It was a Conservative Government who told local authorities that they could keep all their capital receipts only to start to plunder them. The hon. Gentleman should do his homework.

Lower unemployment means lower social security costs. In the past, the Opposition have criticised social security; they talk about cutting the budget and introducing swingeing measures that would make it almost impossible for people to claim social security. In fact, the cost of social security under my right hon. Friends, is down by about £4 billion—that must be welcome. In effect, it means that in order to achieve our other targets we do not have to make it more and more difficult for people who need social security to claim it.

During the period from 1979 to 1997, 42p in every pound was being used to pay off debt. That is down to about 16p at present. All in all, we must congratulate my right hon. Friends—especially on the reductions in corporation tax and capital gains tax and, more important, the assistance to be given, through reduced VAT, to small businesses with turnover of up to £54,000, and £100,000 for larger businesses. Those reductions should certainly be helpful.

Inner-city regeneration has caused much consternation and debate over the years. Under previous Governments, improvement grants were available, but people in inner-cities would now find it extremely difficult to obtain them because the Conservative Government cut them. I welcome the new initiatives to reduce VAT, to encourage inner-city regeneration—whether of property or by setting up small businesses.

Once again, I congratulate my right hon. and hon. Friends on an imaginative Budget, which gives something to everybody. I hope that they have noted the concerns that I highlighted and that, at some point in the future, they will revisit them.

5.43 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): It was a pleasure to be in the House to listen to the speech of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). It was a pleasure to listen to a speech that was part of the debate, that entered into it and offered information and informed opinion. The right hon. Gentleman's speech was in stark contrast to the comments of the Leader of the Opposition—especially the speech about "a foreign land" that he made in Harrogate two weeks ago. The right hon. Member for Huntingdon did not give the House that impression today. It was delightful to hear the right hon. Gentleman forgive his former friend, Lord Lamont—although I suspect that Lord Lamont has never forgiven me for defeating him at the general election.

I want to quote a wonderful remark made by the right hon. Member for Huntingdon—he may intervene if I do not get it right. In 1997, when the right hon. Gentleman was asked to comment on the Labour Government's policy of "education, education, education", he replied that he thought it was a good policy but that he would have put it in a different order. That brings me to a critical comment on the right hon. Gentleman's Government.

Although I would not challenge the right hon. Gentleman's knowledge and understanding of economics, I would certainly challenge the fact that successive Conservative Governments, one of which he presided over as Prime Minister, left 7 million adults functionally illiterate and only one in four adults functionally numerate. That legacy was unacceptable, and it behoves all of us, irrespective of political party, to address that huge deficit and to ensure that future generations do not face the world without the basic skills that they need to operate successfully.

I, too, welcome this debate and echo the comments made at the beginning of the Budget debate by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy), who said:

"the mark of a society is what sense of opportunity it gives its youngsters and how much security it offers the most elderly and vulnerable."—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2001; Vol. 364, c. 318.]

The hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice), who is no longer in her place, hit the nail on the head. The one thing that I took from the Budget, and the one thing that the House should praise, was the concentration on removing child poverty. Without ending child poverty and ensuring that fewer of our young people begin life and spend their early years in poverty, much of the rest of what we do is reactive rather than proactive; it is a sticking plaster.

In terms of my right hon. Friend's comments on 7 March, two main issues were not dealt with in the Budget, and they have been addressed by Labour Members during the debate. First, there was nothing in the Budget on the care of the elderly. That was a huge omission; it is one of the most pressing issues that we face. It is not simply a pensions issue—clearly, we have had many debates about pensions—but one of how we care for our elderly. The way in which the long-term residential care needs of our population are looked after distinguishes a caring from an uncaring Government, an idea to which the hon. Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) alluded in his speech.

There was nothing in the Budget to support local authority social service departments, which are desperately struggling with the costs of residential and nursing-care placements. It was rather sad that there was nothing to support the cross-over between health authorities, health care trusts and social services in trying to meet those needs. The Chancellor, who had the resources available, could more wisely have used his money in that way.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The hon. Gentleman may want to consider the fact that Library figures show that, in the first two years of this Government, the Chancellor reduced personal social services expenditure to the detriment of the very vulnerable groups that he describes.

Mr. Willis: I accept the hon. Gentleman's comments, but he must accept that, certainly in each of the five years before the new Labour Government's election on 1 May 1997, the resources given to local authorities for social care use were reduced, year on year; and that, more perversely, capping arrangements meant that council tax rises could not compensate for those reductions, so I would say, "A plague on both your houses!"

This debate is primarily on education, so I shall return to education as soon as possible. It was rather sad that the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) spent virtually

[Mr. Willis]

all her contribution offering a diatribe without ideas, regurgitating the same old accusations, mostly on behalf of *The Guardian* and Nick Davies, about the Government's spending plans.

The hon. Lady and the Tory party offer one specific response to our schools' needs—free schools. The response that she gave to my question about funding was appropriate, because it goes to the heart of the debate on the Tories' proposals for free schools. They seem to be suggesting that every school will be funded centrally, so I asked whether every child would receive the same level of funding. Interestingly, the answer was no. There would have to be a formula to distribute resources and that is one of the issues that has bedevilled Governments in their attempts to provide equitable resources to individual schools.

I have often discussed the issue with the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes). The tragedy of the Tories' proposal becomes clear when one considers which of the services that are currently offered by local authorities to schools would have to be offered by the schools themselves as part of the package. The costs for special educational needs for schools in an inclusive education system can be horrendous if they are not largely picked up by the central administration. The idea that each school would have to meet the requirement does not bear the critical examination that such a policy should receive. The idea that head teachers want to be responsible for school transport and want to organise buses and taxis is beyond belief. Again, the suggestion that the service could be provided more cheaply if it were run by each individual school rather than by a local authority does not bear critical examination.

One of the key suggestions that the hon. Member for Maidenhead constantly makes to head teachers relates to disruptive pupils. Under a Tory Government—God forbid—schools would be able to kick such pupils out, but where would they go and how much would it cost to look after them? All the evidence shows that it costs at least five times more to educate a pupil in a pupil exclusion unit than it does in school. Where would that money come from, and what would happen if the number of units were expanded? My authority does not have such a unit. It would have to build one, and that would have to be resourced centrally.

In my role as education spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, for the past two years I have had spats with the Secretary of State and accused him of all sorts of things. However, I would never accuse him of not being interested in, or committed to, education. From the age of four, I have spent my whole life involved with various Secretaries of State in one guise or another. In 1944, my father was presumed killed in the war and that was the year I attended my first nursery school. Since then, I have been involved, in one way or another, with every Secretary of State. Perhaps Butler to Blunkett does not sound as good as Huxley's cradle to the grave, but the Secretary of State will be right to be proud of many achievements if he leaves the Department for Education and Employment and goes to the Home Office.

Sadly, however, the Secretary of State's legacy will not be as good as it should have been. In 1997, the whole education world welcomed a change and expected that things would be different. I was a head teacher in 1997 and I know that schools were demoralised then. The whole education system was demoralised and underfunded and there was a 20-year backlog of repairs to school buildings. The situation was dire. So it is rather sad that the Government have abandoned the proud ambitions with which they came into office. They have squandered them on spin, triple accounting and knee-jerk reactions. Above all, the Government have put their faith in the likes of the former chief inspector of schools, Chris Woodhead, who betrayed not only the Secretary of State, but the education system.

The Budget was announced as we look forward to a general election and I support much of what the Chancellor said last week. I welcome the fact that much additional money will go to head teachers to spend on books and equipment. When I was a head teacher, I would have welcomed greater flexibility in the spending of part of my resources, and I am sure that most heads welcome the proposal.

However, the Government should not be able to claim that a huge sum of extra money was announced in last week's Budget. The £1 billion was an underspend from previous years. It was not new money, but money that had been regurgitated. If we take account of the Barnett formula and subtract the money for Scotland, we are talking about £800 million over three years, of which £200 million will go towards earmarked recruitment and retention packages. The money for each school will thus be about £10,000 to £11,000 a year, and a school's future cannot be planned on the basis of such funding. That is the huge mistake that the Government continually make. Year after year, they drip-feed money into our schools and they attract major headlines, but they do not attack the root cause of the major underfunding in the resource budgets of all our schools.

Let me give some examples. A head teacher in the royal borough of Kingston upon Thames has written to the chairman of the Conservative-led council. Kingston is reducing school budgets, because it is anticipating the money that the Chancellor will give directly to schools. Exactly the same thing is happening in North Yorkshire—again a Conservative-controlled authority—which is top-slicing its school budgets by £2 million. Although Harrogate grammar school—which, by the way, is a top-class comprehensive school—will receive an extra £12,000 from the Budget settlement, it will lose £40,000 because of the reduction in funding from the county council. I recall what the hon. Member for Coventry, South said, and point to the nonsense of the current funding arrangements and to their lack of transparency.

Mr. Hayes: I know that the hon. Gentleman shares my concern that the problem with the drip-feed approach that he describes is that, although it may attract headlines, it is unrelated to need. It is a crude instrument. He criticised my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) because she said that the formula would have to take account of need, but surely he would acknowledge that the Government's approach of handing out money in lump sums does not address the core issue of need.

Mr. Willis: I think that I have already said that. I have never met an hon. Member who supports the current system. I asked for an explanation of the current standard spending assessment system and, because I knew that it would be a leisurely debate, I have the answer with me.

I shall describe to the House how primary schools get their money. Under the fairer funding scheme, the Government's SSA for primary pupils for 1999–2000 contains the following formula:

"(a) Pupils aged 5-10 multiplied by the result of: £1,722.06; plus £206.93 multiplied by Additional Needs index; plus £94.75 multiplied by Ward sparsity index; plus £200.94 multiplied by free school meals;

(b) The result of (a) is multiplied by the Area Cost Adjustment for education;

(c) The result of (b) is then multiplied by a scaling factor (1.00000461765062)."

It is plainly nonsense to have such a lack of transparency in our funding system, and the Government promised to change it.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: First, it ill behoves the Opposition's Front-Bench spokesman to talk about SSAs when no one manipulated them more than the Conservative Government. Secondly, every year they were in government we had the hardy annual of finding out whether an area would retain its cost adjustment. We cannot know where we stand when we relate cost adjustments to SSAs.

Mr. Willis: Again, I agree with the hon. Gentleman. However, while the Labour party was still in opposition, it promised that the system would be made fair and transparent. The Secretary of State should give a commitment to that effect.

Another myth needs to be exposed. It was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Huntingdon and relates to the amount that the Government are spending on education services. It is thought that such spending is increasing dramatically. However, according to Library figures, the proportion of gross domestic product that is spent on education during this Parliament will be 4.6 per cent., compared with 4.9 per cent. under the Government of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon. We can argue about GDP until the cows come home, but the Government said that they would spend a greater percentage of the country's wealth on education. That is clearly not happening.

Liberal Democrats welcome the £200 million for recruitment and retention which the Secretary of State announced. We also welcome the fact that the Government have understood that there is a problem. However, we want to dissociate ourselves from the right hon. Gentleman's disgraceful attack on dedicated professionals which appeared in the *Daily Mail* today. When we are in the middle of a sensitive dispute, it does no good whatever to launch a wholesale attack on the teaching unions. The Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), is in the Chamber and I have a challenge for the Government: rather than bandy words with trade unions about teacher shortages and, in particular, the strike action, they should immediately organise an emergency summit with trade union leaders, local authorities and the Department to set a timetable and resolve the crisis.

Last year, we established the General Teaching Council, one of whose key tasks should be to operate as a standing committee on teacher supply. I hope that I receive a response to that idea. We have all continually warned the Government about the problem of teacher recruitment. In last year's debate on the Budget, I said:

"It is surprising . . . that there is nothing in the Budget to assist with teacher recruitment . . . despite the worrying trend."—[*Official Report*, 23 March 2000; Vol. 346, c. 1150.]

This year, we have received £200 million over three years. That is an improvement, but it is clearly not enough.

According to last week's survey by *The Times Educational Supplement* and the Secondary Heads Association, there are 10,000 vacancies in our secondary schools, and some 10,000 vacancies in our teacher training colleges have gone unfilled since 1997. That cannot go unchallenged. Indeed, Ministers have acted. They have introduced "golden hellos" and have tried to introduce a grant, which has become a training salary. Baroness Blackstone has said:

"The Government have introduced training salaries".—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 21 February 2001; Vol. 622, c. 861.]

Hon. Members should note the term "training salaries". Paragraph 5.17 on page 68 of the Green Paper, which was published two weeks ago, said:

"We have introduced a new £6,000 training salary".

However, it is not a training salary and, if it is, it breaks all the Government's rules on salaries. A £6,000 salary works out at £3.95 an hour, based on a 40-hour week, but last week they told the House that we must have a £4.10 minimum wage from October. There is a real conflict here. Perhaps the Government will admit that the new training salary—if it is to be a salary—will have pension rights attached to it and that national insurance contributions will be paid on it. Without those, people will be disadvantaged.

The hon. Member for Maidenhead said that there was a problem with the Government's figures on applications for teacher training. I do not want to repeat those. Last week, we had a major spat with the Graduate Teacher Training Registry because it published figures a day early for the Government. It said that the Government asked for their early release so that they would not conflict with the good news in the Budget. It cannot be right that an independent organisation should leak information to the Government ahead of time, but not give it to Conservative Front Benchers, Liberal Democrat Front Benchers or anyone else. The Government so often get it wrong by attempting to manipulate information rather than giving everyone access to it.

There has been a 13 per cent. drop in secondary course applications, despite all the Government's belated actions since 1997. That is having an effect on our schools because of the related shortages. Rather than criticising the teaching unions, we should work with them to redress that balance.

Higher education was—conveniently—almost totally absent from the Budget statement and the Secretary of State's statement today. The Chancellor recognised that we need 2.5 million more employees who are educated to degree level. However, he offered nothing to ease the growing burden of student debt. There is an aversion to mentioning that problem. Indeed, the Select Committee on Education and Employment avoids recognising that debt aversion is relevant. It puts people off going into, and staying in, higher education. The Liberal Democrats are the only party to guarantee students reduced debt and the abolition of tuition fees. I was delighted to hear the hon.

[Mr. Willis]

Member for Coventry, South mention the Cubie report. Ultimately, we will return to that and have similar arrangements for students in this country.

Last Friday's editorial in *The Times Educational Supplement* said:

"The Liberal Democrats' proposals to restore means-tested grants are the most coherent solution to student poverty and are a prerequisite to expansion. Labour should steal them."

That is a good message for the Minister.

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): My hon. Friend will know that many of my constituents are academics who work in Sheffield's two universities—the university of Sheffield, and Sheffield Hallam university. He should also be aware that many of them are writing to me to tell me how poor morale is within the higher education sector. Does he share my concern that the Government's policy is about cramming more bodies into the higher education institutions without dealing with the fundamental pay problems in higher education? The product that they provide will inevitably suffer as more industrial disputes take place and other problems of morale arise.

Mr. Willis: My hon. Friend makes two excellent points. Expansion is pointless without sufficient investment to ensure quality. After the Robbins report in 1963, the sector expanded year after year, but in the 1990s, under the previous Government, there was a year-on-year reduction in real terms in the amount available for each student in higher education. The sad fact is that every year since 1997 there has been a reduction per student in the amount of money for their education.

The Prime Minister recently announced that his ambition was to have 50 per cent. of young people going into higher education. That is meaningless unless we are told where all those people are to come from. At the moment, the demand simply does not exist. Last year, 53 higher education institutions were unable to fill their student places. There were 40,000 unfilled places in our universities. The Government are planning unbridled expansion simply to grab headlines.

I agree with the earlier comments about further education. There was not a word about that sector in the Chancellor's statement. It is as if the Learning and Skills Council has wiped away all further education worries and resolved all the problems. There is a massive problem of recruitment and retention in FE, just as there is in our schools. There is a huge issue surrounding pay, just as there is in higher education, as the Bett committee reported. An even bigger issue in FE is the professionalisation of lecturers. If we do not grapple with those problems, we will see the same sordid results as have occurred in many of our schools, such as young people being sent away and teachers being pulled in from wherever possible to fill staff places.

The Government's policy on lifelong learning began with a huge agenda and was going to revolutionise the world. Under the policy, "learning works", no child, young person or adult who was failing would be allowed to continue to do so. Sadly, the joined-up thinking has not taken place. The schools taskforce said that we desperately needed people to have access to level 2 and 3 qualifications throughout their lives. The Chancellor says that he wants to underpin level 2 training, but that is all. There will be access to training at level 2, but not beyond, even though, apart from Mexico and Greece, we have the lowest number of people in level 3 training anywhere in the developed world. That is the challenge that the Government have not met. Hopefully, a Liberal Democrat Government will meet it in the next Parliament.

6.12 pm

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): We have heard perhaps the final contribution of the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), so it is appropriate for me to say a few words in response. If we put politics to one side, most of us would accept that he is basically a decent man, but he found himself leading a political party that was unleadable. Indeed, much of his time was spent standing up to the right-wing, extreme elements that now control the modern Conservative party, so it must be difficult for him to make speeches from the Opposition Benches these days.

It was, however, curious to listen to the right hon. Gentleman's analysis of the economic situation in Britain. He was clearly anxious to rewrite the legacy of his stewardship of the economy. Listening to him, one would have thought that his Government had a reputation for economic competence and that he had led them to a barnstorming victory on 1 May 1997, but history records something very different. It shows that Black Wednesday was the beginning of the end of the Tories' claim to be the party of competent management, economically and more generally. That Government left the country with national debt that had doubled. They left the country extremely insecure, socially divided and very unhappy, and that is why the right hon. Gentleman led his party to the worst election defeat in living memory. That is no reflection on him as an individual or on his decency; it is a reflection on the record of the Government whom he led, and more specifically on their economic incompetence and the social division that they created.

The right hon. Gentleman made one useful contribution to the debate of which the Government should take note. In his condemnation of the use of the terms "Mr. Boom" and "Mr. Bust" to describe the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor, he spoke of "sneer and jeer" politics. I am sure that Labour Members would regard "Mr. Sneer" and "Mr. Jeer" as equally appropriate descriptions of the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor, so I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that idea.

Labour Members would agree with much of what the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) said, although, like every Liberal Democrat Member, he asked for more and more public spending. There is never any reckoning of how that is to be paid for, and account is never taken of the need for a stable economy and for economic prudence as the foundation of public spending.

I shall give an example of Liberal Democrat contradiction from my area. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West (Mr. Kennedy) recently said that we cannot have high levels of public spending and low levels of taxation, and that it is important that politicians are honest about the fact that they must put up

taxes if they want to increase spending. Last week, the Liberal Democrat group on Bury council proposed an amendment to the Labour-controlled council's budget to reduce council tax. They displayed none of the honesty recommended by their national leader; they did not say that reasonable, fair taxation is necessary to pay for decent services. They made a nakedly political move to pander to an audience.

Throughout the country, Liberal Democrats at a local level are inconsistent with their national leadership. They do not merely have different policies in different towns—sometimes they have different policies in different streets. Is it not about time that they were honest with the British people about how they would pay for the increased public expenditure for which they continually ask?

Mr. Allan: Before the hon. Gentleman awards us the monopoly on complaints about local taxation, I hope that he will refer to Labour opposition groups, such as the one in Sheffield, who attack Liberal Democrat-controlled councils for their council tax rises. Does he not accept that it seems to be a traditional role of the opposition in local government, whatever party they represent, to attack the ruling group for its council tax rise? Will he pay attention to the proposals published in the Liberal Democrats' alternative Budget, which clearly point out where additional funding at a national level would come from?

Mr. Lewis: The hon. Gentleman's party says that it is different; that is the whole point of the remarks of the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Inverness, West. He tries to pretend that the Liberal Democrats are somehow separate from politicians in other parties, and that they are more honest, straighter and tell the truth. Yet in Bury, the Liberal Democrats did exactly what their national leader tells us is unacceptable and misleading—they called for a council tax reduction purely to pander to local opinion at the time and without any regard for the consequences for local services. The Liberal Democrats cannot continue to have it all ways.

The Budget has been warmly welcomed by my constituents. It demonstrates that the Government have honoured their pre-election promises to the British people. To be specific about the fundamental pre-election promise, the Budget continued the rebuilding of the country on the foundations of economic stability and social justice. The Government have always aimed to combine encouragement of individual ambition and aspiration for families who want a decent life and to do well for themselves with a commitment to community solidarity, to public services and to the idea that we achieve far more together than we ever do alone. The Budget is responsible and it ensures that we are able significantly to invest in the people's priorities. It would never have been possible without the tough choices made by this Government early on in our Administration.

The Conservative party seeks to pretend that we have continued its economic policies and that, had it continued in government in 1997, the economy would have been as strong as it is now and the fundamentals would have been in place. I shall give three specific examples of why that is arrant nonsense and of where this Government had to make distinctive and difficult choices.

The first decision was to give responsibility for the setting of interest rates to the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee. That option was available to Tory Chancellors for many years, but they declined to take it. This Government took the decision to prioritise paying off the national debt. That is a distinctive choice, which Governments do not have to make. In fact, the Conservative party doubled national debt while in office.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lewis: I shall give way in a minute.

This Government chose to make the payment of national debt central to their economic strategy. Yes, we chose to stay within tight spending limits, but that did not mean that we did not spend considerably more in the first two years of the Parliament on health and education—we did. [HON. MEMBERS: "No you did not."] Yes we did. However, the overall Government spend stayed within previous limits. It is interesting that the Conservative party says that that is the best example of our continuing its economic policies, yet the right hon. Member for Huntingdon said that the Conservatives would not have done so had they been in government post 1997.

Mr. Brooke: I feared that the hon. Gentleman would get to a point where my intervention would be irrelevant. As he has said that the previous Government doubled the national debt, will he remind the House of the national debt in 1979 and of that in 1997? I think that he will find that it did not double during that period.

Mr. Lewis: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I was referring specifically to the period between 1992 and 1997, when he was a leading and respected member of the Government. It is important that people who served in that Government take responsibility for their record and legacy, and do not seem to have a collective fit of amnesia.

This Government made distinctive and difficult decisions in their early days that led to today's economic stability. It is wrong to pretend that the economic strength of our country, which the right hon. Member for Huntingdon was honourable enough to acknowledge, was created by accident or chance. We, as a Government, recognise that it is also due to the enterprise of the British people and their contribution to that economic growth and success. If this Government had not laid such foundations, we would not now be able to use that economic stability to invest in our country's future.

Let us consider the outcome of those policies of economic stability and competence. One difficulty for Conservatives is that they cannot cope with the fact that the British people now see the Labour party as the party of economic competence. The Conservative party finds it difficult to stomach the fact that the British people recognise that the Labour party has travelled a tremendous distance and demonstrated—not just promised—in four years that it can be trusted to manage the economy. The outcome of the policies is clear. We have the lowest inflation for 30 years and we have low interest rates. The average family now pays £1,200 per household a year less for their mortgage than they did in 1997. That is a significant contribution to household income. The Government have created 1 million new jobs, and we have the lowest unemployment for 26 years.

We should remember that it was not so long ago that we were being told that mass unemployment was a price worth paying for low inflation. For a long period during

[Mr. Lewis]

the reign of the Conservative party, the British people were told that they could not have low unemployment and low inflation at the same time because it was managerially impossible. In fact, I think that it was Lord Lamont who said that unemployment was a price worth paying. That was an insensitive and disgraceful comment, and this Government have demonstrated that unemployment is not a necessary price to pay for the creation of a low-inflation Britain. It is a Labour Government who have delivered low interest rates, low inflation and low unemployment.

All that does not mean that there are not job losses—of course there continue to be people who lose their jobs. In recent weeks in my constituency, I have seen the sad loss of the East Lancs paper mill, which had offered a number of very important jobs and played an integral part in the community of Radcliffe, which is an important part of my constituency. What is important now to those who have lost their jobs is an opportunity to get another one, and that there will be investment in their area and community to give them hope, so that they are not consigned to long-term unemployment.

In the 1980s and 1990s, far too many people were consigned to the scrap heap of unemployment. In some families, three generations of people were never given the opportunity of a job and of engaging positively in society and in the community in which they lived. There continue to be job losses in certain sectors, but if one maps what happens one sees that the majority of people who find themselves out of work are very quickly able to reskill, retrain and find alternative employment opportunities.

Indeed, one of this Government's great successes has been the incentivisation of work through the new deal, which gets young and long-term unemployed people off benefit and into work. There has been a cultural shift in the social security system and economic strategy. Many people used to be better off not working. Low-paid jobs were available, but people were not able to secure work that provided a decent income for themselves and their families. This Government have created an environment that incentivises work and makes it pay. That in itself constructively engages many people in the community, so that they can make a positive contribution to the economy.

It is essential that our economic and social policy is relevant to all parts of the country. That is why the establishment of the regional development agencies was so important. They look at the strengths and needs of each region and ensure that we invest according to their sensitivity, history and future needs. Of course, the Conservative party is committed to abolishing RDAs, which would be disastrous in areas such as the north-west, where we are beginning to see the coming together of a local strategy between the public and private sectors, working with central Government to lay the foundations for continued economic growth and prosperity while at the same time tackling the fundamental social exclusion that has built up over many years. To ditch regional policy and, more specifically, to abolish RDAs, as the Conservatives would if they had their way, would be a lost opportunity.

One of the most incredible facts revealed in the Budget is the statistic on national debt: in one year, this Government have paid off more debt than was paid off in the preceding 50 years added together. That is a major achievement. I say that not because it is a good soundbite or because it sounds good politically but because I believe that we should analyse the way in which the state spends its money and how it prioritises that spend.

Under the Conservative Government, in 1997, 42p in every pound of taxpayers' money was spent on paying either unemployment benefit or debt interest repayments. Only 58p in every pound remained to be spent on front-line services such as education, health and the fight against crime. Now, only 16p in every pound is spent on debt repayment and unemployment benefit and 84p in every pound of taxpayers' money is available to be spent on services that matter to people. There has been a massive change and a fundamental shift in the management of the economy since the 1997 election.

Mr. Willis: Why have the Government not considered local authority debt, especially that of hospitals and health care trusts? The local health care trust in my constituency spends about £900,000 a year on servicing debt. Why is it only Government debt that is written down? Why is there not support for local authorities and health authorities?

Mr. Lewis: The Government's responsibility is to lay foundations at a national level and to set parameters for the way in which local agencies work and for the choices that they make. The Liberal Democrats would be the first to criticise us for over-centralisation if we decided to dictate priorities for health care trusts and other local agencies in terms of the balance between debt repayment and investment in services. We have set parameters and taken a lead but, ultimately, given the massive extra moneys that are being made available by the Government to local health care trusts and LEAs, it is for those organisations to make choices and judgments on priorities locally.

We in Bury were pleased to receive my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to open the Third Millennium building at the college of further education last week. It was a successful visit, and my right hon. Friend was warmly received by all those who were fortunate enough to attend the opening. We are generally proud of our education system in Bury. We have excellent levels of performance. We have a family of schools working together in partnership with the LEA, which is recognised nationally; Ofsted acknowledges that it is one of the best in the country.

All those educational achievements—among the best performances in the country—must be set in the context of our having probably one of the worst levels of funding per pupil in England. That is why the public, and especially head teachers, teachers and governors, welcome the fact that the Government have produced a Green Paper on the reform of local government finance which for the first time identifies the distribution of education standard spending assessments as a difficulty and commits the Government to taking action to ensure that there is a far fairer distribution of education resources. I am told that a White Paper will follow after the election.

It is important that we tackle the issue of SSAs and have a more equitable system. Wherever a child is educated, a minimum sum should be agreed. No education authority should be expected to receive less than that sum.

Mr. Geraint Davies: I agree with what my hon. Friend says, but does he agree with me that we also need to

take into account issues such as ethnicity, multicultural education, mobility and other costs that certain urban centres face and certain rural areas do not?

Mr. Lewis: Of course I agree that those factors must be taken into account in creating a new and fairer system. The Government are not seeking to justify the funding gap that exists as between some LEAs. Indeed, they are seeking in their Green Paper to redress the balance. The factors to which my hon. Friend has referred matter, but they do not in themselves explain the gap between funding per pupil that exists as between some areas. That is why we welcome the Green Paper.

There are some political parties who say that the Government should have revamped local government finance in their first three or four years—that we should have got to grips with extremely complex and difficult problems that the Conservative Government did not tackle in 18 years. The Liberal Democrats know that, realistically, they will not have the opportunity to tackle them in the near future. We all know that local government finance is amazingly complex and that it is not easy to reform. However, the Government are committed to reform. In the Green Paper, they have specifically acknowledged the inequity of education SSAs as one of the issues that must be put right. Bury regards that as an extremely important commitment.

Those who imply that, because the SSA system has not been radically reformed, massive amounts of money have not gone into schools in places such as Bury and the other LEAs, are deceiving and misleading the public. Investment in the standards fund in Bury has risen from £27 per pupil in 1997–98 to £151 in 1999–00. We have seen £240,000 allocated to school security. Access initiatives have received £133,000. To recruit additional teachers to reduce class sizes, there has been funding of £2,082,000. Various capital projects have been allocated £1,448,000. There has been spending of £1.5 million on new classrooms to reduce class sizes, and £1.9 million has been made available for the new deal for schools. Given what was happening in the education system in the lead-up to the 1997 election, there has been a massive shift.

The right hon. Member for Huntingdon accuses us of scaremongering about the threat posed to communities by Tory cuts. Our argument is based on real experience. Anyone who served on a local authority during the Tory years knew what the annual cycle meant: it meant managing cuts exercises year after year to ensure that cuts did the least damage to the most vulnerable people in our communities.

The extra money that is going into schools and other local services throughout the country is making a real difference to the quality of those services and to the quality of education available in schools. It is a pretence that there has been no difference. We remember annual cuts exercises. We remember when there was inadequate money for books and equipment. We remember when class sizes in primary schools were far too large. We remember that era.

Anyone working in education at any level would acknowledge the significant amount of extra investment that is going into schools, which is making a difference to standards, to the quality of education and the physical environment and to opportunities to learn. The assertion that the Government are not making a difference to education is false and misleading and is not borne out by the evidence that exists in every community.

The Budget will also make a difference to schools through the teacher recruitment strategy announced today, which is backed up with resources. One subject that has not been discussed so far is the reason for the crisis that we face in recruiting people to work in the public services, part of which is the way in which the public services and public servants were devalued and run down during 18 years of Tory government. Public services were portrayed as a leech on the public purse. Young people were not encouraged to go into public services if they wanted a decent standard of living or quality of life.

The status of public services and those who worked in them was undermined and demeaned over an 18-year period, yet in four years the Government are supposed miraculously to turn that culture around. Labour is responsible, allegedly, for the fact that we have thousands too few nurses, doctors, teachers and other public service professionals. In the words of a famous tennis player, "You cannot be serious." Most of the British public accept that, it takes time to make a fundamental shift in such a complex situation.

If we have thousands too few teachers, doctors, nurses and hospital beds, what was going on during the 20 years of unbroken Conservative rule, when there were periods of great prosperity and economic opportunity for the Government of the day? Where did that dividend go? Where did our money go? It went on tax cuts for a very few at the top, and the rest of it went down black holes on Black Wednesday and on debt repayment and paying the costs of mass unemployment.

It is a bit rich for the Opposition to attack the Government for the difficulties arising from the shortage of certain public sector workers. No one out there believes that. I suspect that many Opposition Members do not believe that that is a credible position. Everyone accepts that public services had to be rebuilt from the lowest level at which they have been since the war as a result of the damage that the Conservatives did to them. That will not happen overnight. Most of the British people acknowledge that, and are fair enough to accept it and to congratulate the Government on the achievement so far, even though they want more.

It is important to mention the Government's attack on child poverty, which has a direct correlation with educational performance. It is not good enough to look in isolation at test results, exam results and the resources going into schools. It is essential that we also consider the resources going to ordinary, hard-working families to tackle the problem of poverty and people living on unacceptably low incomes. The Budget introduces the children's tax credit, which will be £520 a year for ordinary families, and £1,040 in the first year after a child's birth, in recognition of the fact that that is a particularly expensive time for families bringing up children.

There will be enhanced child care allowances, which contribute towards a stable home environment, allowing children to learn and do better educationally. There will also be long-overdue improvements to maternity pay and leave, which again contribute towards stable foundations for the average family. The increase of £5 a week in the working families tax credit will incentivise work, making it worthwhile for people to make the choice to have a job.

[Mr. Lewis]

The Government were the first Labour Government, after many promised it, to introduce the national minimum wage. That is to be increased from £3.70 an hour to £4.10 an hour—another policy of which the Government are proud, and which the Opposition said would cost millions or hundreds of thousands of jobs. Not a bit of it. The shadow Chancellor has accepted that if the Conservative party ever returned to power, the minimum wage would have to remain. Of course, that party would allow it to wither on the vine. That is the difference in approach between the Opposition and the Government. We will ensure that it increases according to the economic conditions that prevail, so that people on low pay benefit when the economy is doing well. Although the Opposition say that they would not eliminate the national minimum wage if they ever returned to government, they would certainly have a strategy of allowing it to wither on the vine.

All the Government's support for families, for children and for people who are working hard will make a substantial difference to those people's quality of life and standard of living, and ultimately to the quality of our education system. The Conservatives' comments about the Government's spending plans as set out in the Budget imply that they would make significant cuts in public expenditure. They have accused the Chancellor of having irresponsible spending plans, and they have identified the areas in which they believe those spending plans are irresponsible. If the Tories were ever re-elected, every community throughout the country would face tangible and massive cuts to local services that matter to local people.

It is about time that the Tories were honest and told us where the cuts in local public services would fall. How many teachers, doctors, nurses, police officers and transport schemes would be lost? How many essential services would be cut, and how quickly would we return to the culture of public service cuts? The Opposition also say that they would reduce taxes. We all know who would be the beneficiaries of that policy. The Conservatives would reduce taxes for the few at the top in our society, whereas our tax proposals are directed at reducing taxes in a targeted way for those who most need it.

Opposition Members look horrified at that proposition, but it has always been the way of the Tories, throughout history, to cut the taxes of the very people who least need it, and to do nothing about the hard-working majority of people, especially those on low incomes. It is not new and should not come as a shock to the Opposition that such accusations are levelled against them. It is entirely consistent with what they are promising in their election manifesto, and even more consistent with what they did when they were in government for all those years. It is often best to judge politicians by what they did when they had power, rather than by what they say they will do.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Having listened to him drone on for 40 minutes because his Whips cannot get enough speakers to fill the time allocated for the debate, we are at least entitled to an accurate representation of the Conservative party's policies. There is no question of cutting health, education, transport or police spending. We would make a darn sight better job of running those services than his party has done. Likewise, the tax cuts that we announced would be far more effectively targeted on those who genuinely need the help—the elderly and savers, in particular.

Mr. Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for yet another example of the Opposition denying reality. Whatever the debates and disputes about the state of the economy, when the Government came to power in 1997, we inherited hospitals in crisis, schools that were crumbling, public services that were in a dreadful state, and a transport infrastructure that was a disgrace to a modern economy. That was the legacy not of four, eight or 12 years of the Conservatives, but of 18 years of unbroken government, when they had the opportunity to run the country in whichever way they saw fit. That is the situation that people faced in their daily lives on 1 May 1997, which may provide a miraculous explanation of why the Conservative party had the worst election result ever in the history of a major British political party.

Mr. Willis: Until the next election.

Mr. Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his confident prediction.

It is important to remember that, in four years, it is impossible to put right 18 years of under-investment, social division and the running-down of public services. That view prevails among Labour Members and others and explains why we were elected in such large numbers. Many people who had previously voted Conservative transferred their loyalties to the Labour party because they saw destruction on the ground and society crumbling in their communities.

The Budget redresses the belief that there is no such thing as society and that we are simply a collection of individuals. That was not just Conservative rhetoric; the previous Government tried to run this country on the basis of that belief. They divided the country from top to bottom and, having failed to deliver high-quality public services and a cohesive society, added to that between 1992 and 1997 by messing up the economy. They were deemed to be economically incompetent and unfit to govern.

Nobody believes that the Opposition have any new solutions to the country's fundamental problem. Everybody knows that, if they came back into power, it would be more of the same—cuts in public services and tax cuts for the few at the top of society at the expense of the mainstream majority. There is nothing new about that; it has been Tory philosophy throughout the ages and from one generation to the next.

I am proud to support the Budget. Having spoken to my constituents at the weekend and read newspapers that I am not normally inclined to read, I genuinely believe that it is a Budget for hard-working families and high-quality public services. It is a good Budget for pensioners and small businesses; it is a Budget of which the Government can be genuinely proud.

6.52 pm

Mr. John MacGregor (South Norfolk): The hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) droned on for so long, with so many travesties of the truth and the facts, making so much irrelevant comment about history—

rewriting it and spinning—that he will forgive me if I do not follow his example. Indeed, the longer he went on, the more I realised that it was not worth following him and responding to his comments.

I have spoken in many Budget and Finance Bill debates, both as a Minister and a Back Bencher, during my years in the House. There was a pause only when I was a Minister in a certain Department. This may well be my last opportunity to speak in a Budget debate before retiring from the House, so I am glad to have had the opportunity of catching your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I do not intend to cover the entire ground, only some key points, as I very much agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), not least about our strong economic legacy. I shall come back to that.

My overwhelming impression, as I listened to the Chancellor and looked at the Budget over the weekend, is that this is an itsy-bitsy Budget which, as in previous years, used the smoke and mirrors of the conjuror's art—I know something of that art—to deflect attention from what was really happening. There were little bits for everyone, but they did not add up to much. Nevertheless, the Chancellor got what he wanted: media coverage that made it look like goodies all round. I shall refer to smoke and mirrors later.

It has been widely recognised—and much commented on—that the Chancellor is apparently giving away, or, more accurately, giving back, only a small proportion of what he has accumulated during the past four years. That cannot be said too often because the Chancellor, the Prime Minister and others on the Government Front Bench tried to deny for some considerable time that there had been an increase in the overall tax burden—until, of course, the facts became irrefutable. Many studies by the House of Commons Library, accountants and others demonstrated that what the Government said was untrue. Now, the Red Book demonstrates that there has been a considerable increase in the tax burden, which, as a proportion of gross domestic product, has increased from 35.3 per cent. when the Government took office to 38 per cent. in the coming year. That is a measure of the increase in the tax burden, of which a significant proportion comes from fiscal drag.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon was right to talk about the legacy of a strong economy. When history is written, that will be seen as one of the great benefits that the Chancellor inherited. To be fair, by and large he has not gone back to the policies of past Labour Governments, which would have dissipated all the benefits of the strong legacy that came about partly through the supply side reforms undertaken by my noble Friend Baroness Thatcher in the 1980s and the many other economic reforms during that period.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacGregor: No, I have listened to the debate for a long time and I know that many of my hon. Friends wish to contribute.

During that period, there were strong economic policies, low inflation, and falling unemployment. As those of us who have worked at the Treasury know, those trends continue and others benefit from them—which is what has happened to the Chancellor. As I said, to be fair, he has not returned to the policies of the last Labour Government.

One reason for the fiscal drag is that the Chancellor has indexed all the thresholds on direct tax, including inheritance tax and capital gains tax, and has not compensated for the substantial earnings increases and capital cumulation during those years. When I listened to the Chancellor, I was struck by an illustration of that. The starting point for the tax threshold for the 40 per cent. higher rate, taking into account the personal allowance, is about £34,000, which is only about £9,000 higher than average earnings. Someone earning £34,000 goes straight into the highest tax band, which is a big tax jump and particularly unfair for households with a single earner in the family. They start to pay higher rate tax at the comparatively low level of £34,000 and are particularly disadvantaged compared with two earners in the same family each earning £25,000. That is a similar point to that made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon about the children's tax credit. That issue must be addressed. However, fiscal drag is not permanent and can soon wither—I shall return to that later.

The other reason for the big fiscal surplus is the collective stealth taxes, the bulk of which have been levied on companies and their pension funds, and also involve indirect taxes. Starting with the burden on companies and pension funds, the Chancellor has been able to give the impression that he has not increased the tax rate because the burden has been put on those who, if I may put it this way, are not ordinary voters, and on bodies where the effect of the tax increase will come much later. Some people therefore feel that because the Chancellor has not increased direct taxation, he has not increased taxes overall.

However, the disadvantageous effects of increases in stealth taxes are bound to come through, especially in relation to pension funds. In the past four years, £17 billion has been taken from pension funds and added to the Chancellor's revenue, giving him the opportunity for fiscal surplus. That £17 billion, which will continue to accumulate in coming years, will have severe effects on companies and pensioners. Speaking as the chairman of the House of Commons pension fund, I suspect that, before long, it will feel the impact; the surplus will disappear partly because of the change in advance corporation tax. There is already a severe impact on a lot of companies, which now find that they have to cut benefits, move to direct benefit pensions—rather than direct contribution pensions—and considerably increase their own contributions to pension funds. Damage is already becoming apparent, but we shall see much more.

As for indirect taxes, the one that really affected individuals was the constant increase in fuel duties. Looking at the Chancellor's environmental measures, on which I shall comment in a moment, he has now recognised that technological improvements have made a bigger contribution to our climate change targets and so on than any increase in fuel duty. In fact, the Chancellor's continued increase in the fuel duty escalator was simply for revenue-gathering purposes, not for any environmental reason. It was only because of the outcry last autumn that the Chancellor called a halt to that. The impact of indirect taxes such as those has been very severe indeed, particularly on rural areas.

It is because the collected stealth taxes do not make a direct impact on individuals that the Chancellor's figures suggesting that various households are better off are so misleading. His calculations in the Budget documents

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about people being better off refer only to direct tax. The situation looks very different if we take into account all the indirect taxes.

The Chancellor is at it again with the stealth taxes that were not announced in the Budget, but which leaked out later. The 7.5 per cent. increase in the upper earnings limit for national insurance contributions announced this week is an increase of three times the rate of inflation. Many individuals earning about £30,000 will be worse off as a result of the Chancellor's measures because that stealth tax was not announced in the Budget. We did not hear anything about it in the Budget for the simple reason that the Chancellor wanted to introduce it stealthily.

Another reason for the fiscal surplus has been the restraint on public expenditure in the Chancellor's first two years, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon correctly referred. That restraint was spun out by the treble counting that we kept hearing, year after year. Figures were repeated constantly by the spin doctors and by the Prime Minister, accumulating three years' increases in expenditure and giving the impression that they were being introduced all at once. That is one of the reasons why the public were unaware that many of the increases were nothing like as large as the Prime Minister and the Chancellor tried to pretend.

There has also been an underspend in the departmental expenditure limits, by £2 billion last year and £1 billion this year. That could be one of the reasons why a reluctant Chancellor managed eventually to allow the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to announce changes to the amounts of agrimonetary compensation last week. The underspend no doubt made that very easy for the Chancellor. It is a pity that the announcement was linked to foot and mouth disease, because it has nothing to do with it and should have been introduced much earlier.

I also suspect that the underspend made it possible for the Chancellor to announce what I thought was going to be another smoke and mirrors announcement: the £1 billion increase in health and education. I was watching for an element of retreading or reannouncing of an announcement that had already been made. I grant that that did not happen on this occasion, but the three years' increases were rolled into one and made to look very much larger than they are. The increase in education, for example, is £290 million next year, a far cry from the impression of £1 billion that was given. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), who has just left the Chamber, that education spending as a proportion of GDP under the previous Government was higher than it has been under the Labour Government over the past four years.

I shall make one comment on part of the educational spend—the new £290 million—which is that I welcome the conversion to the way in which we approach education spending in terms of the direct payments to schools announced as part of the package. I notice that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment spoke today about greater delegation of budgets and giving more freedom to head teachers. Well, what a conversion. One of the most damaging things that he did was to abolish the grant-maintained schools approach, in which a large proportion of the spend was directly delegated to head teachers, who were given the freedom to spend it as they wished.

I agree with the comments by my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) about the way in which so many of the education initiatives have been ring-fenced and small, giving the impression of great initiatives and great activity, when they would have been much better directed if they had been given directly to the schools in lump sums.

On health, the reality on the ground and the spin relating to the amount of money are poles apart. A general practitioner in a small village called Brooke in my constituency is retiring. It is proving very difficult—indeed, I think that it will be almost impossible—to replace that GP. One reason is the shortage of money. When I tried to discover whether the relevant funds could be rolled forward into the next three years, I was told that the Norfolk area health authority and the primary care groups were under huge pressure in relation to their budgets. That is the reality on the ground, and the announcement made last week will not make a great deal of difference.

More smoke and mirrors, now. I noticed, when I started to read through the press releases, that many of the tax reductions and grants are, as in the previous Budget, in years two and three. The impression is given that all those goodies will be immediately available, but we shall have to wait for two or three years for them to come through.

Furthermore, press release No. 1 from the Inland Revenue is absolutely littered with proposals which, when we examine them, turn out to be proposals to consult on this, that and the next thing. They give the impression of substantial giveaways to companies—many of the proposals affect the corporate sector—while doing almost nothing at all. As a former Minister with responsibility for small businesses, I can say that the changes proposed for small and medium-sized enterprises are absolutely minimal. The spin is much greater than the reality.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon, I want to give credit to the Chancellor on two counts. First, on the macro-economic front he has not, by and large, pursued old Labour policies. He has avoided the ludicrously high rates of tax and the reckless spending that we saw under previous Labour Governments. I freely acknowledge that, because of that and the continuation of many of the policies that we were pursuing, he has been able to make a significant repayment of debt. Any Chief Secretary to the Treasury—especially one of my political composition—would always wish to be in that position. In fact, I was close to getting to it myself when I was Chief Secretary, and my point about inheritance was that it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon who inherited the opportunity to repay debt.

I acknowledge that the Chancellor has been able to repay that debt, very much for the other reasons that I have given. However, he is in serious danger of throwing away his advantage. I sometimes wonder why there are so many rumours about an imminent election. I suspect that it is because the Prime Minister and the Chancellor do not want to wait until the autumn because they are aware that, given the slowdown in the American economy, the difficulties in Japan and the possible repercussions of globalisation that we experience from

time to time, the fiscal drag and the opportunity to repay debt might quickly start to move away. I suspect that that is one reason for having an early election.

However, we must also take into account the threat to the Chancellor's position on the repayment of debt. According to the Red Book—this point has now been well documented and commented on—in the next three years, the increases in public expenditure are planned at between 6 and 7 per cent. a year, with the three years growth estimated at very much less than that. Anyone who has been involved with the Treasury will know that, in terms of the surplus or the deficit—because we are talking about a small residual figure in relation to the expenditure numbers and the revenue numbers—if the economy moves into a slowdown, or if we spend much more than the growth in the economy, we can quickly experience a reverse in that repayment of debt and in the improvement that the Chancellor has been able to achieve on that front. That is the danger.

I also want to give credit to the Chancellor on the environmental front. I strongly welcome the reductions in fuel duty on ultra-low sulphur petrol, and a number of the other proposals in the Budget designed to improve the environmental aspects of transport generally. I remember clearly that I was Chief Secretary when my noble Friend Lord Lawson was Chancellor and we introduced the first reduction in duty on unleaded petrol. Although we were all in favour of that measure, we greatly underestimated the impact that that reduction would have on quickly moving everyone over to the use of unleaded petrol.

I generally welcome the Chancellor's proposals on environmental issues, but he is persisting with the climate change levy, with all the damage that it will do to the many businesses that will not be compensated by the national insurance reductions. He promises an aggregates levy next year, but that will be equally damaging to certain parts of our industry, and the threat of the pesticides tax to agriculture has still not gone away. If we read the small print, we discover that there is still the threat of a pesticides tax being introduced next year. I can think of nothing more harmful to our beleaguered agriculture industry at the present time than the continuation of that threat.

I have further detailed points to make. I believe that the climate change levy should not have been proceeded with and that the pesticides tax and the aggregates levy should not be introduced. I am sad that the Chancellor did not reverse IR35. When I was in California last September, I talked to a lot of Brits who work in the high-tech and biotech industries. Although California was the magnet that attracted British expertise from these shores, the spike of IR35 has greatly accelerated the trend and the visit to India made by the Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce provided one of the more ludicrous examples of its impact.

The Minister tried to recruit skilled consultants in the high-tech industries, for whom an accelerated immigration procedure was to be introduced, because we were losing our people. We have had to turn to others because IR35 has forced home-grown consultants from our shores.

Mr. Brooke: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the fastest-growing sport in the state of California is cricket, which is played in silicon valley?

Mr. MacGregor: As always, my right hon. Friend, through an illustration or an anecdote, makes the point extremely well.

I understand that the Chancellor has a passion for and obsession with detail, and that certainly shows in the complexity of so many of the new measures. As with education and getting budgets into schools, I believe that it is much more sensible to reduce taxation on families generally than to introduce a series of directed schemes that appear to be favourable and attractive to families. It is much better to leave families to make their own choices.

The complexity that we are beginning to detect on the tax credit front is frightening. Following the working families tax credit, a series of extremely complicated tax credits has been introduced. I must tell the Chief Secretary that I hope that that is not another way to fiddle the figures by reducing the public expenditure totals, as was done by the working families tax credit. The first of the two more serious consequences of such an approach is complexity for the recipients, and I am not surprised that there is not a big take-up.

Coming to the House in the car the day after the Budget, I listened to "Money Box Live". All the questions were about tax credits and the experts had great difficulty in explaining them. A lot of people outside the House simply will not comprehend them and I understand that the form is 40 pages long. That is not the way to set about establishing new systems, nor is it the way to encourage take-up.

Anyone who has tried to complete a self-assessment tax form this year, as I have, will have discovered that, because of a number of minor changes that the Chancellor has introduced to the tax system, that form is also 40 pages long and extremely complex. I happened to fill in my own, but it represents a bonanza for accountants, who will have to spend much longer on it. Introducing schemes of such complexity is not the right way to proceed and, of course, the burden on employers will be substantial too.

In the light of what is undoubtedly a Budget that will greatly exacerbate the complexity of our systems, I await the Chancellor's proposals on simplifying tax. It is perhaps significant that the press release on that subject comes last of all the Budget press releases. What is being simplified this year? The measures, which are the most minor that one could imagine, conclude with

"increasing to £50 the de minimis limits within corporation tax, self-employed income tax and VAT for business expenditure on gifts, so that fewer minor items need to be reported and tracked by business."

Big deal, when so many complexities are being introduced.

On savings, I have to declare an interest. As stated in the Register of Members' Interests, I am a non-executive director of a life assurance company. However, my remarks are geared not to that, but to pensioners. The hon. Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) said that the Chancellor wears a hair shirt and is greatly interested in thrift. She might be right about the hair shirt, but he shows his interest in thrift in funny ways. We know how much the savings ratio has dropped—it has more than halved and is down to 3.75 per cent. this year from about 11 per cent. when the Government took office.

I regard that as serious, but I am not at all surprised when I consider ISAs—which replaced PEPs and TESSAs and are nothing like as good by any measure—and the

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changes to pension fund income in relation to advance corporation tax. I predict that the stakeholder pension scheme will not do for the Government what they hope it will. It certainly will not achieve substantial take-up among the targeted income group—those who earn between £9,000 and £18,000. Indeed, the scheme is likely to proceed in such a way that there will probably be many fewer providers and much larger ones than in the past. That, too, will not produce the results that the Government seek, although I am certainly with them in wishing to encourage much more take-up of pension contributions at a much earlier age from all employees.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that savings ratios tend to go down at a time of consumer confidence and economic stability? The majority of people's savings these days is in their houses, not in conventional savings accounts, and the savings ratio does not take on board wealth accumulated in housing.

Mr. MacGregor: When providing for old age or saving for other reasons, it is not helpful to put all one's money into a house.

Mr. Davies *rose—*

Mr. MacGregor: Let me finish. I was a great supporter of the original Conservative concept of the property-owning democracy and supported all the way through every measure that we took to achieve it, but it has been achieved. The next stage is the share-owning democracy and the vast majority of the population providing for their own pensions. We all know, and the public widely recognise, that the state system will not do that, which is why I want to encourage those other measures and why it is worrying that the savings ratio has gone down.

There was speculation before the Budget that the Chancellor would introduce a measure to deal with the fact that people with personal pensions have to purchase an annuity by the age of 75. The concerns about the current system have been well documented, not least in a report by a retirement income working party headed by Oonagh McDonald, a former colleague in the House who participated in debates on the Finance Bill. I shall not go into those concerns because of the shortage of time, but they are well understood.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) has introduced a private Member's Bill to address the matter, but as far as I can see the Government took every step to talk it out last Friday. Why is not such a measure in the Budget? Why are not the Government removing the deadline age limit of 75, by which one must have turned to a retirement annuity? If we are in a low-inflation environment, annuities will pay much less so it would be much better for individuals—certainly with their personal pensions—to subscribe enough to what the McDonald working party report describes as an index-linked annuity to meet a minimum retirement income. That would cover the possibility that individuals may squander their money, not have enough and, in due course, rely on a minimum income guarantee from the state.

I agree that it is right to protect that, and people have been working out ways to do so, but, beyond it, there is no reason why people who have been encouraged to build up personal or money-purchase pensions should be encumbered with such a restrictive regime, which, in my view, is out of date, not least because they would have nothing to pass on to their families. Therefore, it is sensible to introduce a measure to remove the deadline age limit, and the absence of that represents a great gap in the Budget. I hope that it will be addressed and I am interested to know why the Government have set their face against such a measure.

This may be the last time that I speak in the Chamber and I echo all the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon. Participating in so many Budget and Finance Bill debates has been a tremendous experience, but, above all, it has been a privilege and a thrill to be a Member of the House.

7.19 pm

Mr. Colin Burgon (Elmet): As a relatively humble Back-Bencher, I am proud to take part in a debate with the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), and the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor). I hope that they will still have further contributions to make. The right hon. Member for Huntingdon is a straight man whom I respect. I also respect his experience, but I think that it was Frederick the Great who said:

"Experience is useless unless the correct conclusions are drawn."

Perhaps we will have to debate these issues further.

After the Budget, like all good constituency MPs, I went out and about trying to judge people's mood and find out what they thought about the proposals. I should like to cover three subjects that have been drawn to my attention: education, the environment and pensioners.

On education, I did not recognise the picture painted by the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May). On Thursday, I went to West Garforth primary school to meet the head teacher, Ann Oxley, and open a computer suite, thanks to Government funding. The head was pleasantly surprised to hear that the amount of money she was expecting to receive for her small primary school had leapt from £10,000 to £13,000. Similarly, down the road in Allerton Bywater primary school, a larger school in my home village, Gill Weatherhead, the head teacher was delighted to hear that her expected sum of £50,000 had leapt to £63,000. Likewise, the amount for the two large comprehensives in my constituency, at Boston Spa and Garforth, leapt from £92,000 to £115,000. That is money well spent and well received.

We must be honest. I wish that the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) was still present. I used to be a neighbour of his in more ways than one: I am a neighbour as an MP and he taught just up the road from where I taught. He got a lot more money than I did, and I was in a tougher school—but then again, he was a head teacher, so he can speak with authority. Any MP who goes round schools and talks to teachers must accept that they recognise that more money is coming in, but that is not the full picture.

We must address two problems. First, I hope that when we are re-elected at the general election, whenever that may be, we will do something about teachers' pay structure. Secondly, we must deal with an area that will otherwise give us problems by supporting teachers in the most difficult aspect of their job, which is maintaining discipline. There is no doubt that it is impossible to

contain some pupils in an ordinary school setting, so we must consider pupil referral units. Such units are costly, but they are productive. If the element that is difficult to control were removed, teachers could get on with the job of teaching.

I do not think that I am so aggressive or imposing that head teachers cannot speak to me frankly, and not one of them has ever told me that they want a full, 100 per cent. devolved budget. If the argument is that head teachers are already disappearing under a sea of bureaucracy and paperwork, such a move would involve them in even more bureaucracy, whether it be on school dinners, school transport or special needs. I did not recognise the picture painted by the hon. Member for Maidenhead.

I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's comments on the big issue of recruitment and retention. It is no good trying to shy away from this problem. I welcome the £35 million to be invested in the new management information system. It is our job as MPs—certainly on the Labour Benches—to ensure that the claim that the new system will lighten the load of data collection is delivered. Teachers tell me that the amount of paperwork they receive is extremely time consuming. I regularly receive a lecture from my brother, who is a head teacher and who tells me how much time he has to spend dealing with forms.

In the discussions I have with teachers, I encourage them to speak their minds, and in response I am allowed to speak mine. After having a face-to-face, full and frank discussion with staff of a large comprehensive in my constituency, I asked the head teacher—I shall not say who—"Don't they realise the amount of money that is going in? I can't believe their reaction." He said that, at the end of the day, they will vote Labour, because they know that a Labour Government will deliver the resources they need. We may have an argument with teachers, but it is within the family, and I feel confident that they will support us.

We need to get a grip on the lack of cover in schools. In my city of Leeds, several schools are balloting on strike action. If a pool of people is not available now—to be blunt, supply teachers are of variable quality—I am not sure what strike action will achieve.

I am also interested in the Chancellor's proposals on the environment and how they affect my city of Leeds. Leeds takes a dual approach to many matters. It has an affluent outer core, and an inner-city core where the business sector has developed. It also has areas of devastating poverty. The steps that the Chancellor has taken to regenerate Britain's towns and cities, such as Leeds, are excellent. I want to highlight three or four key proposals.

The stamp duty exemption for property transactions in the most disadvantaged areas is an excellent measure. My right hon. Friend has cut VAT to 5 per cent. to encourage renovation and conversion of existing property, and he has proposed 100 per cent. capital allowances for creating flats over shops. I hope that people will support all those ideas.

I am particularly interested in the 150 per cent. accelerated tax credits to help to clean up contaminated land. That is good news for the industrial and old mining areas of Leeds that I represent. The only bad news is that that was not done a few years ago. In my home village of Allerton Bywater, the colliery site has just been reclaimed. I wish that the tax incentives had been available at that time.

Those measures taken in conjunction with the various planning legislation that the Government have introduced—I am thinking principally of planning policy guidance note 3—provide a package of measures that show the interrelation between the inner city and the suburbs, whose fates are inextricably linked. In Leeds, we are developing housing in the city centre. We must ensure that it is not only flats for wealthy people. If we use our derelict land effectively, it will help us to protect our greenfield sites. I hope that Conservative Members agree with us on that issue.

The proposals in the Budget that have preoccupied me most are those relating to pensioners. Like all MPs, if I had a pound for every time a pensioner chewed my ear, I would not be here—I would be sunning myself somewhere. Pensioners are great people, because they speak their minds. As long as I can speak my mind back to them, I welcome that. I welcome the priorities in the Budget that will improve pensioners' incomes. It is important to consider the strategy that the Labour Government have developed over the years. It represents a giant step forward, but we have a few more to take.

In an overall strategy of ending pensioner poverty by 2010, the Government have taken the initial steps of increasing the basic state pension by more than the rate of inflation to £72.50 for a single pensioner and to £115.90 for a pensioner couple; increasing the amount of income that is taxed at the low rate of 10 per cent., which will help an estimated 3 million pensioners; and increasing the minimum income guarantee to £92.15 for a single person and £140.55 for a pensioner couple.

When the MIG was introduced, like most other MPs, I ran campaigns up and down my constituency to raise awareness of the guarantee and to encourage people to take it up. In such wonderful-sounding places as Swillington, Allerton Bywater and Swarcliffe, we engaged in vigorous discussions about the Government's policy on pensioners and the minimum income guarantee.

An important aspect of the Budget for pensioners, and for me—after all, I may well be a pensioner soon—is the announcement of the start in 2003 of the pension credit scheme, which will reward the 5.5 million pensioners who have made the sacrifice of contributing to modest works pensions, and/or saving for their later years. I encountered many households with very small tailors' or miners' pensions, for instance—they were usually the husbands' pensions; for some strange reason women tend to outlive men, and research will doubtless explain why—which prevented them from claiming other benefits. That rankled with them. I wrote to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and I should like to claim that they have listened to me, although greater forces were probably at work. In any event, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

During that first half of 2000, I went out of my way to meet as many of my pensioner constituents as possible to promote the minimum income guarantee. They raised a question which I hope the pension credit scheme has at last begun to answer. Under the scheme the sacrifices that they made while in work will be recognised, and credit will be given for modest pensions and savings. I am gratified to note that pension credit will be linked

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to earnings, thus giving pensioners more than they would have received through the restoration of the link between the basic state pension and earnings.

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is making a thoughtful speech, and I am enjoying listening to it. However, given his interest in thrift and prudence, and the inevitable and perhaps desirable fact that people will themselves always have to contribute to the pot from which they draw on retirement, would he in principle endorse the notion that we should abolish tax on savings for basic rate taxpayers?

Mr. Burgon: Not at this stage. I think it would be financially irresponsible to do so.

Let us consider what the Labour Government have already done. I said that we should see everything in context, and there are things that I never forget—and never forget to remind pensioners about when they speak to me in the street, whether in a friendly or in an abrasive manner. We have provided winter fuel payments of £200 in every household containing someone over 60; we have provided free television licences for those over 75; and we have given pensioners the right to free eye tests. In June, we will introduce a national bus scheme for pensioners guaranteeing at least half-price fares. The fares will be 20 per cent. of the full amount in Leeds, so we are not doing badly. We have reduced value-added tax on fuel to 5 per cent. We have introduced the home energy efficiency scheme, which gives pensioners grants of up to £2,000 to install central heating and insulation. We estimate that that scheme will benefit some 400,000 pensioners over the next three years, and we hope to hit our target of ending pensioner fuel poverty by 2010.

In our dialogue with our constituents, we must also present the alternative, because a choice may have to be made in a year or less. When considering the Conservative party's approach to pensioners, we must take account of three or four key facts. Under the Conservatives, the gap between the poorest and the richest pensioners grew to its widest since 1960. They allowed the value of the basic state pension to decline throughout their years in office: by 1997, one in three pensioners lived in poverty. They scrapped free eye tests, and cut free travel passes. They condemned more than 4 million pensioner households to fuel poverty.

I can offer the Conservative party a way out. *[Interruption.]* It is not suicide, as someone has just suggested from a sedentary position. On Saturday, I was in Kippax, Garforth and Wetherby. An old couple came up to me in Wetherby—traditionally, a rock-solid Conservative bastion—pushing a trolley, and nearly knocking me down with it. In the course of our subsequent conversation, they told me that they had never been so well off: they were doing really well under this Government. I replied that it was brilliant to hear that, because quite often a certain group of pensioners did nothing but give me a hard time. They said "Mr. Burgon, they will only be happy if you give them a gold pig." I offer this advice to the Conservative party: the only way back to power lies in offering every pensioner a gold pig.

There is no doubt that the buzz on the ground is that Labour has delivered a very positive Budget. I know that the Chancellor did not have one eye on the election, because he is not like that: his strategy is quite different. However, I am delighted that a by-product of the great effort that he has put in is the laying of the groundwork for a Labour victory.

7.35 pm

Sir David Madel (South-West Bedfordshire): In his Budget speech, the Chancellor made a glancing reference to farming industry. He referred to

"farming—an industry essential to Britain, which today faces immediate and long-standing difficulties".

Since he made that reference, things have got much worse, and they are getting much worse for the tourist industry as well. A real crisis is brewing up. I know that a number of electioneering speeches have been made over the past few days, but the Government need to consider the implications of what is happening in farming and tourism if they decide to plump for 3 May.

The hon. Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon) said that he had offered advice to the Conservative party. In return, I offer the Labour party some advice: if it has a big domestic crisis on its hands, the public expect Labour to solve it rather than running to the polls. We went through all this in February 1974. I vividly remember the reaction on the doorstep, and believe you me, if an election is called a year before it is necessary during a full-scale crisis in farming and the tourist industry, the party concerned will receive a pretty hostile response on the doorstep.

My advice to the Labour party is that of Mr. Harold Macmillan, who used to say that the time to call an election was in the autumn, when the charabancs had rolled back from Seville. I must update that now, and say that the time to call an election is when the airlines have safely delivered all their passengers to Luton airport after the summer peak time. Hon. Members will know why I make that particular point. I have no shares or other interest in easyJet, Britannia, Monarch or any of the others, so the sleaze-buster will not be upset by my reference to them.

Budgets always involve grand ideas and lots of detail. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) that this Chancellor hugely prefers detail. To me, the test of the Budget is whether unemployment will fall further and whether it will stay down, whether the 2.5 per cent. economic growth target will be met, what the effect of the United States slowdown will be on this country as Americans start to save rather than spend, and what will happen—the Chancellor mentioned this—if oil prices suddenly become volatile.

There are two grand schemes mentioned by the Chancellor to which I want to refer. In relation to unemployment, he said:

"For the hard to employ, those still left behind, we are proposing from 1 April, at a cost of £200 million a year, a new regime built around more intensive coaching and stronger sanctions for the over-25s."

If that means—as I suspect it does—that local authorities will be involved in such essential work, they will inevitably have to take on more staff. I hope that the revenue support grant will be adjusted accordingly to take account of the additional staff who will be needed if they are to contribute to the employment of those who, in the Chancellor's words, have hitherto been hard to employ.

The second "grandish" scheme features in another part of the Budget statement. The Chancellor said:

"Today we issue proposals and will consult on the best way to extend a research and development tax credit to the larger companies."

All I can say is that I hope the scheme will help research graduates just coming into work pay off their student debts and loans. I also hope that there will be comparable arrangements for medium-sized companies, which also go in for research and development.

I mentioned the Chancellor's devotion to detail. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk mentioned the problems over IR35. Let me give a particularly muddled example. I have been in contact with the managing director of a company in my constituency, who said:

"I have at long last managed to get a credible answer from the Inland Revenue to the question which I raised in November . . . whether an employee who has acquired a more-than-5 per cent. interest in my company through membership of an employee share scheme is subject to tax on her entire fees if she works on a time-and-materials contract which falls within the scope of clause 1(1)(c) of Schedule 12 to the Finance Act 2000."

The first reply that the managing director received from the Inland Revenue declared:

"if the person alluded to in your letter is as you have stated an employee of your business being paid through the payroll the provisions of IR35 will not apply."

The managing director went on to say that that reply was

"remarkably similar to Dawn Primarolo's response to you"—

"you" being me, as I had taken up the issue with the Government. That response stated:

"If the person . . . is . . . an employee of"

that company,

"then that person should already be on"

the company's

"payroll and the company should already be deducting PAYE and National Insurance Contributions from money earned. If that is the case, then the 'ir35' legislation will not apply."

The managing director's letter goes on to say:

"Yet now, after repeated prodding, I have the following statement from the same Inspector who sent me the first reply:

'I can confirm that if the work that your employee undertakes under any given contract were to fall within the scope of clause 1(1)(c) of the Finance Act 2000 then by virtue of the fact that a more-than-5 per cent. interest in the Company share capital has been acquired, as per clause 3(1)(a) and clause 3(4)(a), a liability would arise under IR35.'"

It is a first-class muddle and an example of a business having to spend a lot of time worrying about the Inland Revenue and IR35 when it should be concentrating on the needs of its customers. We cannot say that we have not been warned. The February brief from the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants warns that it is very concerned about the impact of IR35 on income and corporation tax self-assessment. The brief states:

"IR35 mistakes made under the self-assessment arrangements could prove to be a ticking time bomb. If errors are made, they could lie undetected for years only to detonate in the future at huge expense to the individual or company concerned."

I should like to deal with another, albeit slightly different ticking time bomb. My right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) mentioned inheritance tax levels. The Chancellor said this of his inheritance tax proposals:

"I propose to raise the allowance, so that no tax will be charged on estates up to almost £¼ million—a threshold of £242,000. Ninety-six per cent. of estates will pay no tax."—[*Official Report*, 7 March 2001; Vol. 364, c. 298-304.]

With house prices surging ahead in the south-east, how can he be so sure?

I also do not understand the reasoning behind some aspects of our tax system. When someone dies and something has to be done about the house, payment of tax is the first thing that must be done. The house cannot be sold until probate has been granted, but probate will not be granted until the tax has been paid. Surely we can change the system so that, when someone dies and leaves a house, the first charge on the money that is raised is for the taxman—who will be the first in the queue. I certainly do not believe that people should have to borrow to pay the notional tax on a house that has not been sold because probate has not been granted. I should think that that tax reform would appeal to the Chancellor's sense of detail, and that it should be introduced very quickly indeed.

The Government have another looming, detailed problem. Ministers have made much of help for the family and child minders and help with child care. I have a constituent who is a single mother with three children, aged six, three and one. She must pay £100 per week to the child minder and £12 per week to the play scheme which the middle child attends. My constituent gets back 70 per cent. of the £12 that she pays to the play scheme, but gets back nothing for the £100 per week that she pays to the child minder, because the child minder looks after the children not in her own house, but in the mother's house and is therefore classed as a nanny and not as a child minder. That particular child minder—just to make the situation more interesting—works in the play scheme looking after the middle child at certain times of day. The only reason why she is able to do that is that she has the necessary qualifications.

It is a detailed muddle. I do not understand why my constituent cannot claim back money because the child minder looks after her children in her own home. If I have encountered that problem, other hon. Members will have done so too. The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux and those who advise on tax credits advised that constituent to see me, which she did on Saturday morning.

Like my right hon. Friends the Members for Huntingdon and for South Norfolk, I found some good things in the Budget. In South-West Bedfordshire, we have had the tremendous shock of Vauxhall's decision to stop building cars at Luton next year. I was heartened when a statement from management this week stated:

"Vauxhall management will continue to take all reasonable steps to avoid any compulsory redundancies as a result of the restructuring".

The management is hopeful that it will achieve that aim. It also goes on to say—this is music in my ears—that it has reaffirmed its

"undertaking to pursue new business opportunities in the UK."

I hope that those opportunities will come in the Dunstable and Houghton Regis area. The Chancellor's comments in the Budget statement were very relevant for my area because he said that there would be six targeted tax cuts to speed up regeneration, at a cost of more than £1 billion over the next five years. He also said that he

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will do more to clean up contaminated land and help to revitalise high streets, with 100 per cent. first-year capital allowances to bring empty flats over shops back into the residential market. He also said that there will be more help for the Small Business Service. However, he made not one mention or glancing reference to the need to improve the infrastructure in my constituency to make those changes happen. They will not happen until we get new roads such as the Dunstable bypass and other improvements.

This speech—like those of my right hon. Friends the Members for Huntingdon and for South Norfolk—will pretty definitely be my last in this Chamber. I echo everything that they have said. However, the greatest privilege for me has been to represent my constituents in this place for almost 31 years. Above all, I want the employment base to become strong again in South-West Bedfordshire, after some horrific shocks over the years. I want us to remain an industrial area. We want a hand up from the Government, not a handout, and that entails immediate improvements to our infrastructure. When I leave the House of Commons, I want above all to be able to say to my constituents that action has been taken to reduce unemployment and to retain my constituency as a powerful industrial base.

7.47 pm

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Listening to some of the speeches by Opposition Members, I was a little bemused by their recollection of the state of play in 1997. They have described a golden legacy. My memory is of debt doubling and of interest rates being much higher than they are now. I also remember talking to the chief economist of the NatWest bank, who pointed out that the interest rate cycle varies from 7 to 15 per cent. We are now enjoying the low part of that cycle and a stable economy.

Before the Government were elected, unemployment was 1.1 million higher, and inflation was much higher. There were also much higher levels of bankruptcy and repossession. The picture being painted by Opposition Members is a figment of their imagination. Since 1997, the themes in the Chancellor's Budgets—promoting stability, prosperity and fairness, and the focus on benefits to families and businesses—have been remarkably consistent. It is those themes that have regenerated Britain and will serve us in good stead for the future.

Hon. Members will remember that, in the first couple of years of this Government, the overall economic picture was a bit precarious. Hon. Members will recall the so-called south-east Asian financial crisis—when a quarter of the world economy was in recession, world growth targets were halved and Opposition Members were predicting an awful recession and saying that the Government's expenditure plans were grossly irresponsible. They have obviously forgotten all that, and we have moved forward. We still face global threats—the United States economy is slowing down and the Japanese economy is barely growing. Yet there is a robust certainty in the way in which we are moving forward, having prudently paid off debt and repositioned ourselves in the global marketplace for the good of Britain.

We have put an extra 1.1 million people in the workplace; they are making a contribution, rather than taking enormous amounts of money in unemployment benefit and lost tax. The average cost of an unemployed person is some £12,000 a year. In my borough of Croydon, where I was leader of the council, the unemployment figure has been reduced by 4,877, translating into a saving of £58 million every year that can be invested in more services or tax reductions. Indeed, they are being invested in both, for the good of my constituents and the wider economy.

Getting 1.1 million people back into work is the key to the Government's success in being able credibly to say that they will invest more in public services and reduce taxes. The other side of the coin is that people know that Conservative economic policy means lower employment, hence higher taxes and cuts in public services—the worst of both worlds. It is very important, as we approach another time for public decision, that people realise that fundamental difference.

It is not by choice or by legacy that we are enjoying the current economic environment, but by decision and difficult choice. The Bank of England's independence was one of the Chancellor's first master strokes. It immediately took the risk premium out of interest rates. Long-term interest rates dipped and are at a 30-year low. Independence encouraged more investment in jobs, enabled consumers to enjoy lower mortgage payments and allowed stability to reign in the economy and the housing market. In addition, the new deal meant that people who had been taken out of the labour market and had disengaged from the habit of work could get back into work and make their contribution. The Chancellor's overall fiscal management was excellent.

I intervened on the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), when he was describing how he saw his past. The hard facts show that, in 1996–97, the previous Government's total managed public expenditure was 41.2 per cent. of gross domestic product and 6 per cent. of that went on borrowing. The previous Government did not take tough decisions—although they imposed 22 tax increases—but decided to borrow and borrow, thereby doubling debt. We are all familiar with the statistic that for every pound spent since 1979, 42p went on borrowing, debt and dole. Now that figure has been reduced to 16 per cent.

If we compare the percentage of GDP that was tax plus borrowing in 1996–97—38.2 per cent.—with the figure for 1999–00 of 36.2 per cent., which is 2 percentage points lower, that represents £19 billion more that would have been taxed or borrowed under the Tories. That is an equivalent of 7.3p on income tax. If we were doing what the Tories did with the economy, which we have enlarged through economic prosperity, the punter would be paying 7 per cent. more tax.

People need to realise that, under the Tories, taxes would be higher and cuts deeper because of economic incompetence. They have already announced £16 billion worth of cuts in planned expenditure, but that is a massive underestimate. We must add to it the cost of higher unemployment. For example, the borough of Croydon would be looking at cuts of £72 million a year against planned investment, plus the £58 million saving resulting from people who are back in work. That is a total of £130 million a year—an enormous amount for a borough such as Croydon. It does not bear thinking about.

There have been references to the savings ratio. People are saving less because of economic confidence and because the primary method of saving in the modern economy is through housing, and house prices have been going up.

I realise why the right hon. Member for Huntingdon painted the picture that he did, but I did not recognise it. The Conservatives were responsible for unsustainable borrowing and debt which would inevitably have meant the road to ruin for any business. Thank goodness the Chancellor arrived; he has balanced the books by making tough decisions about containing cost, focusing on job creation and repaying debt. In addition, the cost of that debt has come down because market confidence has led to lower Bank of England interest rates. All those factors have combined to provide a more benign economic picture.

Let us compare that with the shadow Chancellor's proposition to ask the Monetary Policy Committee to reduce target inflation from 2.5 per cent. to 2 per cent. We should remember that the Conservatives did not want a Monetary Policy Committee; they did not want independence for the Bank of England. Now they have come round to the idea—in fact, they have gone a step further. They know that the public have no confidence in their capabilities, so they want an independent commission to look at fiscal policy as well. Their attitude is, "Don't worry, vote Conservative and we will not actually manage the economy at all. We will ask Evan Davies of 'Newsnight' to do it."

The Conservatives want a 2 per cent. inflation target. I realise that, given the good management of the economy, that would be achievable in terms of the current inflation rate. However, that is not a desirable constraint because it would inevitably mean that, other things being equal, interest rates would have to be higher than they would otherwise be. That would reduce investment and increase the cost of mortgages, thereby increasing unemployment, debt costs, and the cost of unemployment, and reducing the tax take.

Even if the right thing to do were handed to the Conservatives on a plate, they would go back to the bad old days of boom and bust. That is why their claims to match our expenditure and our action on taxes are completely unbelievable.

Mr. Willis: To give the hon. Gentleman a break, does he think that that is why, in last Friday's *Yorkshire Post*, Mr. Paul Sykes, the multimillionaire who has rejoined the Conservative party, said:

"I don't want anything to do with the Conservative Party. They are a disaster."?

Mr. Davies: I do not have time to list all the possible reasons for Mr. Sykes to come to that conclusion. Many people come to that conclusion for a variety of reasons. Obviously, Mr. Sykes is particularly interested in not joining the single currency, for reasons best known to himself. He does not want to attach his campaign to the Conservatives' failed campaign. He does not want to attach himself to a bunch of losers, so he is keeping his money in the bank, keeping his powder dry, and he will fight his own campaign on the single currency.

We are all concerned about sovereignty, as opposed to the single currency. Sovereignty is, by definition, about having maximum control over the choices that dictate our destiny. Are we around the table, leading the debate, or are we on the sidelines, being led by the "Nos"? I have nothing against people who live in the rest of Europe, but some of the speeches made in Harrogate suggested that much of the policy is led by a loathing of foreigners as opposed to a rational analysis of the pros and cons of the single currency and of integration.

Turning back to the good fortune that I see personally in Croydon as a result of the masterly management of the economy, the NHS locally has received an extra £18 million. There is a linkage between good health, a strong economy and good education. People who are able to work more regularly are healthier and happier. Their morale is higher—that is good for the economy. We can see that in the police force in London, where the reduction of absenteeism has added the equivalent of 500 police officers to the force.

The Mayday hospital in Croydon does not have the best reputation in the world, but there have been an extra 2,000 operations; there are 90 more nurses, a new kidney unit and a new maternity unit, and the accident and emergency department has been refurbished. Things are getting better; people realise that. They want more and that is what they are getting.

I know that hon. Members are interested in the education situation in Croydon. There is an extra £370 per pupil. Standards are rising—an improvement of 13 per cent. in mathematics since 1997. Primary class sizes are smaller. There are difficulties in teacher recruitment, but that is part of the wider economic success that the country is enjoying. If 1.1 million more people have jobs, if after-tax income has gone up by 10 per cent.—as it has—and if the labour market is tight, graduates or trained teachers enjoy more choice. We must work harder to get those people into the classroom. We are working harder and they are coming into the profession. The other day, a chap who had just left college told me that, because of the "golden hello", he was becoming a mathematics teacher—good luck to him.

We are investing in areas that faced economic and poverty challenges. Often, because of economic circumstances and educational background—in respect of the availability of books in the family home—people from those areas have not succeeded as much as they might have done. That is why we have an education action zone in Croydon, where the business community has come to the table—I helped in that process. Companies such as Sainsbury and Mondial Assistance see that initiative as a one-way street to success.

Individual self-esteem is being raised. Often children are held back in school because perhaps their parents or parent say, "I didn't do very well in school son, and you're not very bright. School's not a very good thing." That holds people back. Education action zones break down those difficulties with more investment and more new ideas. That brings new success by raising standards that will shape the life choices of our children so that they can contribute to the new economy that is growing for the future.

Education is the key to the new economy and the family is the key to education. The big challenge faced by the Government, in a tight labour market, is how to add to productivity and skills. Yes, we can do so through technology, but also by enabling parents—especially women with young children—to engage flexibly with the

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labour market in a way that does not ruin their family life. With a family of small children, it is extremely difficult to engage meaningfully with the labour market. That is why we have introduced all the extra benefits—the working families tax credit, the children's tax credit and help with child care. There is universal provision of nursery schooling at four—now at three. There is extra provision before and after school. Those measures are of enormous importance to providing flexibility.

People with very young children also have the choice to stay at home to look after them. As a parent of very young children, aged six, three and three months, I believe it important to invest enough time with them—reading to them, and so on. We must create a flexible environment whereby people can engage in the labour market and have a meaningful family life. That is why we have invested more in maternity and paternity benefits. I very much welcome that. With working families tax credit and children's tax credit, working families are better off than ever.

Employment is growing and productivity is rising. There are some interesting misconceptions about productivity growth; some criticisms have been made. Last Friday, at a dinner of the Chartered Institute of Bankers, there was a question about relative productivity rates and the slow-down in productivity growth, and I pointed out the simple fact that if employment is quickly increased by 1.1 million, it is obvious that the extra people will be less productive on average than the existing stock of workers. One would expect current average productivity to go down, because marginal productivity is less than the existing average. After any rapid increase in employment, productivity will slow down in the short term, but will then quickly speed up. That is the Chancellor's ambition and I am sure that with the investment in education, skills and information technology, our economy will go from strength to strength.

Business is, of course, the basis of the prosperity that we enjoy and that we invest in the social products which we all consume—through education and health. Businesses are succeeding. As someone who has run his own business and worked in multinationals, I believe it right to hold robust discussions on red tape, discrimination and the relative focus on administration versus entrepreneurial activity. However, it is also right to remember that some of the key costs identified by the British Chambers of Commerce—the minimum wage and the working time directive—themselves make contributions towards more profitable and productive business. When those costs are taken out, the BCC's somewhat exaggerated claims become massively deflated.

Enabling people to join the labour market effectively and profitably is part of the process of business success. People who run small businesses say that there is too much red tape, but when one asks them whether they are making more money and employing more people, the answer is, "Yes, yes, business is good." If we had listened to the Opposition, we would be back in the world of small business bankruptcy that we all vividly remember.

The right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) mentioned that he would have liked to reduce debt. Sadly, his Government increased debt. He said that he would have liked to give more help to small and medium enterprises. Sadly, bankruptcies ran at a record high. We have delivered his aspirations; I am glad about that.

On the environment, people have mentioned the fuel tax problems. We all know that fuel taxes in Britain are higher than they are on the continent. However, income and other taxes are higher on the continent, so on average, taxes are much lower in this country. That is a clear choice. When people tell me, "I have paid too much for my petrol," I say that, yes, it is right that the Chancellor has taken away the escalator because world oil prices have risen.

People have a choice. Do they want income tax or fuel tax? I do not have a queue of people asking for more income tax. If I did, we could discuss the matter. However, I do have a queue of people worried about asthma in children and about the environment they live in. The people who complain about greenfield site developments need to understand that we have to create a good environment in our towns and cities in respect of air quality, education and security. Those are key drivers that make towns nicer places to live in. That is what I am pressing for in Croydon as a local MP. People understand that there are better alternatives in transport. I very much back the extra investment in public transport to be made over the next 10 years.

Through the combined effort delivered in the Budget, we have a situation in which education standards are being driven forward to help the economy, but where the economy also helps education. Health is improving; that is helping the economy. Institutionalised poverty tends to cluster—in bad housing, bad health, bad education and poor pay. Those problems, which were endemic under Conservative Governments, are being targeted directly and broken down. We are taking an enormous step forward.

Only a few years ago, those of us who talked about full employment were told that it could not happen again. We were asked how we could compete with the developing world, but we are doing just that by empowering people with skills and by providing the infrastructure and the human-based services that people desperately need, whether in care homes, public services or, indeed, in restaurants and all the other services that we enjoy because of our higher disposable incomes. All those things are moving forward; we are living in a better Britain. There are difficulties and there is a long way to go, however.

Crime is an issue, but it is down by 10 per cent. Many people are misled about crime. As hon. Members may know, the British crime survey is the only reliable indicator of all actual crime. It records all crime in a sample of about 20,000 people and shows that crime is down by 10 per cent., as crime recorded by the police represents only between a quarter and a fifth of total crime. A bit more crime is being recorded, so people believe that there is a real problem.

We need to invest in more Bobbies and Beatrices on the beat; we need to make progress on crime. As a London Member, I am glad that an extra 2,044 police will be provided and that, because of previous Budgets, almost an extra £3,500 has been added to the pay of new police recruits. I am also glad about the extra investment in closed circuit television and in partnerships with councils.

In my own area, the police budget is about £30 million; the local authority budget is, of course, 10 times that amount, so much of the incremental, unseen investment in combating crime takes place through local authority partnerships. It is not surprising that crime is down when we have more people in work and more people are being educated. The difficulties with mobile phone thefts and one-on-one assaults are being confronted, but they are non-financial issues.

Overall, in relation to business success, our fundamental services, stability, mortgage payers and the wider community, we have much to be proud of in the Budget; it is a stepping stone to the future. We do not want to be complacent, but actions such as paying off an enormous amount of debt strengthen us for the inevitable buffeting of the world economy, in which the future is unpredictable. We are stronger and better prepared than any of our European partners, and I commend the Budget to Parliament.

8.13 pm

Mr. David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden): I feel privileged to speak, bracketed between the valedictory speeches of several hon. Members who are among the most admired—certainly by me—in the House. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies), a colleague of mine on the Public Accounts Committee, although he will understand if I disagree with almost everything that he said, as will become apparent in a moment.

I should like to address the Budget in the context of the Government's overall economic strategy—especially that on taxation, spending and borrowing—of the past four years and its long-term implications. The one point on which I agree with the hon. Member for Croydon, Central is that the Budget has had a good press. The public sector financial figures look healthy at first sight. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor) mentioned the smoke and mirrors that are involved in that, and it is true that financial and economic commentators like a surplus.

There are two sets of reasons for the surpluses—one good, and one bad. The good reasons reflect the healthy economy, delivered by nearly 20 years of Conservative economic reforms. Cutting tax rates and tax complexity and limiting regulation have been vital to the healthy and dynamic economy that underpins the Budget. In more fundamental terms, however, which the Government will not like, without the great trade union reforms, the great financial market liberalisations, the great privatisations and the dramatic reductions in tax rates under Conservative Governments, the Budget would not have been possible.

The bad reasons for the surpluses reflect the fact that we are simply being charged too much tax. Even the Government now admit that the burden of taxation has increased. We now pay between £25 billion and £35 billion in extra taxes. We must also take into account another £10 million—the cost of extra regulations—not to mention the ferocious complexity of the modern tax and benefits systems. The irony—the paradox—of the Budget is that it is slowly destroying the very things that made it possible.

Despite continually repeating economic platitudes about caution and prudence, the Chancellor and the Government have not learned the key concept of Conservative economic arithmetic, which is straightforward enough: lower tax rates lead to higher growth rates; higher growth rates lead to higher tax takes; and higher tax takes allow tax cuts and spending increases—the story of 18 years of Conservative government. That virtuous cycle is the key concept behind Conservative economic policy.

The Government are gradually breaking that virtuous cycle for three reasons: first, their attitude to spending and their inability to manage it; secondly, their obsessive attitude to debt, which we have heard about today and with which I shall deal in a moment; and, thirdly, the high level of waste in government and the associated poor delivery of services.

I shall deal first with spending. Old Labour was characterised by feast, famine and overspending, followed by cuts when the Government ran out of money. The Chancellor knew that the financial markets would punish him for such behaviour. Indeed, his approach to the first few years has been dominated by the overwhelming desire to build up his reputation, at all costs, as cautious, careful and even prudent. He first ran up his war chest by overtaxing, and when he had a surplus he set out his pre-election bonanza. Old Labour represented feast then famine; new Labour represents famine then glut. That may have created the Chancellor's current reputation, but it is the worst possible way to manage public expenditure.

Starving the public sector of cash, followed by throwing money at it in panic will lead to waste and to the public sector failing to reach its targets. Runaway spending will fail to deliver the proper level of improved services. It will destabilise the public finances and, in the longer run, it will be unsustainable.

One of the Chancellor's strangest characteristics in his obsessive pursuit of prudence has been his obsession with public debt. Some of that obsession has been reflected in today's debate. The national debt in Britain is about a third of national income—half the European average—so it is not unmanageable; it is not even high by international standards. It is about half the level that is judged to be sustainable. We are not facing the situation that existed after the Napoleonic wars, when debt was three times as high as national income. We are not even facing the situation when debt was in the high 50s as a percentage of national income, which happened to be when the previous Labour Government were in power. The Chancellor, however, is saddled with Labour's history and reputation for economic incompetence, so, like a reformed alcoholic, he has to be a debt teetotaller and purchase Labour's economic credentials with taxpayers' money.

It is important to understand the purpose of national debt, which acts as a flywheel for the economy. When the economy slows, debt increases to allow the budget to meet increasing welfare payments without increasing taxes. When the economy is going well, debt should grow at a below-average level or a modest proportion should be paid down. Over the whole economic cycle, debt should stay roughly constant as a proportion of national income. The problem of paying down too much debt is that one has to raise too much tax to do it. The Government paid down £34 billion this year. In my judgment, it would have been smarter to have paid off about half that.

The Government's strategy is paradoxical. In the pursuit of their own reputation for financial prudence, they are damaging the financial standing of their citizens. The greatest single immediate effect of the last few years

[Mr. David Davis]

of taxation and economic policy has been to drive the savings ratio down from 10 per cent. in 1997 to about 3 or 4 per cent. The hon. Member for Croydon, Central said that that was all the result of changes in economic confidence, but the numbers do not reflect that. There have been changes in economic confidence—up and down—in the past few years, but they have not been reflected in the rate of change in debt.

Mr. Geraint Davies: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that debt and borrowing are, in fact, deferred taxation? The money has to be paid in any case, so in paying off a huge chunk of debt—for example, by the spectrum sale—we can save £2 billion of tax or avoid £2 billion of cuts in a given year without breaching the rules of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union. Those rules would be breached under his prescription.

Mr. Davis: I would not breach any of those rules, but I shall deal with the hon. Gentleman's point shortly.

By 1999, the reduction in personal savings was about £25 million and, by 2000, about £35 million. The increase in taxes is also about £25 million to £35 million, depending on when one measures it. Therefore, for every £1 increase in our tax burden at least £1 has come out of savings. The overall aggregate effect of the Chancellor's four-year strategy has been to transfer money from personal savings to the Treasury.

Instead of considering the issue in terms of billions of pounds, which is incomprehensible for most people, let us think of it in terms of the effect on the ordinary family. The level of national debt is about £15,000 per household. The Chancellor is expropriating more than a £1,000 a year from every household—money that would otherwise have gone into savings—and is using it to pay down Government debt, which is subject to the lowest possible rate in comparison with the return that a normal saver would get.

Before I come to the point made by the hon. Member for Croydon, Central, I wish to deal with a technical issue. The reduction in public debt might have a perverse effect that could lead to a shortage of gilts. The Chancellor might think—he almost said so in his speech last week—that the Myers report and the relaxation of the rules on investment solve the problem that that creates. Ironically, the reduced availability of very low-risk investments might, through the management of average risk, lead the financial institutions to cut their exposure to high-risk investments—precisely the opposite of the Chancellor's wishes. I have told the Financial Secretary that I shall write to him about that point, because the issue is too technical for this debate.

Debt reduction is being represented to the public as a virtue. The hon. Member for Croydon, Central, among others, has made that point. I can summarise his argument, because a Treasury press release does just that. It states:

"We are now building a virtuous circle of falling debt, lower interest rates, lower debt repayments and a stronger economy, releasing more resources for public services."

That is the thrust of the argument, but it completely ignores the fact that the tax raised to pay down the debt has the effect of depressing the growth of the whole economy.

The destructive effect of high taxation on overall economic performance is now well understood, but appears to have been ignored by the Government. Studies based on Warwick university's economic model, by Robert Barro of Harvard university and by David B. Smith of Williams de Broe, whose work has recently been published by Politeia, show that a stark reduction in economic performance is related to increased spending and taxation.

The simplest way to understand that is to consider another model and another country. Through the late 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, the social democrat model in Sweden went along the route of increasing public expenditure faster than the economy's growth rate. In the 1960s and 1970s, Sweden was the third or fourth richest country in the world. Today, it is the 19th richest, and that is the direct consequence of higher taxation. The studies that I mentioned argue that, if it had maintained a sensible and Conservative policy, its private sector would be three times as large as it is today. Had Sweden gone the low-tax, high-growth route, not only would individuals have been richer, but its expenditure on public services would be much higher than it can conceivably afford today.

Politicians' classic error is that they love to be the distributors of largesse—the apparent benefactors of their fellow citizens. In the Chancellor, that vice has become an addiction. Social engineering is so detailed and complex that it is now social micro-engineering. He and other politicians ignore the fact that their complex and burdensome taxes and regulations destroy initiative; that their largesse brings millions more into dependency—2 million in the past three years—and that the destruction of savings and the savings culture undermines the primary instrument of self-help and independence, which is people's investment in their own family's future.

The greatest help that we can give the poor is to provide better jobs and better choices and give them the right to keep more of their money. Those would all be better than the Chancellor's cold charity and would all be delivered by a vibrant low-tax economy. The Government's strategy is tax a lot, spend more than we can afford, pretend prudence by the unnecessary payment of debt and ignore the long-term consequences for growth.

The approach of Conservative Front Benchers is to promise £8 billion of tax cuts, based essentially on the reduction of waste and bureaucracy in government. They rightly intend to focus much of that benefit on cutting taxes on savings. The Government have rubbished that strategy, but I am not too worried by attacks from Treasury Ministers who cannot manage their own spending to within £5 billion and cannot forecast their surpluses to within £20 billion. Indeed, Treasury forecasting is so far off that I am beginning to believe that it is a deliberate attempt to persuade the world that tax cuts are not possible.

In reviewing Conservative policy, I considered the possibility of cutting waste and bureaucracy. The best study that I could find was by Mr. Tim Ambler, a senior research fellow at the London business school. It is due to be published later this year and draws on experience in Britain, New Zealand and elsewhere. It estimates that £30 billion a year could be saved. Although I do not accept all Mr. Ambler's arguments, I certainly believe that it is possible to achieve savings of £20 billion with no

adverse effects on public services and front-line spending. Indeed, it is possible to achieve that while improving public services.

Mr. Geraint Davies: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way twice. He has painted a picture of a Labour strategy of excessive spending and taxation, but the statistics show that although we are spending more on health, education, crime prevention and so on, we are spending less on failure—on unemployment and debt. As a share of total GDP, total Government spend is marginally down because we do not have to service the same debt as the Conservatives. Tax and borrowing as a share of GDP is also down. All aspects of policy are good, even according to the right hon. Gentleman's terms.

Mr. Davis: The hon. Gentleman assumes that the effects of the upturn of the economic cycle will always be available to the Government. Incidentally, he assumes that the effects of 20 years of Conservative reforms will always be available to a Government who follow a social democratic programme. That is not plausible. We are not just interested in the waste—as he rightly calls it—of people on unemployment benefit; we are also concerned about the waste in government.

I did not intend to mention this, but as the hon. Gentleman has raised it and as he is a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I should explain that the Treasury assesses that the PAC has saved £1.5 billion a year so far. Is he really saying that that cannot be multiplied 10 times over by a Government who are determined to do their job properly, because it certainly can? He should accept that before he makes any more fatuous comments.

In conclusion, there is great scope for increasing savings beyond the £8 billion proposed by Conservative Front Benchers. It might be possible to double that in the following year. In addition, the Government's shortfall in spending appears to be systemic at about £5 billion a year—sometimes a little more, sometimes a little less. The result is that we are systematically paying £5 billion a year too much tax. In addition, we have the obsession with debt that I described earlier. It is not at all implausible that an incoming Conservative Government could, in their third year, consider tax cuts of some £20 billion, which would go some way to restoring the situation that existed when this Government came to power.

The simple fact is that the strategy that the Government have followed will not, in the long term, deliver economic success for this country. The Prime Minister likes to talk about preferring "what works". What works is freedom, as Conservative Governments have demonstrated over the years. We need freedom from excessive regulation, excessive taxation and excessive Government meddling. It is clear that the Government have not understood that message. I trust that the next Conservative Government will understand it and apply it with vigour.

8.30 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): I apologise for being absent for a couple of hours of the debate while I attended a Select Committee meeting and polished off a couple of related reports.

I pay my respects to the right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), who has just left his place. He and I come from the same part of Scotland. He became a magician and I kicked a football about. I have retained my accent, but he has slightly lost his—I do not know why. Our politics diverged very early in life and are very different now, but I pay credit to his hard work for his constituents, the county, his party and, indeed, his country. I look forward to working with his successor, who will undoubtedly—and, I hope, soon—be a Labour MP. The right hon. Gentleman and I will no doubt meet again on the A11 dual carriageway, which the Government have now allowed to be developed. He will be glad that we finished the work that he started, although I note that it took a Labour Government to finish it off.

I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I want to concentrate on the growing confidence in Norfolk, especially in education, although it is reflected in other sectors. Norfolk county council is taking up Government initiatives. I pay tribute to the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats, who have worked hard together to implement those initiatives, shown great entrepreneurial spirit and kept in touch with reality. I pay tribute also to Norfolk's outstanding director of education, Dr. Bryan Slater.

Norfolk local education authority is responding to the Government's agenda of high standards for all and dealing with the legacy of the laissez-faire, market forces approach of the Conservatives nationally and locally, which has directly led to under-performance in far too many schools and low standards for far too many children. Norfolk now has a rapidly improving standard across the board, and at key stage 2 the improvement in our pupils' performance over the past three years has been the highest of any of the shire counties.

Norfolk is achieving that by challenging and supporting its schools in the way expected by the Secretary of State, and by making the best possible use of increased Government funding and education initiatives. The extra funding for schools announced in the Budget will therefore be put to good use in Norfolk. It will add to the pump-priming money that Norfolk will receive as part of its capital service agreement with the Government, which it signed recently. Norfolk will deliver even better performances in its schools in return for up to £4 billion of extra funding, and will do so by using the new flexibilities provided by the Department for Education and Employment.

Norwich, part of which I represent, is the heart of the county. Over the years, it has had education problems, but six schools, including two high schools that were in special measures, have been restored to health in the past three years. Norwich still has problems with fast economic growth and with the increase in the number of pupils. That has created a difficulty for the LEA in finding school places.

The problem stems from planning consents given by Conservative-controlled district councils that do not require developers to contribute to what can often be small towns on the edge of conurbations. In my constituency there are two growth areas with many new houses, but no schools were built, which has created problems. It would make sense if, in the next Parliament, regulations were introduced to make developers' contributions to infrastructure a mandatory element of planning consent. I believe that the Secretary of State has some sympathy with that view.

[Dr. Ian Gibson]

It is opportune to congratulate the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State on the forward-looking initiatives announced in the recent Green Paper on education, "Schools: Building on Success". Much of the media attention has focused on the proposal significantly to increase the number of specialist schools. Norfolk has already embraced the idea of specialist schools and 10 have been set up in the past two years. Ten more are in the pipeline, and expansion of the specialist schools programme will be music to their ears.

The specialist schools in Norfolk's network are working together to improve standards for all children in all schools. I hope that the Secretary of State will accept the ultimate logic that all secondary schools should develop a specialism, that those that might find it difficult to raise sponsorship funding should be given the financial help that they need, and that particular attention should be paid to the difficulties of schools in less-advantaged areas as well as those in sparsely populated rural areas where there is no large employer to call on as a sponsor. It would be a tragedy if a two-tier secondary school system were to result from the specialist schools programme. Experience in Norfolk to date shows that there is no reason why that should happen. I shall return to that point in a few minutes.

There are a number of other positive features to the Green Paper proposals. This country has lagged disastrously behind other developed countries for many years in its failure to develop a system of secondary schooling in which academic and vocational education are of equal worth. Of critical importance to providing appropriate provision for all individual learners is the development of a system in which individualised pathways, involving a mixture of academic, vocational and work-related activities, can be provided. The Green Paper proposals offer the first real hope for the development and implementation of such an approach in our schools since the abandonment of the technical and vocational education initiative in the early 1990s.

Equally, if used sensitively and in the interests of the individual learner, proposals to enable individual young people to progress at different rates will provide a further means of ensuring that not only the content but the pace of learning is more likely to be appropriate and therefore to continue to engage the individual learner in learning. Those two developments underline the importance of developing through the new Connexions service, comprehensive and effective guidance for young people as they progress through the secondary education system.

Equally welcome are the clear statements about the role of local education authorities—reformed education authorities, in the language of the Green Paper—in future. All the signs are that local authorities have recognised and acted on their duties to raise standards.

The Green Paper also makes strong statements about the need to ensure collaboration and mutual development across schools. The stated intention of the welcome proposal for expansion of the specialist schools programme—both in the number of schools and the range of specialism—is to drive collaboration and not competition. That feature of the Green Paper has attracted the most comment and criticism since its publication.

Many have argued that the need for schools to attract external sponsorship in order to make a bid for specialist status will result in a two-tier system of secondary schooling, in which schools in more affluent areas are able to achieve specialist status, while others are not. That point is worthy of some examination in the Norfolk context.

Norfolk has rapidly developed a network of specialist schools: six technology schools, two sports colleges, one arts school and one language school. It has done so exactly in the spirit of the Green Paper, by developing a geographical spread and a range of specialism with the explicit expectation that schools will share the developing expertise across the secondary sector. That approach has been adopted as an intentional counter to the clearly emerging two-tier perception of secondary schooling in parts of the county—most notably the urban areas. The accumulated effect over a number of years of previous legislation and its interaction with local circumstances has come dangerously close to producing sink schools in some areas. Happily, things have moved on, and none of the worst-affected schools are any longer subject to special measures.

That pattern can be properly reversed only over a period of time, with schools and the LEA working together in the shared belief that all schools can be good schools. We must remember that it is the education of every child that counts. I passionately hold to the view that it is not necessary to have endemically weak schools in order that the majority of children can receive a good education.

The opportunity further to expand the specialist school system in Norfolk in a collaborative framework is therefore welcome news. However, it is slightly galling that it comes only weeks after the Department for Education and Employment wrote to tell Norfolk that it was nearing its ceiling for the number of specialist schools that it could have. That position has been reversed, and that will come as great encouragement to the 10 schools that are bidding to join the existing 10 specialist schools, and to the entire secondary sector.

Mr. Willis: How does the hon. Gentleman square what he has just said with that fact—it is also in the Green Paper—that only four out of 10 schools in Norfolk will be allowed to be specialist schools under the new framework? All those schools can opt to select 10 per cent. of their students. Surely the art of selection will undermine the sentiments that the hon. Gentleman is so admirably presenting to the House.

Dr. Gibson: The way round the problem, as Norfolk education authority sees it, is to take forward the spirit that head teachers throughout the county have adopted for years. They have not split away and formed grant-maintained schools. Instead, they have worked together. They are determined to show that a specialism in one school does not mean that it is higher up a hierarchy than another school. That is the spirit of partnership that drives education forward. It is all right having a valuable sector in a school, but that does not reflect on the other sectors. Instead, it encourages them. I have worked in education establishments where there has been one really classy department. That stimulates other departments to think that they, too, can be classy. If we create that spirit, it will drive education forward. It is a scene that we have not experienced for many years.

It would have been even more welcome if the Green Paper had fully grasped the nettle and had given the green light for all secondary schools, over a period, to develop their own specialism within a collaborative network. Perhaps Norfolk should itself work towards such a position in partnership with secondary schools in the county. I know that the people that I have mentioned—the head of the education committee and the director—have that in mind and will be reflecting that position over the years, given the increased money that the Government have given them.

It is important to recognise that Norfolk will need to continue to ensure that an appropriate balance is maintained between so-called competition and collaborative approaches as the specialist school programme develops. There is no magic blueprint. I think that a spirit of co-operation and a determination to drive standards forward will overcome many of the problems that we could perceive in perhaps a more intellectual environment.

A further tension lies within the Green Paper. Teachers will find it difficult to reconcile statements about greater freedom for schools with highly prescriptive statements about the organisation of schools and curriculum delivery elsewhere in the Green Paper. Were local education authorities to adopt some of the stances set out in the Green Paper, such as those in relation to the use of setting or curriculum delivery, it would be regarded by schools and Government alike as old-fashioned interventionism. The Green Paper therefore offers an insight into the Department for Education and Employment mindset. Much room remains for development of the trust that could enable the appropriate exercise of professional judgment at all levels within the education system, based on commonly held principles that are developed in partnership with Government, local government and schools. That should be not only allowed but encouraged.

Without doubt, the Green Paper envisages a period of rapid development in coming years in the secondary sector. It proposes a significant expansion of the specialist schools programme. It welcomes more faith-based schools and the continuing establishment of city academies, and proposes changing the law to allow external sponsors to take responsibility for under-performing schools against fixed-term contracts of five to seven years, with renewal subject to performance.

The drivers for change in the secondary sector have been apparent for some time. Put simply, changes are encroaching on secondary schools from both directions. Sustained and significant improvement in attainment at the end of primary schooling means that secondary schools must be much more able to provide continuity of experience for all children, as well as meeting the higher potential that is now being demonstrated for many.

A separate paper on the agenda considers the Government's proposals for reform of key stage 3 of the national curriculum. At the same time, key stage 4 is facing massive change. The Government's post-16 reforms are designed to ensure that in future the vast majority of young people, if not all, stay in some form of education after the age of 16. In order to achieve that, changes and reforms in key stage 4 will be vital to provide a wider variety of experience than at present. The long-overdue establishment of vocational GCSEs and workplace learning in key stage 4 will need to become realities within a short time.

There is much more in the Green Paper, but the vision set out in it will bring about improved performance, which is already being seen in secondary schools in Norfolk and across the country, and even higher standards and greater equality of opportunity. The Budget initiatives and investments being made in schools will add to that vision, and lead our people on to higher education and a more fulfilling life.

8.45 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson). He has added to the scientific understanding of the House since he entered it, and I shall follow him primarily in speaking about an educational subject, though I hope that I shall be closer to the Budget and perhaps less close to the Green Paper. A year or so ago in the Chamber, I declared interests in higher education. I apologised for their egocentricity. They are in the Register of Members' Interests, and I do not propose to be egocentric again.

The febrile attitude in the popular prints suggests that an election is on the way. In that context, I take the liberty of quoting a famous passage from the Venerable Bede:

"Such, O King, seems to me the present life of men on earth, in comparison with that time which to us is uncertain, as if when a winter's night you sit feasting with your ealdormen and thegns—

I am addressing you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

"a single sparrow should fly swiftly into the hall, and coming in at one door, instantly fly out through another. In that time in which it is indoors it is indeed not touched by the fury of the winter, but yet this smallest space of calmness being passed almost in a flash, from winter going into winter again, it is lost to your eyes. Somewhat like this appears the life of man".

In that quotation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you, of course, are the king, the Clerks at the Table are the ealdormen, and the Serjeant at Arms and his staff are the thegns. We, the Members of Parliament, are simply the sparrows who fly through the Chamber from one door to the other.

I made my maiden speech on the Monday night of the Budget debate in 1977 and, like various of my right hon. Friends and my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Sir D. Madel), I am making what may be my final speech in the Chamber on the Monday night of the Budget debate in 2001. Those 24 years are exactly what the Venerable Bede had in mind in the quotation that I have just given.

As the poet said,

"The Ancient of Days is an hour or two old".

Twenty-four years is a bagatelle in a rural seat. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), who is also leaving the House, says that there have been five Members in East Devon in the past 130 years. Inner-city seats are a little different. Because of that, 24 years gives me the bronze medal in the City of London, which for most of the period since 1283 has had six Members of Parliament, and it gives me fourth place in Westminster, which has had two Members of Parliament since 1544 and Members of Parliament representing the same area since 1295. As fourth place gets one money in the grand national, I think that those are two reasonable places in the two seats.

I do not propose to spend what may be my final speech in the Chamber wandering down memory lane, save to make one confession and, from it, a single point. A year

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

or so ago, as I mentioned earlier, I indicated the intention to pursue in the House the issue of higher education in the latter part of this Parliament. That that was a reasonable intention is evidenced by the fact that in the Palace this very evening a meeting has been debating the future of higher education. That I have been prevented from doing so over the past months has been because my constituency office has become an outstation for the Home Office, to compensate for the latter's taciturnity and reticence towards my asylum-seeker constituents. Every Monday morning, I tidy up the asylum-seeker backlog from the previous week and, by Monday afternoon, the asylum-seeker constituency mail for Monday and the previous weekend has refilled the tray that I emptied in the morning. Although the correspondents have no votes, I do not begrudge the time I spend repairing the country's honour towards asylum seekers. Like all Tories, I recognise that, sadly, we live in an imperfect world.

My confession, as my prolegomenon may have made clear, relates to our universities, which have been a continuing interest of mine throughout my 24 years in the House. I spoke sympathetically about university pay in the Chamber in 1978 and thought it careless of the Association of University Teachers never to quote it against me when I was the higher education Minister five years later. My confession relates to that period. My Secretary of State was the late great Sir Keith Joseph, who was as sceptical about public expenditure—I use the old-fashioned term—as he was enthusiastic about freedom. My noble Friend Lord Lawson of Blaby, under whom I later served at the Treasury, was awash with oil revenues in the same way as the Chancellor is with mobile phone licence revenues. The universities, on the other hand, were imprisoned in a straitjacket of state planning. That meant that, in 1983, if a university sold an asset, it had to return the proceeds to the Treasury—a spectacular disincentive to entrepreneurialism, which we happily soon corrected, even if in two stages. It also meant that, even when we framed the rules on overseas student fees in sufficiently flexible language to encourage entrepreneurialism at all academic levels, universities tempted to try it feared that the University Grants Committee would penalise them. Thus Gulliver was held down by tiny but restrictive ropes.

My regret is that I did not even attempt to persuade the late great Sir Keith—who played a large and honourable part in changing the intellectual playing fields of British politics, on to which new Labour was finally obliged to follow us—to seek to persuade Lord Lawson to set free what were our then 45 universities with the encouragement of endowment if they were ready to be cast loose. Of course, I would not have insisted on their being cast loose. In the words of C.S. Lewis, if one hears of someone going round doing good to others,

"you can always tell the others by their hunted look."

However, for those to whom freedom is important, there is no substitute for it. I seek to make amends for my juvenile silence in the mid-1980s by nailing my colours to the mast of freedom now that I have entered the final third of my first century, and as I leave this place.

The Chancellor has chosen to put the proceeds of the mobile phone licences towards repaying the national debt. I am aware of the attraction of that repayment for the Chancellor's place in history. Because I go back to prehistory—that heady mixture of Rider Haggard's "She" and Sir Leonard Woolley's "Ur of the Chaldees"—I recall the level of the national debt in 1979. I did so during the lengthy speech of the hon. Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis), who made me recall an observation about Margot Asquith in the first world war. After she had visited the wounded in hospital, someone said of her:

"Margot is so marvellous . . . She can make the deaf hear and the blind to see, and she would cause the dumb to speak if they could only get a word in edgeways."

I recall the level of the national debt in 1979, so I recognise why Government's base date for the national debt in this Parliament has always been 1990, rather than 1979, especially as international commentators warmly commended the previous Government's handling of the national debt during our full 18 years in government. Of course, the fact that the Chancellor has used the proceeds of licence fees for debt repayment, rather than true investment in our higher education by endowment, does not prevent the next Conservative Government from borrowing to set our universities free, without offending against the Chancellor's golden rule.

I pay the Chancellor tribute for championing genuine investment for 15 years, as against new Labour speak for revenue expenditure, unknown in the late Sir John Hicks's classic book on the national accounts. The Chancellor has championed genuine investment in training and higher education, for which I admire him all the more. Endowing universities would provide real investment, under whichever Government, and would set universities and the Chancellor free from the Laura Spence syndrome.

Under a planned system, an Oxford college—I declare an interest as a former undergraduate—is free to allocate places only in limited numbers and in particular subjects, determined by the system. Under a free system, Harvard—I declare an interest as a former postgraduate student there—is free to offer Laura Spence a scholarship, albeit in a different subject to the one that she sought to study at Oxford, because of the endowment funds that it has accumulated for that purpose.

I acknowledge the amount that the Government have put into higher education in the current year, and I do so unreservedly. I am happy that they have done so, but theirs is not the same aim as the one that I am espousing. When I was in the private sector, I gave up a day a year to sit at the feet of the futurologist Herman Kahn. One year, in the mid-1970s, he said that the United Kingdom's opportunities in post-industrial society would be in its three special centres of excellence: medicine, higher education and government. My ambition potentially embraces not just one of those centres of excellence, but even one and a half.

When I was at the Treasury, we held the view that anything that could not be measured did not exist. That view was put to the test some years ago by the Foreign Office, which we all know and love. There was concern in the British embassy in Brussels that the doorway between the main spare bathroom and the main spare bedroom in the embassy would be insufficiently large to encompass the then Foreign Secretary, Mr. Ernest Bevin, who was, I acknowledge, a large man. A telegram was sent from Brussels to London, which stated:

"Please verify diameter of Secretary of State."

A telegram came back from London, which demonstrated that those in the Foreign Office—for those of us who know and love it—are possibly more literate than numerate. It stated:

"Unable verify diameter, but circumference is 60 inches."

Beyond measurement—and, therefore, infinite—is the potential of our universities, which respond to the spirit of the British genius. I hope that, as I leave this place, in this new century, our 90 British universities will blossom in the way they truly deserve to do.

8.57 pm

Mrs. Betty Williams (Conwy): Like those of several other Labour Members, my constituency has many attractions and advantages, but wealth is not one of them. The Budget is welcome news to my constituents. Also like many other Labour Members, I am looking forward to the results of the Chancellor's sound management of the economy further benefiting the economic and social fabric of our nation. The Chancellor's prudent management has placed the Exchequer in a position to respond to unexpected problems in ways that are not possible when a Government spend, day by day, to the limit of their resources.

The foot and mouth epidemic is such an unexpected problem, and is having a serious effect on the economy in my constituency. The news last week that it may continue for a long time was a blow to the many who, although affected by the epidemic, can do little or nothing to bring it to an end. I pay tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for acting so incisively and for reporting to the House so well. I also pay tribute to the National Assembly for Wales, not only for the personal commitment of its Minister for Rural Affairs, Mr. Carwyn Jones, but for the excellent foot and mouth disease information service that it has provided on the website, at www.wales.gov.uk. The Assembly has gathered information from several sources and the website is a great help in the Principality.

Compensation is available to farmers whose livestock is slaughtered, and I understand that other assistance may be available through the European Union under the EU agrimonetary compensation scheme. I am sure that that will be well received. However, the foot and mouth epidemic is having a much wider effect in my constituency. In Conwy, the landscape and the seashore are our livelihood in many ways, and the epidemic is having serious repercussions. Incomes are suffering and jobs are threatened in tourism, hotels, catering, countryside pursuits—including those of climbing instructors and mountain guides—shops and the haulage industry, to name but a few examples.

To seek some measure of the likely extent of the problem, I briefly examined "Digest of Welsh Local Area Statistics 2001". For an accurate assessment, I would need the services of a statistician, which most certainly I am not. My constituency contains parts of Conwy and Gwynedd and it is probable that the agriculture and tourism-related industries provide respectively 2,500 and 10,500 jobs in those counties. A substantial proportion of those 10,500 jobs may be under threat at present and the incomes of some of my constituents who are not involved in agriculture have already been reduced to nothing by the epidemic.

I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Wales are aware of my concerns. That, and the fact that they and their colleagues are examining the consequences of the outbreak, was made clear in their answers to my questions on 8 March at columns 426 and 427, and on 7 March at column 277. I am grateful for that and for the agreement of my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary to meet my constituents on Wednesday.

The policy of slaughtering all affected animals is of long standing and I accept that it may be one of economic necessity. If so, we must give more serious and detailed consideration to the wider economic effects on constituencies such as Conwy. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor's stewardship has brought our economy to a state of unprecedented security, so I hope that a way may be found to assist my constituency and others where the epidemic is having a disproportionate effect on the local economy.

The Labour Government have brought many benefits to my constituents and to the nation, but they have done much more. International development and the relief of world poverty are examples. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development visited my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd, West (Mr. Thomas). During her hectic day, I was delighted to introduce her to the university of Wales, Bangor. In particular, the work of the school of agricultural and forest sciences and the centre for arid zone studies was demonstrated and explained by staff, including the work being carried out under the Department for International Development plant science programme. My right hon. Friend's work on tackling world poverty, in which she co-operates with the Chancellor, is much appreciated by my constituents and I am proud that the university of Wales, Bangor, is playing its part in that mammoth task.

Sadly, towards the end of my right hon. Friend's visit, she was attacked by persons who are neither students of our university nor residents of my constituency. I feel that the House would wish to know that I have been sent many messages from my constituents expressing outrage at the treatment that my right hon. Friend received. I quote from a letter from Penrallt Baptist church, Bangor:

"Our own Baptist forefathers fought hard and with great sacrifice on the side of free speech and democracy and we share the dismay you must feel. Although our church hosts a variety of different political viewpoints we are all united in our support for you in this matter and assure you of our prayers on your behalf."

To add to that moving message and the others that I have received, I wish to extend to the House my own sincere regrets and apologies.

9.4 pm

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): I declare the interests recorded in the Register of Members' Interests.

First, I shall discuss the Budget framework. The Chancellor appears to have delivered a healthy Budget surplus, but we need to look behind that. Yet again, he has substantially undershot on the revenue side. Yet again, he has substantially undershot on departmental spending. He goes on about long-term stability and consistency, but he is consistent about one thing: he keeps undershooting his own underestimates.

Secondly, it is by now obvious to almost everyone that the golden rules that the Chancellor claims to have met so comfortably are not quite as golden as all that. This is fool's gold, or at the very least gold plate. One must ask

[Mr. Michael Fallon]

oneself, certainly after this year's outcome, whether these golden rules mean anything and whether they are any guide to the Chancellor's performance, so easily does he skip past them. Thirdly, as previous speakers have emphasised, the Chancellor has enjoyed the one-off proceeds of the mobile phone auction—some £22 billion to add to the revenue side.

The plain fact is that behind this year's healthy Government surplus, as defined by the Chancellor, spending goes on rising faster than the economy is growing. Even on his own forecast, he plans to borrow again in just two years' time. In the financial year beginning April 2003 he will borrow £10 billion, then £11 billion and £12 billion. That assumes continuous growth. If growth should slow or stop, all those figures will look suspect.

That must be why the Commission, in its assessment for the Council of Ministers, and the International Monetary Fund have warned of the consequences of the Chancellor's future tax and spending plans. The IMF warned of

"negative consequences for investment and growth."

When I asked the Chancellor about that last Thursday, one of his junior Ministers said that I was misrepresenting the report. The IMF and the Commission warned that the Chancellor's tax and spending plans over the next three years may not be sustainable if growth turns down. If growth does turn down and he wants to go on increasing spending at the rate that he has been doing, we can be sure that taxes will rise again.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) told us graphically how taxes have already risen. In the last year of the Conservative Government, income tax receipts were some £69 billion, and this year they are £99 billion. I make that an increase of well over 40 per cent. Pension funds are paying £5 billion more in tax on dividends. Capital gains tax receipts have doubled from £1.2 billion to £3 billion. Inheritance tax is up from £1.5 billion to £2.3 billion. As my right hon. Friend said, 2.2 million more people currently pay tax than paid tax three years ago, and there has been a 30 per cent. increase in the number of people paying the higher tax rate. It would have been inconceivable before the war and in the period just after the war for so many people doing straightforward jobs to be classified as higher-rate taxpayers. Police sergeants in London, heads of department in schools and senior nursing officers are now classed as higher-rate taxpayers.

The result of all that is that total revenues—income tax, VAT, capital gains tax, inheritance tax and excise duties—are up by a third in three years to more than £250 billion. The tables in the Red Book finally and clearly reveal what the Chancellor has consistently tried to avoid disclosing in the past few years, which is that the tax burden is up from 35.2 per cent. of gross domestic product to 38.2 per cent.

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): Is my hon. Friend aware that Credit Suisse First Boston has calculated that, after tax and inflation, average household disposable income under the Government has risen by 1.6 per cent. compared with 2.5 per cent. under the previous Conservative Administration, and 2.9 per cent. between 1979 and 1990?

Mr. Fallon: The House will be grateful to my hon. Friend for putting that point on the record so clearly. We hope to hear more from him later this evening, or in tomorrow's debate if he catches your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The facts on tax are now coming out. For so long the Chancellor and his colleagues first tried to deny that the tax burden was rising at all, then they claimed that it had risen but was planned to fall. Now, on the record in their own tables in the Red Book, we see that the tax burden has risen for the first three years. Whatever their plans are, we can be clear about what has actually happened: the tax burden has gone up. We are therefore entitled to ask where the money has gone and why it is not getting through.

It is interesting that today's debate, inaugurated by the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, has concentrated on teacher shortages and the difficulty of recruiting teachers. Given the billions of extra revenue and the billions that the Government have boasted of giving to the education service, why have they failed to get enough teachers into our schools?

When I visited Swanley school in my constituency on Thursday morning, the head teacher had to excuse herself from our discussion. She had to go and teach English—not a shortage subject—because the school was unable to recruit enough English teachers. Why is there a shortage of hospital staff, despite all the tax revenue and all the billions that have been allocated? Why is the money not getting through to front-line services?

The money is clearly not getting through. As is plain from last year's Budget, the pre-Budget report and the Budget last week, the Chancellor keeps topping up a settlement that he said was comprehensive and fixed for three years. Departments, he said in 1998, should not come back for more: the settlement would allow them to plan for the next three years. But in each successive year—in each successive mini-Budget and Budget—the Chancellor has to top it up to try to ensure that the money gets through. Now he is saying that he will give money directly to schools each year—money that is clearly not getting through under the existing system.

Mr. Ruffley: I wonder whether my hon. Friend's experience in his Sevenoaks constituency is similar to mine in Bury St. Edmunds, where police numbers have fallen, there are waiting lists for the waiting lists at local hospitals—longer than they were in 1997—and secondary-school class sizes are larger as a result of the gerrymandering at the bottom end in primary-school class sizes.

Mr. Fallon: That is an excellent example of the way in which Government targets, schemes and policies have distorted allocations. Two things are happening. First, money is not getting through to the front line—to the area police commanders, the NHS trust chief executives and the head teachers. Secondly, when it does get through it is distorted by centrally fixed priorities that dictate to the people running local services how those services should be run from the point of view of Whitehall. Our hospitals

and schools are ending up as branch offices of the great Departments of State in Whitehall, doing the Secretary of State's bidding.

Something is wrong with the way in which the Government have been allocating their spending. That is proved by the fact that they keep coming back to announce further allocations in some desperate bid to get the money through before people notice at the general election.

So much for the framework; let me now turn to some of the specific decisions in the Budget. Of course, I welcome some of the Chancellor's measures for entrepreneurship. It is certainly refreshing to have a Chancellor who claims to believe in entrepreneurship: that is not something to which we have been accustomed in the case of previous Labour Chancellors. I welcome, for instance, the extension of the enterprise management incentive scheme, the changes in capital gains tax and the help for small businesses. As I hope the Financial Secretary agrees, however, it is important for those moves to be followed up.

On the one hand, the Treasury accepts the case for share ownership in binding employees more closely to their companies and encouraging company loyalty; on the other, it is not prepared to go further and cut the costs of share dealing in this country. If the Government firmly believe in share ownership, they should ask themselves why it is so much more expensive to deal in shares in the United Kingdom than it is elsewhere in Europe or in America.

The Chancellor's proposals on capital gains tax and small businesses raise similar issues. It is no use the Government exempting more small businesses further up the turnover scale from VAT when they are simultaneously piling on to those businesses more of the social red tape and other regulation to which we are becoming accustomed. If Ministers believe in exempting those businesses from VAT, why are they also piling on extra regulation? The Government's entrepreneurship proposals need to be followed through much more consistently if we are to believe that there really has been a conversion in the Treasury to the cause of entrepreneurship.

The Chancellor's decisions can be characterised under four headings. First, there is far too much fiddling about with the provision of small tax credits here and there. The credits are all intended to deal with ostensibly worthwhile causes such as community investment, research and development and persuading people to build flats over shops. However, I warn the Treasury that there are always deadweight costs in introducing such incentives for people who may well have made those decisions regardless. There are certainly bureaucratic costs in processing all those applications and ensuring that they are dealt with. I also doubt whether, ultimately, such incentives change behaviour in the way that the Treasury hopes they will.

My favourite line in the Budget is the announcement that the Government will

"remove VAT on the purchase of adult cycle helmets . . . to encourage people to cycle more".

All I can say to Treasury Ministers is that I doubt that people will suddenly abandon their motor cars—or that the commuters of Sevenoaks will suddenly leave their Mercedes or Volvos at home and cycle down to Sevenoaks station—simply because VAT has been abolished on cycle helmets. That is not how people behave in the real world.

Mr. Ruffley: Does my hon. Friend agree that that is the unacceptable face of the new Labour nanny state?

Mr. Fallon: That is an uncharitable view.

More fully, the sentence states that the Government will

"remove VAT on the purchase of adult cycle helmets . . . to encourage people to cycle more and improve road safety".

The Government are therefore reducing VAT on cycle helmets to improve road safety. I do not quite follow that. Nevertheless, that sentence demonstrates all the overweening ambition and the futility of fiddling about with the tax system and thinking that, on 1 April, because a couple of pounds have come off the price of cycle helmets all the cars will be left at home and millions of people will be happily cycling to work. It really doesn't work like that.

The Chancellor's decisions can be criticised as quite clever packaging—like the "new and improved" formula that one sees in the shops. Not only has the decision on VAT on church repairs already been announced, it has already been blocked. Now, Ministers are trying to find a different way of producing the same money.

We have also already heard about the children's tax credit being increased to £10. The Government were consulting on that proposal and—surprise, surprise—people said that they were in favour of it. That change was reannounced again in the Budget statement. In his clever packaging, there were some measures that the Chancellor did not include. He did not remind us of the increase in national insurance contributions. Although that had been announced before, he did not trouble us by reannouncing it.

On Thursday, the Paymaster General was rather caught out and with some embarrassment had to explain to the House that Ministers had not provided hon. Members with the press notices with which we are usually provided and which explain some of the changes, including the one on the application of VAT to spectacles. Some of the notices were not even included in the Budget bundle. I think that the hon. Lady tried to convince the House that that was standard practice. It certainly has not been standard practice. In the old days, the Budget bundle included all the press notices and hon. Members did not have to ring up the Treasury or plug into the website to try to obtain more information.

My third criticism of the detail of the Budget is that there are, again, costs to business. Right hon. and hon. Members may be surprised to hear that, because the Budget was in general presented as one that cut taxes. However, maternity leave has been increased and paternity pay has been introduced. Even if the cost of those changes does not fall directly on business, it will do so indirectly. Business ultimately funds the changes through increased costs or it has to accommodate itself to the changes. That is particularly true of very small businesses which may have only three or four key people. Nevertheless, the Government tell them that they must provide so many weeks maternity leave and paternity leave. All those changes pile extra costs on business.

My fourth and final criticism is that the Budget perfectly demonstrates just how far the Chancellor has strayed from Treasury matters into all kinds of areas. I do not know whether the Financial Secretary has had time

[Mr. Fallon]

yet to read the Treasury Committee's report on the role of the Treasury, which clearly shows that the Chancellor is involved in almost everything. He is involved in welfare policy—he is running the welfare system. He is involved in family policy. As we have just heard with regard to road safety, he is involved in transport policy. He is involved in education policy, in getting the money directly to the schools, helping to bypass the local education authorities. He is also involved in many other policies. Indeed, the Chief Secretary has become involved in something quite different. According to a Treasury press release, the right hon. Gentleman has announced an award for the most outstanding public building. So the Chancellor is also into architectural policy and has announced a new design award scheme. What does architecture have to do with the Treasury? The Chancellor simply cannot resist meddling in anything and everything—welfare, families, cycling and transport, education and now public architecture.

The bigger issues are neglected. The Treasury has issued another consultative document to puzzle out why our productivity is still slipping behind that of our major competitors and why it seems that the gap between us and the United States cannot be bridged. There are issues at which the Treasury should be looking. For example, why do the Americans pay less tax but seem to work harder, for longer hours, and take fewer holidays? Why do our medium-sized companies find it so difficult to train and retain their work force?

After productivity comes the tax code. It is quite striking that commentator after commentator has gone on about the complexity of the tax code and the need for simplification. It is bad for individuals and complicated for business. Of course, I welcome the rewrite project and the work of those who are attempting tax simplification, but the structure is far too complex. It is time that the Treasury addressed these criticisms and came up with at least a commitment to taking an interest in simplifying the tax code.

In conclusion, this is not a very successful Budget. Taking the past four years as a whole, the Chancellor put up taxes quite massively for two years and then, in the past two years, reduced them slightly. As a result, taxes are much higher, but spending, as I have demonstrated, is no better. It is said that the Budget will benefit those with babies. It will certainly not take in those who were not born yesterday.

9.23 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): This has been an interesting and quite prolonged debate. The opening speeches highlighted the contrast between the parties. My hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) made an incisive, constructive speech which showed her free thinking, in complete contrast with the wooden, inflexible speech of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, who has done so much to induce initiative fatigue in those of us who have to listen to him.

This was a unique day. We heard no fewer than four valedictory speeches from colleagues on the Opposition Benches—unfortunately only one of them is still in the Chamber. The first was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), who drew attention to the Government's and the Chancellor's assault on middle England. He drew attention to the boom in tax raising and the bust in manufacturing.

In truth, the Chancellor has much for which to thank my right hon. Friend, who laid the foundations for the Budget. The tough decisions on which the Chancellor has based his Budget were taken in the Budgets of Lord Lamont and of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rúshcliffe (Mr. Clarke). As my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon looks back at his career, I pay him the compliment of summing it up in this phrase: he made a difference and I pay tribute to him.

The second valedictory speech came from my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), who, as a former Chief Secretary to the Treasury, had his finger on the button. He rightly said that the Budget was patchy, with little bits for everybody, and that the increase in the tax burden was caused by fiscal drag. With his unique knowledge of the pensions industry, he drew attention to the problems with annuities.

The third valedictory speech was made by my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Sir D. Madel), who incisively exposed the flaws in the Budget. He drew particular attention to the mess caused by IR35, giving an example that highlighted that problem.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) pointed out most effectively and clinically how the Budget and its predecessors were eroding Britain's competitive position.

The fourth valedictory speech was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who really is my friend. He and I soldiered through the proceedings of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 together, so I know what a support he can be for those less experienced than him.

My right hon. Friend pointed out that as the Member for the City of London, he would have won a bronze medal and as Member for Westminster he would have taken fourth place. In the affection of Members on the Conservative Benches today, he certainly takes first place. His speeches never fail to illuminate and lift whatever forum he chooses to speak in. To include the Venerable Bede, Margot Asquith and C.S. Lewis in one speech is unique and is unlikely to be heard again.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) also made an incisive speech. He pointed out that in two years, the Government will be borrowing and that the IMF has noted the negative consequences of the Government's present monetary and fiscal stance.

What is most remarkable, however, is that although the Government have 417 seats in the House—a majority greater than the total number of Conservative seats—there were fewer Members on their Benches throughout the day than on the Opposition Benches. That shows how little interest Labour Members have in the serious consequences of the Budget that we are debating.

I shall deal with some of the wilder misrepresentations of Conservative tax and spending policies on education. The Chancellor announced an extra £1 billion for education over the next three years. He has used that technique before. Every year, he seems to produce a new three-year plan of some sort. A future Conservative Government will match that extra expenditure. However, somehow the inference has been made that that affects our projected tax and spend policies.

Before the Budget, the Chancellor had projected that public expenditure would be £442 billion in 2003–04, and we had set out how we intended to spend £8 billion less than that. After the Budget, the Chancellor still proposes to spend £442 billion in 2003–04, which includes the extra funding for education. We still intend to reduce that figure by £8 billion, but as none of that sum touches the education budget, we can match the Government's education proposals without affecting our overall policy.

The mystery, if there is one, is how the Government can spend an extra £1 billion without increasing the spending total. In an excellent speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead showed the manipulation in the figures and seriously brought into question whether an extra £1 billion existed at all. In fact, it looks more like an extra £200 million by 2003–04.

Our education policy would have fundamentally differed from that in the Budget in one way—our plan to endow the universities, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster referred. Before the Budget we had already announced that we would use the surpluses from future privatisations and spectrum sales to endow universities for the future. The universities will then invest the money and fund themselves through the income raised.

In the Budget, the Government propose to repay £32 billion of the national debt from the surpluses that they have accumulated during the past four years. In our judgment, much of that money could be better used to endow the universities, allowing them to receive substantial sums, which they could invest to fund themselves through the income. We will put our great universities on a standing with Stanford, Yale and Harvard, which revel in their independence.

Our policies will free the universities from excessive control and interference, allowing them to forge links with business and harness funding from the private sector without affecting their grant. They will decide the salary structures and how many students to take. That policy will remove the uncertainty about university funding, and it will be fiscally neutral.

That imaginative proposal stands in stark contrast to the Labour party's manifesto commitment in 1997, when it undertook to raise the proportion of national income spent on education. Under the previous Government, the average figure was 5 per cent.; under this Government it is 4.7 per cent.—another broken pledge.

Dr. Gibson: Does the hon. Gentleman understand the difference between a permanent endowment fund and an endowment fund? Could he explain which fund would operate under the Conservative party's policy?

Mr. Ottaway: The fund will be perfectly straightforward; the money will be given as a grant to the universities, thus removing the need for the Government to give them their grant, which is why the policy will be fiscally neutral.

We acknowledge that the Budget's foundations were laid in the 1990s. We acknowledge the current stable, monetary position, the reasonable growth in the economy, low inflation and falling unemployment, but, as many hon. Members have said today, the growth in the economy started in 1993, when unemployment started to fall, as did inflation shortly thereafter. Yet despite the Chancellor's achievement in not messing up the golden legacy that we handed him, the fall in unemployment is slowing down under this Labour Government. Between 1994 and 1997, unemployment fell by 27 per cent.; since 1997, it has fallen by only 24 per cent.

The Labour party said in its 1997 election manifesto that it would get 250,000 under-25-year-olds off benefit and into work, but according to the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, youth employment has risen by only 13,000 in the past two years. So it is clear that the new deal has been an expensive failure and one of the least effective job creation schemes in history. The next Conservative Government will replace the new deal with "Britain works", a scheme modelled on the highly successful "America works". It will save about £400 million of public expenditure and it has a greater likelihood of success.

Despite the relative stability of the economy, what the Chancellor is doing with it is alarming people across the length and breadth of the country. Whatever the Government's protestations and whatever phrase or spin they choose to put on the situation, there is absolutely no argument that the tax burden has risen under this Government. They may talk about a couple of pence off petrol or an increase in the children's tax credit, but the remorseless, indisputable truth is that, in 1997, the tax burden was 35.3 per cent. of gross domestic product and, today, it is 37.7 per cent. Britain is paying more; Labour has taxed by stealth.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): Does my hon. Friend agree that not only did the Government inherit a benign set of circumstances from the previous Government, but they inherited a benign set of world economic circumstances, particularly in north America? North America still has a very much lower tax burden as a percentage of GDP than the Government are currently imposing. Does my hon. Friend agree that, to become competitive in world terms, we still need to have a lower tax burden?

Mr. Ottaway: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I intend to deal with the position of the United States shortly.

Mr. Ivan Lewis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ottaway: No, I am sorry, but time is against me.

The Government have invented 45 stealth taxes on everything from holidays to pensions. If people are married, smoke, drink or drive a car, they feel it in their pockets. The irony is that those taxes are being introduced by, of all things, a Labour Government. They are regressive taxes, hitting those on the lowest incomes and hitting worst of all in the Labour party's heartlands.

With the election imminent, those of us who have been on doorstep know what the public are saying. There is a sense of unease about what the Government have done. Labour voters from 1997 have their doubts and Millbank spin doctors warn us of apathy among the voters. It is not apathy; it is dissatisfaction among the very people whom Labour were voted in to look after.

The Government's tax increases since 1997 add up to £25 billion a year, equal to 10p on income tax. A typical working family is £670 a year worse off under Labour.

[Mr. Ottaway]

However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk pointed out, the cruellest tax of all is the stealth tax on our pension funds. We all know that the price of cigarettes has gone up, but millions are unaware of how their pension fund has been eroded. Unless, one puts in hundreds of pounds extra a year into a pension, one will be much poorer in retirement than planned.

In a cynical step, with the election weeks away, the Chancellor has started to give a fraction of that money back. He has widened the 10p tax band; he is going to give people an extra 69p a week. That, on top of last year's 75p increase to pensioners, illustrates that the Government have lost all sense of relativities. All that they are doing is earning the anger of the British people.

However, while the Chancellor is trumpeting his tax cuts, as in most of his Budgets, reading the small print reveals much more. The rises in national insurance contributions mean that 2.5 million taxpayers will be worse off; the climate change levy will start to clobber business; the increase in company car tax continues the right hon. Gentleman's relentless assault on the motorist; and the aggregates tax will hit the cost of construction.

However, it gets worse. Deep in the small print of the Red Book, it is revealed that the increase in corporation tax this year will be more than £5 billion. The Chancellor may have trumpeted a modest reduction in the headline rate of corporation tax but, since he came into office in 1997, he has not adjusted the threshold at all. Furthermore, he has left IR35 untouched. No wonder business feels unfairly treated.

However, most contemptible is the imposition of VAT on spectacles. It will particularly hit the poor and the elderly. Just what do the Government think they are doing? The elderly in our society are the most vulnerable. That is why we will cut taxes for the over-65s, eliminate tax on savings and substantially increase the age-related allowance, which will take 1 million pensioners out of the tax system altogether.

What a contrast with the fiddly changes to the rules on individual savings accounts and personal equity plans. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) said, those changes illustrate the central features of any of the Chancellor's Budgets—the complexity and dramatic extension of means-testing and the use of tax credits reflect his tinkering, meddling, fiddling, interfering, intruding, prying, snooping and tampering. All that from a Chancellor who, in 1994, told the Labour party conference that he would eliminate means-testing from the benefits system.

To qualify for the tax credits, people must fill in extensive forms, so they do not bother. It comes as no surprise that millions of people who are entitled to receive the children's tax credit probably do not know about that. The Inland Revenue does not know where the children are—it does not keep such records. The anomaly of the children's tax credit remains. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon said, why should two earners who are both on £35,000 a year—a household total of £70,000 a year—receive the children's tax credit when a single earner on £45,000 does not. In last year's Finance Bill, the Minister said that he was looking into the matter. I suggest that he gets another pair of spectacles—if he can afford the VAT.

We recognise the need to maintain spending on schools, but that does not mean that savings cannot be made. A future Conservative Government will take the growth in the economy and increase expenditure on public services while letting people benefit from the reduction in taxes. We are proud to campaign for tax cuts of £8 billion, which the nation can afford and which it wants. That highlights the philosophical divide between the parties. Conservatives believe that people who work hard and make an honest living should be entitled to keep as much of their money as they can and spend it in the way that they wish. We will cut taxes because we believe that people know better how to spend their own money. The Budget fails to recognise that fundamental truism.

The Budget is complacent. Although the Government predict a deficit in two years' time, they plan to increase public spending at an unsustainable level. The world outlook is not that rosy. Japan's economy has stalled and the alarm bells are ringing in the United States of America, but the Chancellor claims to have eliminated boom and bust, as if it were in his gift to do so. If the American economy turns down, the surpluses of which he is so proud will disappear in the mist. The Government will face the stark and unenviable choice of cutting expenditure or increasing taxes. That sounds like boom and bust to me, and they know it.

9.43 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Timms): The fundamentals of our economy are stronger today than they have been for a generation. The centrepiece of our economic strategy—the establishment of a new stability in the economy—was set out before the last election, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury, South (Mr. Lewis) reminded the House. The new macro-economic policy framework, with interest rates decided independently by the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England and the rules of fiscal prudence, was needed to establish a new stability in the economy after decades of instability, compared with the record of our competitors. Having achieved that, we see it as a precious prize indeed. So maintaining it and locking it in for the long term was at the heart of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's objectives last week.

We are enjoying clear benefits from that approach. More people are in work than ever before. The unemployment rate is at its lowest for 25 years. Of particular importance is the dramatic fall in youth unemployment. The number of young people aged 18 to 24 who are unemployed for six months or more—the group targeted by the extremely successful new deal for young people—has fallen by more than 75 per cent. since 1997. Everyone can appreciate the huge benefit to us all of so many young people becoming familiar with the habits and disciplines of having a job, especially when such a large number of them grew up in households in which no one regularly went to work. Opposition Members referred to the evaluation carried out by the Institute for Social and Economic Research. Its conclusion is that the new deal for young people will have cost £150 million a year over this Parliament and will have increased national income by £500 million a year, such is the scale of its success.

Interest rates are low and stable. We have the lowest long-term interest rates for 35 years, and unprecedentedly high rates of business investment—over 14 per cent.

of GDP. Inflation is on target, and has been lower for longer than at any time in the past 30 years. It is the lowest in the European Union. National debt has sharply decreased. The fall in debt charges, which some Conservative Members have questioned in the debate, has alone freed up £7 billion for next year, compared with four years ago. The fall in spending on unemployment benefit has freed up about £4 billion. That is why we can now plan with confidence for substantial increases in investment over the next three years in education, science, transport and health—the priorities on which our future prosperity will depend.

I shall respond to points made in the debate and set out the approach on productivity that we have taken in the Budget. There is still a substantial productivity gap between the UK and our leading competitors. The most recent data suggest that there has recently been significant improvement, with manufacturing productivity up by 4.4 per cent. in the past year, but we still have a long way to go to catch up on past failure, and we are determined that we should do so.

There are five key drivers of productivity growth on which we need to make progress: investment, skills, innovation, enterprise and competition. I shall outline how the Budget addressed each of those. On investment, we want to maximise the contribution of institutional investors to boost productivity. Following an investigation by Paul Myners of Gartmore Investment Managers, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor last week accepted his recommendations, which included making it easier for institutions to participate in venture capital investment. We want it to be worth people's while to move from a secure job in a large firm to a fast-growing start-up, so we are extending the enterprise management incentive, which has been welcomed in the debate. In future, tax-advantaged share options in small firms can be extended to as many employees as the company chooses, up to £3 million in total for all the options. We want a new regional dynamism to boost the economy, so we are introducing new flexibility to how the regional development agencies can use their budgets.

On skills, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced earlier in the debate our measures to improve recruitment and retention of teachers. We also want higher investment in work force training throughout the economy, and we are prepared to consider a tax credit for it. We need businesses and others to take complementary steps in response. Sir Gareth Roberts, the former vice-chancellor at Sheffield university who has just moved to Wolfson college, Oxford, will conduct a study of the supply of highly skilled scientists and engineers, focusing on those skills areas where shortages are most acute.

There is a great interest in sectors facing shortages in recruiting people who are currently out of the work force altogether: young people, lone parents, returners and early retirers. We will develop intensive, sector-based welfare-to-work strategies in skill shortage areas such as retail, construction, financial services and information technology.

Mr. Bercow: The Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), is on the record as saying in a written answer on 11 December:

"The number of people leaving a profession may be taken as an indicator of morale."—[*Official Report*, 11 December 2000; Vol. 359, c. 65W.]

Is not the Financial Secretary therefore able to recognise that there is an obvious link between the massive explosion of circulars, glossy publications and consultation documents that have spewed forth from the DFEE over the past four years on the one hand, and the number of people leaving the teaching profession on the other?

Mr. Timms: The hon. Gentleman, who I know has been present for most of the debate, will have heard several hon. Members recording their constituency experiences of the very high morale in schools throughout the country, which reflects the huge improvement in investment in our schools in recent years. He will have heard also about the substantial increase in the number of people applying for teacher training and about the measures that we will take over the next 18 months before those people go into employment in schools.

As the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) said in his winding-up speech, the debate has been marked by—possibly—the last speeches of three distinguished former Conservative Cabinet Ministers, all of them, as it happens, former Treasury Ministers, and by that of a very distinguished Conservative Back Bencher as well. I want to run through the points made by all who spoke and say something about their remarks.

In a thoughtful and commendably succinct speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, East (Ms Prentice) drew attention to and welcomed in particular, among other features of the Budget, the special grant for museums, to repay their VAT and to help them offer free admission, which we very much welcome.

The right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), in a dignified speech which he said might well be his last in the House of Commons, spoke with great feeling of the privilege of being a Member of the mother of Parliaments. He described my right hon. Friend as "this most prudent of Chancellors", paying him a number of compliments as well as levelling some criticism. The right hon. Gentleman commented on tax as a proportion of gross domestic product. It is worth making the point that it is less than it would have been on the previous Government's projections when the right hon. Gentleman was Prime Minister.

As the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) rightly said, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon struck a very different tone from the current leader of the Conservative party in Harrogate. The right hon. Gentleman explained that he would be unable to be present for the close of the debate, but he will take with him when he leaves the House the good wishes of all hon. Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry, South (Mr. Cunningham) raised his interest in further education. The Minister responsible, the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks), was on the Government Front Bench when he spoke and heard his remarks with particular interest. My hon. Friend also welcomed the support for research and development announced in the Budget, and the consultation on the new tax credit for large firms. That will be of particular interest to firms such as Rolls-Royce in his area.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough supported moves in the Budget to reduce child poverty and made a number of points about education. My hon.

[Mr. Timms]

Friend the Member for Bury, South was right to point out, however, that representatives of the Liberal Democrat party have a tendency to make endless demands without ever telling us how they would pay for them. My hon. Friend also made an important point supporting the new partnerships encouraged and gathered by regional development agencies.

The right hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr. MacGregor), another former Conservative Chief Secretary to the Treasury, in what he said would be his last speech in a Budget debate, paid some slightly back-handed compliments to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's stewardship of the economy. He said that the fuel escalator was abolished in response to the fuel protests in September. Of course, that was not so. The abolition of the fuel escalator was announced in the pre-Budget report in 1999, well before those protests.

My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet (Mr. Burgon) was one of those who passed on to the House the welcome of head teachers in his constituency for the additional sums that are being provided directly to their schools following the announcements last week. That is one of the factors that has improved morale in schools up and down the country.

The hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Sir D. Madel), in what I think he said would be his last speech after 31 years in the House—he is the longest-serving of those who spoke in this debate before retirement—said that, although he welcomed the research and development tax credit for large firms, he was concerned about small and medium-sized enterprises. I can tell him that we introduced in last year's Budget precisely what he wanted—a tax credit for small and medium-sized enterprises which has been widely welcomed and in place for the past year. He also asked about support for the cost of child care at home. I refer him to paragraph 4.17 in the Red Book, where that point is directly picked up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, Central (Mr. Davies), in a highly economical, perceptive and well-informed speech, said that the key to the Government's success was the 1.1 million extra jobs that have been created. He made the telling point that the proportion of tax as a percentage of gross domestic product needs to be considered alongside the unsustainable borrowing that was taking place in 1997.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson) showed his strong commitment to improving education in Norfolk. He welcomed the impact of the Green Paper. My hon. Friend the Member for Conwy (Mrs. Williams) spoke effectively of the repercussions of foot and mouth disease through the local economy in the area she represents, and welcomed the work of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development.

I regret that I do not have time to comment on some other interesting speeches, including that made by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis). There was also the—possibly—retirement speech of the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), another former distinguished Treasury Minister.

The greater prosperity that we are working for and taking forward in the Budget depends on public investment. We could not seriously aim for greater prosperity if we continued in the old way of under-investing in our schools. We could not seriously aim for greater prosperity if we carried on in the old way and failed to invest in science. We could not do so if we carried on in the old way and failed to invest in transport. Investment, and public investment, are the essential prerequisites for prosperity in a modern economy.

What do the Tories offer us? They long to make cuts, but they know that the country has had enough of under-investment and crumbling services. They long to wield the axe, but they know that only a minority would support them. Instead of a frank commitment to cuts in services, we have an extraordinary list of fudges, exaggerations and naiveties, to which the hon. Member for Croydon, South referred, and which they claim would amount to £8 billion in savings.

Let us be charitable and pretend that £8 billion in two years would be enough to make the Conservatives' Budget arithmetic add up. It would not, of course, but let that pass. Let us consider the list on its own terms. Even on the most charitable interpretation, the list crumbles into dust when it is exposed even to cursory examination. It simply does not stack up.

It is well known, for example, that there are no regional assemblies in England, yet the Tory list claims that £205 million will be saved by abolishing them. They are not there to abolish. We have been told this evening that the Conservatives would use the £34 billion debt repayment this year—it has already been made, but presumably they would borrow it again—to establish an endowment for universities. That opens up an additional hole of £2 billion that needs to be plugged by other measures that have not been specified. At point after point, the entries on the list cannot sustain even more than the most cursory scrutiny.

I am particularly interested by the claim that housing benefit reorganisation would yield nearly £450 million in savings. The Conservative party has experience of housing benefit reorganisation. The Conservative Government reorganised it twice in the 1980s, and made a hash of it on both occasions. The figure that the Conservatives have come up with is completely fictitious. They count savings from taking away housing benefit from some local authorities, but forget to add in the extra costs that the Benefits Agency would incur in taking on the additional work. It is all like that.

It is a curious fact that in the 1985 public spending White Paper, the Tories spelled out how much they thought they would save by housing benefit reorganisation. Yes, the sum was £450 million, but the saving never materialised. It was groundless then, and it is completely bogus now. As I have said, the numbers do not stack up.

Our numbers do stack up. We said before the election that stability was the key to success in managing the economy, and stability is what we have delivered. It presents us with our best economic opportunity in a generation, and all of us should wish to seize it.

It is being recognised increasingly that the United Kingdom is an attractive place for setting up a business. A few weeks ago, Arthur Andersen and Growthplus released their first annual pan-European benchmarking study on—

It being Ten o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Business of the House

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Motion relating to the Criminal Justice and Police Bill may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

The House divided: Ayes 266, Noes 134.

Division No. 143] **[10 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Rt Hon Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Perham, Ms Linda
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Ian Pearson and
Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Flight, Howard
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. Gerald Howarth.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Criminal Justice and Police Bill

10.15 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Before we debate the Leader of the House's motion on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, will you tell the House whether there is any precedent for the Government moving a motion that consideration in Committee of any Bill be deemed to be completed when it clearly has not? The point is simple. There will be arguments later about what happened, but it seems to me to be wrong for Parliament ever to cut any part of proceedings on a Bill and not to return to the stage at which proceedings were disrupted. Will you rule on whether it is out of order for the Government to seek to cut a whole stage of the parliamentary process on the Bill?

Mr. Speaker: There is no precedent, but we have a motion covering that matter before us. Therefore, it is not for me to say that the Government are out of order.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): That is up to the Lobby fodder over there.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Government are in proper order; if it were otherwise, I would say so.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Would you please advise the House whether it would be possible for the Government to table a motion recommitting the Bill to the Committee and giving the Committee sufficient time for proper debate?

Mr. Speaker: That matter is hypothetical. We are dealing with the motion before the House, which has been tabled by the Government, and an amendment, which has been tabled by the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): And others.

Mr. Speaker: Order. No, the motion has been tabled by the Liberal Democrats; others have added their names to it. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will listen more often—he might learn something. Before I was interrupted, I was telling the House, and I might tell him, that I have accepted the amendment in the name of the Liberal Democrats.

10.17 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I beg to move,

That, following the Report of the Chairman of Standing Committee F on 9th March, the Criminal Justice and Police Bill shall be deemed to have been reported to the House, as amended by the Committee, and as if those Clauses and Schedules the consideration of which had not been completed by the Committee had been ordered to stand part of the Bill, with the outstanding Amendments which stood on the Order paper in the name of Mr. Charles Clarke.

I begin by saying how really delighted I am to see the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) here for the whole debate. Earlier, she notified the Whips Office that she would have to miss the first half because of the annual general meeting of her

Conservative association in Maidstone, which will presumably call on her to justify her behaviour last Thursday to Conservative party members.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate) *rose—*

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset) *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: No, I will not give way at this stage.

This afternoon, the right hon. Lady and I had a very frank exchange outside the Chamber after Question Time. I am very glad that she has considered further counsel and is with us for the whole debate. I welcome her.

Mr. Blunt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: Later, but not at this stage.

I believe that the debate is about judgment—three different judgments. The first is the Government's judgment in allocating time to the Bill. The Opposition claim that we did not allocate enough. The second is the judgment of the Conservative party in determining its approach to the Bill. The third is the judgment of the right hon. Lady in deciding to flout the rules of the House and the authority of the Chair. I shall discuss those three judgments in order.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am grateful to the Minister. Can he explain to the House why he said that he could

"confirm that the Government will be tabling a motion on Monday to the effect that has been indicated"—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2001; Vol. 364, c. 527]—

which is this motion? He told the House on Friday that the motion would be tabled today and then slipped it in surreptitiously on Friday. Why did he change his mind?

Mr. Clarke: There was no change. That matter was dealt with at points of order immediately after Question Time this afternoon and I have nothing to add.

Mr. Blunt: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The Minister says that this matter was dealt with at points of order after questions, but what he said on Friday was not dealt with by you. You have made it clear that you are not responsible for what the Minister said on Friday. What is perfectly clear from *Hansard* and from the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) is that—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am not responsible for the Minister's reply. Opposition Members have a chance to rebut what the Minister states tonight. That is known as debate. The Minister is involved in the debate, and the hon. Member or his Front-Bench colleagues can rebut the case that he puts.

Mr. Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am keen to debate fully all three judgments. First, on the judgment about the time allocated for consideration of the Bill, in the light of some of the examples that have been given I want to give just one example to which the Opposition should give good consideration. The Police Act 1997, which was passed in the pre-election 1996–97 Session, had 138 clauses and 10 schedules on enactment. It was considered for a total of eight sittings, compared with the number of sittings for this Bill under this Government. The House should bear that in mind when considering the crocodile tears that are being wept by some Opposition Members.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, not at this stage.

Our overall approach to this matter was clear. First, we wanted to co-operate with the Opposition on the issues developed, as I and the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Jane Kennedy), have on previous Bills such as the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill and the Terrorism Bill. Secondly, we wanted to be out of Committee by 8 March. Thirdly, following Second Reading we initially proposed 16 sittings, equivalent to 36 hours, and said that we were prepared to put in more time and sittings. Fourthly, we made it clear that it was up to the Opposition to choose the subjects that they wanted to spend time debating. That was the basis on which we went to the first Programming Sub-Committee for the Bill.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): There were 14.

Mr. Clarke: As is being shouted out, the resolution proposed for 16 sittings, not 14. That followed a personal commitment by my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), who believed that his unavoidable absence had been accepted by his opposite number in the usual channels. For that reason, I made it clear at the Programming Sub-Committee that we would allocate time at least to make up the missing four hours, and more if necessary, to debate the subject of the Bill.

The Opposition were not interested in the time. They were interested only in the end date of 13 March, when the Bill would come out of Committee—an extra five hours on the original proposal in the resolution that we submitted. That was their only concern, not time.

I believe that that dispute—it was a sharply held dispute through the whole process—originated from Conservative inflexibility for reasons that I shall explain later. It poisoned the work of the Committee. As a result of that inflexibility, the Opposition usual channels were not prepared to come to agreements unless the Government agreed to change the end date to 13 March, as originally proposed by the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald).

Mr. Gray: Does the Minister accept that what happens between the usual channels is not a matter for debate in this Chamber? I for one do not intend to enter into discussion about what the Government usual channels and I discussed. That is a private matter for the usual channels, and he should not be raising it from the Dispatch Box.

Mr. Clarke: The hon. Gentleman spent 20 minutes speaking in Committee as a Whip. As these issues were fully debated in Committee, when I said exactly what I have said now in this Chamber, his argument has no substance.

[Mr. Clarke]

The Opposition's argument was not about increasing the time for debate, but about their ambition to change the end date. We made offers that were not accepted. We offered to meet on the afternoon and evening of Budget day on Wednesday 7 March, but they said no because they would not come to any understandings. We also offered to sit longer on other occasions, but none of those offers was accepted.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: I shall give way in a moment, when I have gone through the facts on time, so that the hon. Gentleman knows where we are.

We originally committed to 16 sittings: a total of 36 hours. The programme motion that we tabled began with 14 sittings: that is, 32 hours. We agreed six extra extensions during that period: 30 minutes on 6 February, 30 minutes on 13 February, an hour on 27 February, an hour and a half on 6 March, two and a half hours on 7 March and two hours on 8 March. That represents a total of eight hours in addition to the 32 that we originally proposed. We allocated 40 hours to the Committee stage, equivalent to 17 or 18 sittings.

The House may wish to consider the amount of time that the Committee spent on procedural discussions of that very point.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: Not at this stage.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Clarke: Yes.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: My hon. Friend will have noted that the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) sought to intervene earlier. I wonder whether, before he is given an opportunity to do so, my hon. Friend will ask him why he has not been allowed to speak for the Opposition in this debate.

Mr. Clarke: The way in which the Opposition have allocated opportunities to speak is certainly very interesting.

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is it in order for an hon. Member to suggest that another has tried to intervene when he has not?

Mr. Clarke: Let me be candid, Mr. Speaker. We decided that the Ministers who were on the Committee should open and close the debate. I find it extraordinary that neither Opposition spokesman is prepared to speak openly tonight, but that is a matter for them.

Mr. Heald: In fact, I am the Member for North-East Hertfordshire.

The Minister knows that, in the Sub-Committee, we pressed for extra time to be provided and for the end date to be put back to 13 March because we knew that consideration could not be completed in the time that he was allowing. Does he agree that on the Wednesday afternoon, which he mentioned, we moved a motion that would have allowed us to sit all night if necessary in order to complete consideration, and have 13 March as the end date? We did that because we did not want to deprive the real victims of the guillotine—the organisations and individuals who wanted their case to be put—of the chance to have that case put.

Mr. Clarke: That is remarkable. The amendment that the hon. Gentleman tabled at that first Programming Sub-Committee sitting would have given us 37 hours of debate. In fact, we had 40 hours. Beyond that— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I appeal to the House. I cannot hear the Minister. He is entitled to a proper hearing, and he is not getting one.

Mr. Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I shall try to lower my voice, in order not to drown out the voices of others.

What I was seeking to add to my point about the allocation of time, which was that we had given more time than had been requested by the Opposition, was that two and a half hours—equivalent to a whole sitting—had been occupied by debate of procedural matters. In the first sitting on 6 February, the time occupied was 30 minutes; in the ninth sitting on 1 March it was 40 minutes; in the 13th sitting on 7 March it was an hour; in the 15th sitting on 8 March, we witnessed the notorious events led by the shadow Home Secretary and potential leader of the Opposition following the election, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald, who sought to disrupt the Committee with a sit-in. On a series of other occasions, the Opposition deliberately sought to waste time.

Mr. Sayeed: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: No. I want to continue my speech.

Let me give some specific examples. When we were discussing clause 2, the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins)—I cannot see him, but he may be present—devoted half his speeches to reading out evidence from the Criminal Bar Association. We had "interpretation" debates about the meaning of "police" and about British islands; we had ridiculous and misleading information about early-day motions on animal rights. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) must behave himself.

Mr. Clarke: Therefore, on the first judgment—allocation of time—I believe that the Government more than fulfilled their commitment on 16 sittings. We gave more time than the Opposition requested and ample time to discuss the issues.

Mr. Heald: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to challenge the ruling of the

Standing Committee Chairman, who, in the sixth sitting—which was long after the events that the Minister described—ruled:

"My view, and that"—

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is not a matter for me. The Chairman is perfectly capable of looking after the Standing Committee.

Mr. Clarke: I therefore believe that on the first judgment the Government fulfilled their pledges and that there was ample time to discuss the issues.

I come to the second judgment—the Opposition's judgment—

Mr. Sayeed: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: No. I have made it clear that I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman—

Hon. Members: Give way.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The Minister is not giving way. It is no good for the Speaker to have to keep interrupting proceedings. I appeal to the House to come to order.

Mr. Clarke: I now come to the nub of the debate—the Opposition's judgment in this whole process. I believe that the Opposition had a deliberate strategy to undermine the Bill. From the outset, they had the strategy of arguing that there was not sufficient time to scrutinise the Bill and of arguing against the programming procedures of the House. They would have made that argument regardless of what happened. I believe that the explanation for that deliberate strategy lies in their voting record in Committee.

In Committee, we had an extraordinary series of no votes by Conservative Members on important issues of principle. I shall provide a series of examples. On the matter of payments made for proceedings on fixed penalty notices, they voted against clause 5 stand part. On extending child curfews to older children, they voted no. Liberal Democrats voted against that provision; Labour Members voted in favour of it.

On extending current disclosure powers, Conservative Members again voted no. On reducing the rank of officers authorised to notify arrest, they voted no. On the use of video links for review of proceedings under the Terrorism Act 2000, they again voted no. On extending the national fingerprint database, they again voted no. On building the DNA database, they again voted no. On doing the same in Northern Ireland, they again voted no. On restricting DNA and fingerprint exchange with overseas authorities, they again voted no.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Surely if my colleagues on the Committee were wishing to waste time, they would have sought to have more votes, not fewer.

Mr. Clarke: Each of those was a vote in which Liberal Democrat Members said that, for libertarian reasons in accordance with their principles, they did not like our proposals. Therefore, they voted. However, on each of those occasions, Conservative Members decided not to vote. Those no votes are a matter for them, but they chose that option because they could not decide on the issues of principle involved.

When faced with the choice between libertarianism and authoritarianism, Conservative Members could not decide. When faced with the choice between the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), they could not decide. They could not resolve the next leadership battle in the Conservative party. That was the argument at the heart of Conservative policy—as we saw at the most recent Conservative party conference. Conservative Members cannot decide where they stand on those key issues. That was reflected in Committee. Throughout our proceedings in Committee, Liberal Democrat Members—although I did not agree with them—were clear on where they stood on all the issues.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. How can we believe anything that the Minister says when he said that he would not table a motion—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I cannot hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying because other hon. Members are shouting. I must be able to listen to a point of order.

Mr. Fabricant: Mr. Speaker, how can we believe anything that the Minister says when, on Friday, he said that he would table a motion on Monday, only to table it a few hours later on the same day?

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have already dealt with that matter.

Mr. Clarke: I believe that, on that key list of amendments, Conservative Members sat on the fence for a very simple reason. They wanted to hide the deep split in the Conservative party and to hide their policy differences on every issue.

Mr. Brady: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Will the hon. Gentleman please take his seat while I am speaking? I hope that we will not go over points of order that have already been dealt with. It must be new business.

Mr. Brady: It is new business, Mr. Speaker. I cannot see any relevance to the motion that we are discussing in the rather pathetic, feeble excuse for an argument that the Minister is advancing.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I will be the judge of that.

Mr. Clarke: For the illumination of the House, the relevance of what I am saying is that I believe that the Conservatives had a deliberate strategy of trying to wreck the working of the Committee by their conduct throughout. The explicit political reason was that their judgment was to obfuscate and obstruct, to prevaricate and pontificate, as a way of hiding their own internal divisions. That is what is was about.

Mr. Blunt: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. He will recall saying at the Committee's ninth sitting:

"I praise the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt), whose contributions, throughout the proceedings and without exception, have been constructive and to the point."

The hon. Gentleman then went on to say that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell)

"has shown no evidence of having read or discussed the Bill, and has been repetitive ad nauseam on points of no substance."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 1 March 2001; c. 343.]

Will the hon. Gentleman accept that he had to withdraw clauses 7 and 8 after arguments from my right hon. and learned Friend showed just how deficient the Bill was? Will he also accept that the fact that more than 50 clauses were not debated in Committee is the cause of this debate and of the difficulty in which the hon. Gentleman finds himself?

Mr. Clarke: No, the cause was the Opposition's decision from the outset not to come to the kind of accommodations and discussions about the conduct of business in the House that is conventional.

I turn finally to the judgment of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald. She made her position clear in the media. In the *Financial Times*, she said that her protest—

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, I shall not. The right hon. Lady said that her protest was about the fact that the Bill could not be reported and that her aim was to delay its passage. That was very explicit. She said in *The Mirror* that it was an official Opposition protest. She confirmed again on GMTV on Sunday that it was an official Opposition protest. The right hon. Lady deliberately flouted the House's rules to pursue her dishonourable cause. *[Interruption.]* She was aided and abetted by the Opposition Whips—

Hon. Members: Order.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has not been out of order. I ask again that we should not have this shouting across the Chamber. I will not tolerate a situation in which hon. Members tell me how to do my job.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I hope that it is a proper point of order.

Miss Widdecombe: It is a proper point of order, Mr. Speaker. May I ask you to rule on whether the use of the word "dishonourable" to describe the conduct of an hon. Member is in order?

Mr. Speaker: Order. My understanding is that the hon. Gentleman used the term "dishonourable cause". He was not calling anybody dishonourable; he said that it was a dishonourable cause. *[Interruption.]* Order. I am giving a ruling. The hon. Gentleman is not out of order and I do not want any Member to shout at the Chair. I have already given a ruling and a statement about Members telling me how to do my job.

Mr. Clarke: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I can confirm by reading from my text that the right hon. Lady deliberately flouted the House's rules to pursue her dishonourable cause—exactly as you stated, Mr. Speaker.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: No, I shall not. I went on to say that the right hon. Lady was aided and abetted by the Opposition Whips. The hon. Members for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran), for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) and for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) assisted her in her disruptive action. That was their deliberate intent.

The right hon. Lady was also aided and abetted by the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald). After the entrance into the Committee by the right hon. Lady and her colleagues in crime, the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire said:

"On a point of order, Mr. Gale. I understand from 'Erskine May' that there have been occasions . . . when hon. Members have entered a Committee and stayed there . . . The Committee has no power to require Members to leave. My understanding of the procedure set out on pages 703 and 704 of 'Erskine May' is that after the requests have been made, the position is reported to the House".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 8 March 2001; c. 675.]

My point is that before the right hon. Lady and her hon. Friends went in, the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire knew and had prepared himself to deal with the situation in that way. It was an Opposition conspiracy—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"]—to deal explicitly with that situation.

If we are talking about defending Parliament, I contrast the Opposition's practice with the experience in 1988 in respect of the Standing Committee of the Local Government Finance Bill. On that occasion the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) was leading for the then Government and disruption of the same type occurred. On Thursday 21 January 1988, it was caused by the then Member for Falkirk, West, Dennis Canavan—exactly the same thing happened and exactly the same issues arose. An hon. Member moved a resolution—as I did last Thursday. On that occasion, the resolution was that the then hon. Member for Falkirk, West be reported to the House. The Standing Committee member who moved that resolution was the present Minister of State, Department of Social Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker)—then an Opposition Front-Bench spokesman. He said that such behaviour could not be tolerated or understood. That is quite unlike the position of the current Opposition.

If it was an official Opposition act, we need the answer to some questions—from the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) when she opens for the Opposition or from the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald when she winds up. Was that act explicitly approved by the Leader of the Opposition? Was it or was it not? Was it approved by the Opposition Chief Whip, the right hon. Member for North-East Hampshire (Mr. Arbuthnot)? Was it approved or was it not? Did the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire explicitly and

directly plan those acts with his right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald and the Opposition Whips?

My conclusions are clear—as, I believe will be those of the House. That act was a conspiracy to deflect Parliament. It was agreed by the official Opposition—by the whole Conservative party. It does immense personal discredit to every Conservative who does not publicly dissociate himself or herself from the actions of the right hon. Lady. It proves the right hon. Lady's unfitness for high office of any kind. It shows that the Tories are not fit to be an Opposition, let alone a Government.

I hope tonight that the House will not reward in any way such contempt for its rules. I urge the whole House to support the motion.

10.42 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): It is with regret that I note that the Leader of the House is not leading for the Government tonight. Clearly, the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), who opened for the Government—*[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, the Leader of the House tells me that it would have been a pleasure to open the debate; I am sorry that she was disappointed. She knows that matters to do with the House's experiment on programming—especially in respect of the Criminal Justice and Police Bill—have not only occupied the Committee dealing with that measure; as shadow Leader of the House, I have raised them no fewer than three times recently, because of my concern and that of my colleagues about the way in which the Committee was proceeding.

Although the Opposition are opposed to programming in principle, in the spirit of the experiment, we accepted the Government's word from the Dispatch Box that they would co-operate, that they would be flexible, that the official Opposition would be listened to and that the Government would negotiate with us in good faith.

Mr. Charles Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green) *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: Let me make a little progress. I have spent quite enough time at the Dispatch Box trying to convey a message to the Government about the Bill—

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I do not intend to spend valuable time tonight—when it is clear from the presence of so many hon. Members in the Chamber that they want to contribute—on trivial interventions from Labour Members who chose not to say a word on the three occasions when I raised the matter with the Leader of the House at business questions. Instead, I shall give way to the Minister.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I should be grateful if the hon. Lady would explain to the House whether she was part of the conspiracy. Did she know? Did she agree?

Mrs. Browning: There is no conspiracy, merely an attempt by the official Opposition to ensure that the democratic processes of the House are carried out so that we, as individual Members, can represent our constituents, and so that the Conservative Members serving on the Committee can make genuine representations and amend the Bill, in accordance with what we, in our recent history, have thought to be the democratic process. It is no good the Minister's waving his hand at me; I will make some progress.

The motion states that

"the Criminal Justice and Police Bill shall be deemed to have been reported to the House".

As part of this wonderful experiment in programming, we are now faced with virtual legislation.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: No.

If we are to accept tonight that a Committee and all its outstanding business, which I shall mention in a moment, are deemed to have been considered and concluded, why do we not deem Second Reading debates to have been completed? Why do we not deem Report stages to have been completed? Why do we not deem ourselves to be elsewhere, and allow some robots to sit on these Benches and legislate on behalf of the people of this country?

The House should not be surprised that the Bill has caused great anger among Conservative Members, although the Conservative party concurs with many of its provisions and has helped to fashion them in Committee so that it can become a better Bill. It was in that spirit that my hon. Friends approached the Bill's consideration in Committee.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I will give way, but just to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Hughes: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Just for the record, will she tell the House and the public what fundamental objections, if any, the Tory party has to the Bill?

Mrs. Browning: My hon. Friends have raised many issues in Committee, and the Minister spelt out his objection to the fact that Conservative Members did not vote for several amendments and clauses. In many cases, my hon. Friends were not objecting in principle; they were objecting to the detailed wording and to the way in which the provisions were introduced. That is what a Committee is for; it is intended to scrutinise the detail, the wording and the amendments.

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: No, I will not.

The Minister of State knows that the purpose of considering a Bill in Committee is to scrutinise the detail and vote on the particular, not on the generality. It is normal in Committee for hon. Members to accept a principle but not to vote for or concur with the detail of certain provisions. Hence, they abstain on many provisions, as was the case with the Bill.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Does the hon. Lady accept that many of the issues were in fact points of principle,

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

not points of detail? Will she confirm that she knew what the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) was going to do last Thursday before she did it?

Mrs. Browning: My right hon. Friend had no discussion with me about her actions on Thursday.

Ms Walley: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady has already indicated that she is not giving way.

Mrs. Browning: In conclusion on the previous intervention, if the Government choose not to accept Conservative amendments, they should not be surprised if the Conservative Members serving on the Committee do not vote for their proposals. That is the normal procedure in Committee, and I am surprised that, having refused the amendments, the Minister should make such a fuss about it.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: No. I hope that the right hon. and learned Gentleman will accept that I want to make progress by stating our principled objections to the programme motions that have resulted in the Bill becoming such a shambles.

At business questions on 1 March, I put it to the Leader of the House that there were problems with the Bill in Committee. When the right hon. Lady replied, she did not address any of my concerns relating to the Bill. I raised the matter again on 8 March, which was my last opportunity at the Dispatch Box to raise with the Leader of the House our genuine concerns about the Bill's progress in Committee. I am sorry to say that, again, the right hon. Lady failed to make representations to her right hon. Friends. As we know, on 8 March, the Committee stage was concluded.

The Committee had only reached clause 90 by the conclusion of its proceedings on Thursday 8 March. Elements of the Bill that were not discussed by the Committee at all included setting up the police training authority, changes to the constitution of police authorities, changes to police ranks, inferences to be drawn from silence in police conduct proceedings, pensions for staff, courts to give reasons for granting opposed bail, expenditure interpretation and repeals. Many important matters remained outstanding. Not only that: yet further amendments in the name of the Minister of State, Home Office are before us tonight. These amendments are bundled up in the wording of the motion. Does the hon. Gentleman even intend to describe to the House tonight that they mean? Are they to be deemed to have been accepted without any discussion in, or explanation to, the House?

Mr. Charles Clarke *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I shall give way to the Minister. Does he want to explain the amendments to the House?

Mr. Clarke: What I want the hon. Lady to do is accept that the Committee did not finish its business, because it was disrupted by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald.

Mrs. Browning: That is rather disingenuous of the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I shall, since it is the right hon. and learned Gentleman. This is the last intervention.

Mr. Campbell: If the hon. Lady did not know of the plan for disruption, will she tell us whether she endorses or dissociates herself from it?

Mrs. Browning: The actions of my right hon. and hon. Friends were the only actions left given that, just hours before, as shadow Leader of the House, I had used the only opportunity that was available to us to put to the Leader of the House the difficulties that we were encountering with the Bill.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock) *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I shall not give way to the hon. Gentleman. I read what he said in Committee.

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: I shall give way to the right hon. Lady shortly.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department wasted more than one whole sitting of the Committee on clauses that he eventually abandoned, having been extremely rude about the former Attorney-General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) and having virtually told my right hon. and learned Friend that he did not know what he was talking about. The hon. Gentleman then had to withdraw the clauses, so I do not think that we want to hear anything from him.

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Lady claims that I made no response to the representations that she made about the timing and handling of the Committee. She must recall that that is not correct. She knows, I am sure, that I repeatedly made it plain, first having inquired into the circumstances that she was describing to the House, that the Government had offered extra time and that the Conservative Opposition had not taken that offer up. That is not the same thing as no action being taken. The hon. Lady is not correct in saying that.

Mrs. Browning: The record of business questions on 1 March shows that, when I first raised the issue, the right

hon. Lady did not, as she usually does—she is usually very particular in responding to each of my points—respond specifically to the point that I made about the Bill. She responded to a point about another Bill—the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill—to which she referred, but she did not mention this Bill at all.

Mrs. Beckett: I can clarify that for the hon. Lady. At that point in time, I did not precisely recall what the explanation was. I did recall it later. As she says, when she raised the issue on the last occasion, I made it plain to her that the Government had offered extra time, which is the clear answer to the basic point that she has made, as she rightly says, on number of occasions.

Mrs. Browning: The problem when we run into difficulties with programming is that there is no record of what has been discussed in the Programming Sub-Committees. However, we know that, in this case, the Government voted down the Opposition's proposals. It was my clear understanding, not only from the right hon. Lady but from Labour Members in general, when we discussed the issue in November that unless we made an outrageous and cavalier request the Government would consider our opinion and help to accommodate us. I believe that my hon. Friends' requests were reasonable, which is supported by the fact that we have felt it necessary not to conclude the Bill. Had the Government acted as they said they would, we would have had more time to scrutinise the Bill and they would have got their end date. It was all achievable.

Mr. Bercow: The Government are clearly being deliberately obtuse. Does my hon. Friend recall the 1997–98 Session, when the Crime and Disorder Bill, which was 152 pages long, had 22 Committee sittings and 54 hours of debate? Does she also recall that the then Minister, the right hon. Member for Cardiff, South and Penarth (Mr. Michael) said that that was a good example of how a Committee stage should operate? Is it not obviously absurd that a Bill of comparable length—150 pages—should have only 15 Committee sittings and 38 hours of debate? Surely that is so obvious that only the most extraordinarily clever person could fail to see it.

Mrs. Browning: It is obvious, and this Bill is comparable in terms of the work involved.

The motion states that we shall be deemed to have concluded our proceedings on the Bill. If we deem ourselves to have passed legislation that has not been scrutinised either on the Floor of the House or in Committee, we will set a precedent that could well be used in praying in aid the outcome of court cases. Hon. Members will be familiar with Pepper *v.* Hart, which decided that a Minister's interpretation was important in determining Parliament's will when the House considered legislation. How could any court determine our will if we deem ourselves to pass great chunks of legislation—

Maria Eagle (Liverpool, Garston): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: No, I am sorry, but I shall not give way again.

If Parliament passes great chunks of legislation that have not been scrutinised or debated at all, how can the courts determine our will? We must be very careful. However annoyed the Minister may be that his Bill has come to the surface as an example of why programming is not only a mistake but damaging to our democratic process, it would be wrong if, in a fit of pique, his antics tonight were accepted by the House—[HON. MEMBERS: "Antics?"] Antics was the word I used, and antics was the word I meant. If the hon. Gentleman's antics were seen as being accepted by the House, there would be a read-across for this and many other Bills.

Maria Eagle: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Browning: No, I am sorry, but I am really not giving way. *[Interruption.]* The Minister says that the antics of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) have brought us to this state of affairs. It might have been different had we been able to accept the Government's word that programming motions would be negotiated and that there would be compromise between the parties. However, this Bill got off to the wrong start. The Minister knows that the whole House had the opportunity to negotiate the programme motion on the basis of information that was not even accurate.

It is no good the Government praying in aid the fact that somebody had a personal appointment or saying that the half-term holiday reduced the time for which the Committee could sit. It was evident to my colleagues on the Committee that more time was needed for discussion, yet it had to be drawn out of the Government hour by hour, and even then it was not enough. If the Bill had been properly drafted and the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department had not wasted at least half a day of the Committee's time on clauses that he withdrew, we would clearly have been in a much better position tonight.

We are focusing on a particular Bill, and an important one at that, but it has demonstrated that the current experiment in programming is not only an abysmal failure but an affront to the democratic process.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Everybody, especially many Labour Members who spent 18 years in opposition, understands that opposition is frustrating, and there will be many occasions on which the Opposition do not get their way on programme motions or guillotines. We could name plenty of occasions when much less time has been allocated to Bills more controversial than this.

I want to be clear about the answer given by the hon. Lady, who is the shadow Leader of the House and aspires to be Leader of the House, to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell). Is she saying that it is now the official Opposition's policy that where they object to the time allocated to a Bill, they believe that the generation of "grave disorder"—those are the words of the Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale)—by Front-Bench Opposition Members is entirely justifiable?

Mrs. Browning: The right hon. Gentleman completely misrepresents the case because the actions of my—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) is very noisy this evening. I do not want to hear him.

Mrs. Browning: The actions of my right hon. and hon. Friends last Thursday were in answer to the negative

[Mrs. Browning]

response that we had received not only in Committee but on the Floor of the House. As shadow Leader of the House, I personally did everything in my power to try to resolve that on-going problem before the Committee reached its final stage. The Home Secretary will be aware that, in the words of the Leader of the House, this procedure is an experiment. I hope that, as a result of what has happened with this Bill, he will realise that the experiment needs to be halted or radically changed. I am sure that, as a radical himself in days gone by, he will recognise the thrust of what I am saying.

Mr. Straw: As I said, we all understand the concerns of the Opposition about whether enough time has been made available, but the hon. Lady has just said, from the Front Bench, that she can justify the generation of grave disorder by Front-Bench Members as part of a protest. As the grave disorder was directed not at the Government but at the Chairman of the Committee and, by implication, the Chair of the House, may we take it that the hon. Lady is endorsing, as an official Opposition policy, grave disorder undermining the authority of the Chair?

Mrs. Browning: No. What undermines the authority of the House, whether in the Chamber or a Committee, is the fact that the official Opposition can no longer take the word of members of the Government. When they come to the House and say 16 sittings, they should mean 16 sittings. The Government say that the changes are an experiment, and that they will be co-operative and flexible, but they are not. We have assessed the situation and used every opportunity possible. We are not making a complaint or trying to insult the Chair of any Committee of this House. We are standing up for the democratic rights of the people of this country, and we will continue to do so even if they are not held in respect by the Government of the day. The sooner the people of this country change the Government of the day, the sooner we can get back to democracy as we have known it in this Chamber and the country.

Mrs. Beckett *rose—*

Mrs. Browning: I give way for the final time because I want to conclude my remarks.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that the hon. Lady wants to make progress, and I understand also that she finds herself in a very unfortunate position. I say to her in her role as shadow Leader of the House that many of us— *[Interruption.]* I do not need advice from Conservative Members, thank you very much. When we were on the Opposition Benches, many of us found ourselves sympathising with actions taken by Members in objection—not normally by the shadow Home Secretary, but we will not go into that—but we simply understood that this House cannot work unless Members, and particularly Front Benchers, sustain the authority of the Chair. Even if we think that the Chairman's ruling is mistaken, we must sustain the authority of the Chair in this House. I hope that the hon. Lady will indicate that she understands that.

Mrs. Browning: I should not have to remind the hon. Lady that the experiment has caused such chaos because—for the first time ever—she and her Government have imposed on this House changes to the Standing Orders without the agreement of the official Opposition. When people flout the rules of the House and show no respect whatever for its precedents, this is the result. It is not any affront to any Chairman; it is a definite affront to this Government, who respect neither this House nor its procedures.

11.7 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): We have just heard what I can only describe as an astonishing speech by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning). My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House was right to press her on these matters. I was involved in an incident such as this some years ago, and I want to draw to the attention of the House what happened on that occasion and the position taken by Conservative Members and, indeed, the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), who voted against me.

I was concerned about proceedings in the Select Committee on Members' Interests—the former Privileges Committee—in the case of an inquiry into Neil Hamilton. I was worried that a Conservative Whip had been placed on the Committee. I sought to obstruct proceedings because I felt that that Whip was interfering with proceedings and leading the Committee, with its Conservative majority, into taking partisan decisions. It was clear—this all happened prior to Nolan—that the Committee was being politically manipulated. I confess that I took a maverick position and obstructed proceedings.

What was interesting about that affair was what happened when the matter came before House. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House said, the Labour Opposition sought to protect the House and prevent the likes of me carrying out similar practices in future. I refer to the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), who spoke from the Opposition Front Bench in the debate on the motion that dealt with my conduct. He said:

"I see no case for disrupting Committee procedures, whether they be Select or Standing Committees held in public or in private. Hon. Members can always find a suitably convenient time and place to raise any issue that they want on the Floor of the House. I remember those long distant days when we had a Labour Government—those times will soon return—and, as a humble Back Bencher, I found that I could raise any issue that I chose whenever I chose to do so by using the procedures of the House."

That was the position we took in opposition. It was a thoroughly responsible position, but I had made my point.

The hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) also spoke in the debate. I shall watch with great interest which way he decides to vote tonight. He said:

"What the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) has done is wrong. I appreciate that he holds strong opinions about the matter, but it must be wrong for any Member of the House to override the procedures of the House and take it on himself to decide the way in which the Committees operate. As a result of the hon. Gentleman's behaviour, the Select Committee has been obstructed."—[*Official Report*, 20 April 1995; Vol. 258, c. 404-06.]

The hon. Gentleman might wish to intervene to tell me which way he intends to vote. Can we rely on him being consistent in the approach that he takes to these matters?

Mr. Clappison: The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity of hearing my views later in the debate.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I will look forward to hearing the hon. Gentleman's views. I shall take great interest in them.

There is another Member for whom I have particular affection this evening, as do many of my hon. Friends. I understand that we have all come with the same tracts and quotes. It does not surprise me that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton took upon herself the duty of speaking for the Opposition. The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) may have had great difficulty in doing so. He, too, participated in the debate in 1995, and he led for the Opposition in Standing Committee F. He is the one who made the complaint. He conspired with the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald to carry out their little dirty deed. He cannot deny it.

My hon. Friend the Minister referred to the hon. Gentleman's contribution when he opened the debate. The hon. Gentleman said:

"My understanding of the procedure set out on pages 703 and 704 of 'Erskine May' is that after the requests have been made, the position is reported to the House".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 8 March 2001; c. 675.]

He continued with that sort of stuff. He could never have known what pages 703 and 704 said. He does not have an encyclopaedic knowledge of "Erskine May"; he must have known in advance what would happen. I put it to him—he can deny it from the Opposition Dispatch Box—that he was party to the conspiracy.

Mr. Heald: In Committee, the Opposition were pushed to a point that was intolerable. We were pushed by a Minister who was so arrogant that he would not give the time that was needed for debate. There was no option left.

I have quite an encyclopaedic knowledge of "Erskine May", and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman mentioned that.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Those were interesting words, and I think that we heard them correctly. The hon. Gentleman said that the Opposition were pushed to the point of opposition.

Mr. Blunt: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: No. The hon. Gentleman can speak when I have finished. I have something to say about him, as well.

The debate is rather like the one that we had the other month on programme motions. The Conservatives leave so much dirty linen in their cupboard. There are so many opportunities for us to respond to their points—

Mr. Blunt *rose—*

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I would like Opposition Members to hear what I am about to say because it is quite remarkable.

I shall quote the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire, who speaks for the Opposition on these matters. In the debate on my misdemeanour in Committee, he said:

"Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Committee has its authority as a result of the resolution of this place, that it is therefore arrogant of him to say that its decisions, which are made with that authority, are wrong, and that he is entitled just to walk into the Committee and speak in breach of all the rules? What does that say about this place's powers and the Committee's authority? Is he not breaching it through arrogance?"

That is said of me—arrogance.

Mr. Hogg: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: No, no; there is a lot more to come, and I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman that the best come at the end.

The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire said:

"If we invest a Committee with authority, especially an authority which . . . is absolute and exclusive in a certain area, it should be wrong for individual Members, whether they be the hon. Member for Workington or, indeed, the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery"—

that was Mr. Carlile—

"to say that their judgment is greater than that of the House, greater than that of the Committee, thereby abandoning an essential principle. If one sets up such a Committee, as we have in this House, we should not interfere with its authority."

That is the hon. Gentleman's position.

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire continued:

"That principle has been in this place for more than 150 years. In 1844, the Speaker observed in a similar issue"—

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), but I must say to the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) that it is fairly evident that the hon. Member for Workington is not giving way at present.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I return to the quote from 1844. The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire obviously felt passionately about the matter. The Speaker said in 1844 that

"no member who was not a Member of the Committee had any right to interfere with the proceedings . . . though he might be present in the room."

The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire went on to say that

"we might just as well go back to having a Committee of the whole House with witnesses brought to the Bar of the House—if all Members were entitled to attend Committees and to interfere in the processes. There must be a remedy."

On the remedy, the hon. Gentleman said:

"The only remedy is that which the motion suggests—in fact, the traditional remedy. On other occasions when it has been necessary to exclude a Member from a Committee, a motion has been placed

before the whole House and that person has then been told that he must not attend the Committee at the behest of the Chairman. If there is no remedy, such Committees will become meaningless."

The hon. Gentleman went on to say:

"I do not believe that it is right for an individual Member to put his strong views above those of the House. When this place has decided by resolution to give a Committee authority to deal with an issue, it is simply wrong for another Member to be there trying to interfere with the members of the Committee and with its deliberations."

The hon. Gentleman put a prolonged case. He clearly believed passionately in it, yet he sits on the Front Bench today, somehow justifying the actions taken by his right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald. He continued:

"A more fundamental issue is at stake—the law of Parliament, which has set out those principles for more than 150 years, and which the hon. Member for Workington, aided and abetted by the hon. and learned Member for Montgomery, now wishes to break and to treat with contempt. That says something about the form of campaign with which they wish to associate themselves."—[*Official Report*, 20 April 1995; Vol. 258, c. 389-98.]

There is more. The House would get bored if I went on, but there are pages of such quotes.

Mr. Hogg: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: In a minute.

The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire shamefacedly sits before the House, defending his right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald for doing what I did, and himself being party to the decision that she should proceed in the way that she did. Far worse in many ways is the fact that what those right hon. and hon. Members did was official. It was done on behalf of the Opposition. That shows that they have changed their very attitude towards Parliament. Whereas historically the Conservative party stood for law and order, it now stands for no law, no rules and disorder.

Mr. Hogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has been in the House as long as I have, and he used to have a reputation for defending parliamentary liberty. He knows a lot about the history of Parliament. Does he not recognise that, from time to time, hon. Members have had to define the practices of the House to cure a greater injustice? May I remind him of Mr. Bradlaugh and the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), both of whom defied the practices of the House to cure a greater injustice? That is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) did last week.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: That is true. There has been a series of those incidents over the years, but there is a distinction between those that have occurred in the past 200 years and the one that we are discussing this evening. This occasion, unlike those in 1849, 1827, 1952, 1974, 1982, 1989, 1994 and 1991, was organised by members of the shadow Cabinet—people who, in six weeks, will aspire to run this country. That includes the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton, who seeks to be Leader of the House of Commons. Tonight, at the Dispatch Box, she is sanctioning outrageous activity. That is deplorable and, in my view, she should withdraw immediately from the Chamber.

11.21 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I beg to move, in line 2, leave out from 'be' to end and add

'remitted to Standing Committee F for consideration of all remaining clauses, schedules and amendments not so far debated in Standing Committee without limit of time for further consideration; that a week shall elapse between the completion of Committee Stage and the commencement of Report Stage; and that notwithstanding the Order of the House of 29th January, Report Stage do continue without limit of time until completion; and that one day be allocated for the Third Reading of the Bill.'

Liberal Democrat Members tabled the amendment, and Conservative Members added their names to it. The speech of the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) was a useful and helpful contribution. In the words of Edward Lear, I was coming to it. I shall return to a slight inconsistency in a minute.

May I remind the House of the Bill that we are discussing? It is the Government's flagship legislation and has run into trouble tonight. In fact, it ran into trouble over its content a long time ago. It raises serious law and order issues and, as we discovered both on Second Reading and in Committee—when my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) and I tested the Government—it raises major civil liberty issues too.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No, not at the moment.

In many cases, the ideas in the Bill were shown to be flawed and its policies unworkable. The Government proved to those Committee members who listened and paid attention that a lot of it was about trying to find "eye-catching initiatives"—in the words of the Prime Minister—to put in the pre-election shop window. We all know that if the Prime Minister keeps to his intention to hold the election on 3 May, the Bill will not complete its parliamentary stages anyway.

This is a flagship Bill with no port of destination. Its cargo is fatally flawed, and now it has run into difficulties concerning procedure in the House. *[Interruption.]* Liberal Democrat Members are making innumerable contributions: the Bill has foundered; it is sinking; it is sandbagged; it has run into difficulties. Although it does not sound like it tonight, the Bill is beached, if not becalmed.

The issue before the House is not whether we have programme motions for Government Bills, but whether, for the first time in our history, we get rid of whole stages of procedure and allow a Government, however arrogant and consistent they have been in wanting to push their business through, to get the approval of the House for a procedural stage to be completely removed. This is a night for Parliament, Labour Back-Benchers and Opposition Members to say to the Government, "You must not have your motion accepted because Parliament should never be told that it should not do its job properly." If there has been disruption, we should go back to where we were and not get rid of a Committee stage which, for one reason or another—I shall come to that later—we could not finish.

The arrogance of the Government—arrogance is often a manifestation of Governments—has led them to become a Government trying to railroad a Bill through Parliament.

I remind Labour Members that their party received 43 per cent. of the vote, not a majority of the votes of the British people, at the previous election. Only 30 per cent. of the electorate voted for them: not a majority, nor even a third of the electorate. They cannot, therefore, come to the House claiming that they speak for the British people. They speak for a minority of the people, just like the rest of us.

The accident of the present distorted political system gives the Labour party more Members of Parliament, but the job of Parliament is to ensure that the accident of the electoral system does not mean a denial of democracy for the citizen. We shall not allow the Government, however big their majority, to get away with brushing aside parliamentary procedures. We shall ensure, if possible, that Parliament resists whoever is on the Government Benches taking away powers from Back Benchers and giving them to the Government, just because they have decided that they want to get rid of parliamentary procedures.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does not the hon. Gentleman's party support the principle of programming? The amendment that he and his hon. Friends have tabled today appears contrary to what his party agreed to in the Modernisation Committee, and to what has been agreed to by the House. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that the tactics used by Conservative Members last Thursday—which could be used time and again in disputes in which hon. Members disagree about difficult issues—completely negate how democracy in Parliament works?

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman has asked two perfectly proper questions. He served on the Modernisation Committee, and we appreciate his work. On his first point, we believe in sensible programming, provided that Front Benchers and Back Benchers have a say in how that is decided, and provided that, when a Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and says that we shall have 16 sittings, we have 16 sittings. On this occasion, we went from the 16 sittings announced by the Government to the 14 announced by the Government in Committee, then, after negotiation, to 15.

I say to the hon. Gentleman, whom I respect, that if the Government propose a programme, they must keep to the promises and the proposals that they make. On a flagship Bill, they cannot expect Opposition Members suddenly to sign away the amount of time for its consideration that the Government had told us—although we had not agreed to it—was the least that we would have.

The Liberal Democrats have supported the idea of programming, but we have never supported the way in which the Government have set about implementing it. We should not have programme motions put before the House the minute after Second Reading. Such programme motions do not take into account the breadth of views expressed on Second Reading; nor do they give the House an opportunity to consider them. If we are to have programme motions, they must be introduced at a decent interval after Second Reading, when the House has been able to reflect on how much time needs to be given to each Bill.

Mrs. Beckett: I remind the hon. Gentleman of something that many hon. Members seem to have forgotten. The proposal that programme motions should be taken with Second Reading was contained in the first report of the Modernisation Committee—before I was a member of it—which was carried unanimously.

Mr. Hughes: The right hon. Lady is quite right to remind the House of that. However, she knows that our shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), has said on regular occasions since he and the right hon. Lady took on their respective jobs that, if we are to get agreement across the House, we must allow time for the House to reflect on Second Reading debates.

I shall come to the other point raised by the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike), concerning the behaviour of Conservative Front-Bench Members, in a minute, as it is an important matter and one that I want to say something about.

The Bill is not only a flagship Bill; it is a Bill containing 132 clauses, and one to which a large number new clauses and 300 amendments have been tabled, many by the Government. At the beginning of our last afternoon sitting, we had got as far as clause 77, out of 132. When we finished our work last Thursday evening, we had only reached clause 90 out of 132. There were amendments yet to be considered, including Government amendments.

Those who chaired the Committee—experienced Members of the House—were clear that there had been no filibustering. Both kept the Committee on a tight rein. My hon. Friends and I pay tribute to them for doing an extremely competent job, as the House would expect of them. If they said that all debate was in order, clearly there had not been enough time to complete consideration. When we finished last Thursday afternoon, had there not been the proceedings to which I shall refer in a moment, about a third of the Bill remained to be considered. We should have considered all of it. Parliament had not properly done its work when the guillotine fell on the timetabled Committee debates.

Mr. Blunt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way because he would not want to give the House the impression that we had considered 77 clauses. We had not considered the whole of part III, from clauses 49 to 69.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is correct. He also played an extremely good and effective role in Committee. *[Interruption.]* No, the hon. Gentleman was very much an independent Back Bencher who moved his own amendments and argued on his own as well as supporting his colleagues. Debate on the early parts of the Bill was often guillotined and we did not fully consider the rest, so it is true to say that we had not properly considered many measures, including significant clauses.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is he not overlooking the fact that the equivalent of a full sitting was wasted by Opposition Members discussing programming and procedural motions?

Mr. Hughes: I do not accept that because all the debate was clearly in order. The hon. Gentleman served on the Committee and he knows that that was the ruling. It is not

[Mr. Hughes]

surprising that programming was discussed when we were debating the flagship Bill of this Session, which deals with controversial matters.

Although the hon. Gentleman will remember, I remind him that we were debating fixed penalty notices—not uncontroversial; whether curfews should be extended to under-16s—not uncontroversial; how we should deal with alcohol and alcohol-related offences—not uncontroversial; drug-related offences; protection of witnesses and possible witnesses; granting bail; information exchange between Departments and between the Government and agencies abroad—not uncontroversial; limits on the rules of detention; and the use of video links in extending detention under terrorism legislation, which is extremely controversial.

The hon. Gentleman will also remember that, at the end of proceedings, we were discussing not only how to deal with animal rights extremists, which is a matter of particular interest and concern to him for perfectly proper reasons, but whether innocent people whose DNA samples were taken when they were under suspicion should be allowed to have those samples withdrawn, rather than being held for the rest of their lives even though they have done nothing wrong. If those are not controversial civil liberty and law and order matters that need proper debate, I do not know what are.

I pay tribute to the way in which the Minister dealt with the Committee and argued the Government's case. To his credit, he agreed that major issues such as DNA sampling deserve a major national debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and I voted in and forced Divisions more often than the Conservatives. We did not agree with the fixed penalty notice system proposed by the Government. We were not in favour of some of the Government's proposals to allow the authorities to close licensed premises without warning landlords.

We were not in favour of extending child curfews, which have not worked for the under-10s, to the under-16s when the police say that curfews would not work for them either. We were not in favour of extending without qualification the power of seizure. We opposed the Government because we were not in favour of detention under terrorist legislation being extended to people at a remote distance. We were not in favour of allowing DNA samples to be kept indefinitely.

We opposed the Government. I am surprised that the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) did not oppose his Government on those hugely important matters. All deserve to be debated properly.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman concede that the debate on each issue of principle that he has raised was substantial and not guillotined? Debate on non-key issues was guillotined.

Mr. Hughes: In general terms, the Minister is right. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] No, the Minister is right, except that the debate was guillotined. We had a timetable and a fixed end point. The Government wanted to come out of Committee by 8 March. Some of us think that that had something to do with a possible election on 3 May. The Government fixed the end point, and they fixed staging points. Although we had decent debates on the major matters, by the end of our consideration of the Bill we were trying to deal with important issues, such as the running, training and organising of the police. The Minister knows that those police matters would never have been debated.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for agreeing with my fundamental point. Does he also acknowledge that we debated clause 1 for four hours and clause 2 for two and a half hours? We fully discussed issues such as fixed penalty notices, as he would wish.

Mr. Hughes: My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and I have argued that there were major matters to debate. We had some major debates, but the question is whether we had enough time to consider a flagship Bill of more than 130 clauses. The answer must be no, given that we had only reached clause 90 half an hour before the end of the last sitting.

Mr. Heald: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that we did not discuss issues such as the disclosure of tax records, the seizure of property, and police organisation, training and discipline—given that the burden of proof is to be changed for disciplinary proceedings? Those are not trivial matters, and many outside bodies, including chartered accountants, lawyers, the Police Federation, police authorities and the National Association of Probation Officers, and individuals wanted us to debate those matters properly and to seek assurances, but we were not able to do so.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is correct. This is a two-part Bill: it is a criminal justice Bill and a police Bill. The police clauses started at clause 86, and we began to debate that clause at some stage last Thursday. We only had until 7 o'clock to debate all the matters to do with the police. Hon. Members on both sides of the House spend much time saying how important the police are, how much we value them, how many more we want to recruit, how difficult it is to hang on to them, and how undervalued they are. I do not think that the police can be satisfied when those clauses in the one Bill in this Session that deals with police matters are allocated less than a day in Committee, and we do not discuss about 40 clauses to do with their future, their structure and their organisation. On that point, I certainly share the hon. Gentleman's view.

We were a few minutes away from the end of the Committee last Thursday when things took a turn for the slightly bizarre. One of the Government's difficulties is that in opposition—I accept that it was not members of the Front Bench—the Labour party often used tactics, as we did, to ensure that it gave the Conservative Government a hard time. We must all be careful not to be self-righteous about this. When Government want to get their business through, they use the levers available to them. When the Opposition want to stop them, they will use ruses to try to do so. Trying to block the timetable has always been one of the weapons open to Opposition parties and to Back Benchers. I and my colleagues have used it, and I give credit to the Conservative party for what happened on Thursday, because it was a good wheeze and it delayed the proceedings.

My hon. Friend and I are slightly confused.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No, not for the moment.

On all the important matters of principle—fixed penalty notices, child curfews, closing licensed premises, extending powers of seizures, allowing detention by remote link and DNA samples—we did not notice the Tory party opposing the Government.

Mr. Heald: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No.

This is the great flagship Bill. Of course, there were differences and unhappiness about the nature and extent of the legislation, but, as I said to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning), on the fundamental principles there did not seem to be any opposition to the 10 major ideas in the Bill.

On Thursday, we saw a protest about procedure, but on a Bill on which the Tory party's view was pretty similar to that of the Government. It might have been better to protest about the Bill and its content than to protest about the way in which the Government were taking the Bill through the House.

Mr. Heald: I am rather surprised that the hon. Gentleman should be so shocked. We did not vote against the Bill on Second Reading. The point is that there were numerous matters of detail in regard to which we had tabled amendments, wanted assurances and wanted to improve the Bill. As a result, as the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have dropped two clauses, accepted four amendments, and agreed to reconsider a range of other matters and issue guidance. We served our purpose when we were able to do so; the complaint is that, for much of the time, we were not able to do so.

Mr. Hughes: I understand the hon. Gentleman's position, about which he has always been straightforward. The Conservatives did not object fundamentally to the policy in the Bill. They wanted to improve it; they wanted assurances. In regard to certain matters—perfectly properly—the hon. Gentleman's colleagues and my party agreed that the Government needed to be pushed, exposed and pressed, and the Government made concessions. I make no criticism of that. My point is that the great showdown took place in connection with a Bill on which the Tory and Labour parties have one view, and we have another. It is a strange coincidence in British politics that on law and order the differences between Tories and Labour become narrower every day, almost paling into insignificance—*[Interruption.]* It is true. It is left to some of us to argue about both the procedure and the principle.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: I will give way once more.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Surely the scandal is not who said what on a particular clause, but the fact that no one said anything about so many clauses.

Mr. Hughes: I have said so myself. The hon. Gentleman, who is consistently good in this regard, knows that the House must stand up for the rights of the House—Back Benchers, Front Benchers and members of every party—to take an interest at each stage of the proceedings. The mischief tonight is that we are being asked by the Government to cut out a whole section of procedure, to ignore the last part of the Bill, and to behave as though it had never had a Committee stage and had never been tested. That must go beyond what Parliament has ever been asked to do.

I sincerely hope that when this is put to a vote, not just the hon. Gentleman—who I am sure is entirely trustworthy on matters such as this—but Members on both sides of the House will realise that the issue is bigger than the Bill or the Government of the day. As Mr. Speaker said about an hour ago, there has never been a precedent for a motion such as this, and the House should not allow a precedent to be set tonight.

As for the action on Thursday, I have said that in terms of procedural rules it was—described neutrally—a jolly good wheeze. It is also true that, as the hon. Member for Workington has argued throughout his distinguished career, many great parliamentary developments have occurred because of peaceful protests by those elected to Parliament. Many things would not have happened otherwise, and many people—not just the Charles Bradlaughs, but many others—would not have secured rights for parliamentarians had they not protested and taken a stand. There is a difference, however, and the hon. Gentleman put his finger on it.

Here was someone who aspired, and still aspires, to be Home Secretary of the United Kingdom, leading a protest, seconded by someone who wants to be Home Office spokesman on police matters and backed by the Conservative Chief Whip. The shadow Leader of the House now endorses the protest. That is an entirely different kettle of fish. It is one thing for Back Benchers to engage in a peaceful protest and challenge the Government; it is something else for people who, as the hon. Gentleman said, aspire to govern the country from the Home Office in six or seven weeks and to set an example in regard to law and order to act as they did.

I sometimes feel a grudging respect and admiration for the antics of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), but I think she made a terrible error of judgment on Thursday evening. For her and her colleagues, who speak on Home Office matters and who want to set an example in regard to law and order, to lead such "non-law and order" activity and defy the Chair of the Committee—who was trying to do a job on behalf of the House—was indeed a bad error of judgment. It was not an example to set: it was not an example of upholding the law, and not an example that the Tory party can easily justify or be proud of. If the right hon. Lady, with that record, ever were to become Home Secretary, heaven preserve the rest of us. If that is the example from the top, there is not much hope for the people at the bottom.

Miss Widdecombe: The burden of the hon. Gentleman's argument seems to be that it would have been perfectly all right if I had asked some Back Benchers to go in, but that it was not all right for me to go and do it myself in a straightforward and honourable manner.

Mr. Hughes: As I said, if Back Benchers had done it, it would have been an entirely different kettle of fish. However, I understand that the right hon. Lady is never one to shy away from a teeny bit of publicity and that that

[Mr. Hughes]

was another golden opportunity. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) said about the intervention of the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald), I think that I heard a plea of guilty, but the mitigation seemed to be argued at the same time.

On Thursday, the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) was absolutely right and the Conservative party leadership was absolutely wrong. Tomorrow, I think, the House will have an opportunity to decide whether we have to give the right hon. Lady and her colleagues a disciplinary rebuke for Thursday's events. That is a matter for us. In about six weeks, however, the country may have to judge the prospect of a Conservative Government. My judgment is that, on that occasion, the country will give Conservative Members collectively a red card.

Today, however, we are considering a Government motion, and an Opposition amendment that attempts to reassert the rights of the House. I hope that the House will say that the Bill should return to Committee; the Committee should finish its consideration of the Bill; and that only then should the Bill be considered on Report and Third Reading in the House. It is a very simple choice: do we properly observe democratic procedures, or do we allow an unprecedented Government motion to deny debate to which Parliament is entitled? I hope that hon. Members, including many Labour Back Benchers, will support the amendment and that the Government will not be so arrogant again.

11.47 pm

Mr. Phil Hope (Corby): The motion has been tabled because four Conservative Members—the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and the hon. Members for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin), for Beverley and Holderness (Mr. Cran) and for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown)—decided to cause grave disorder in Standing Committee F, which was considering the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. Opposition Front Benchers themselves have now confessed that that was a deliberate and premeditated manoeuvre to prevent the Committee from completing its business in the time allocated to it in the programme motion on which the whole House had voted.

Clearly, therefore, the action was not taken by a group of renegades. It was not even a leadership bid, prior to the general election, by an aspirant leader of the Tory party. It was a planned campaign by Opposition Members, with the endorsement of the shadow Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition. The Committee Chairman was left in the impossible position of having to deal with an organised rebellion and challenge by Opposition Members to his authority as Committee Chairman.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) so eloquently said, the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald)—who sought to oppose the motion moved by the Standing Committee Chairman, who is a Conservative Member, asking those Opposition Members to leave the Committee—spoke in the 1995 debate on Select Committees. I should like to add a couple of quotes to those given by my hon. Friend. The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire said that the issue at stake is

the upholding of our constituents' rights. I believe that for that purpose the law of Parliament is important. Once we start breaking that law, there will be no end to it."—[*Official Report*, 20 April 1995; Vol. 258, c. 399.]

That is why it is so important that this motion be passed.

Maria Eagle: Will my hon. Friend also look at the comments of the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) in that debate regarding the misbehaviour of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours)? The hon. Gentleman said:

"The worrying aspect is the 'demoism —the wish to take direct action to establish a form of street cred. The House should have no truck with that."—[*Official Report*, 20 April 1995; Vol. 258, c. 399.]

Mr. Hope: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the cant and hypocrisy of the Conservative party, which said one thing when it was in power in 1995 and which acts another way now.

In 1995, the then Conservative Leader of the House moved, with the support of the then Opposition, that any Select Committee

"shall have power to direct such Member to withdraw forthwith; and the Serjeant at Arms shall act on such instructions as he may receive from the chairman of the committee in pursuance of this Order."—[*Official Report*, 20 April 1995; Vol. 258, c. 383.]

However, we are today talking about a Standing Committee of the House, a point made by the hon. Member for North–East Hertfordshire in defence of his Front Benchers as they tried to disrupt the democratic procedures of the House.

How often will we allow this kind of behaviour to take place in this Parliament? What action should Parliament take to prevent an organised rebellion by the Opposition from undermining the democratic procedures of the House?

Mr. Pike: Is it not a fact that a democracy can work only if the Opposition are positive about their role? If they misuse the rules, democracy can be ground to a halt.

Mr. Hope: My hon. Friend is right. The passage from "Erskine May" quoted by the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire makes it clear that there have been orders in the past

"empowering the chairman of a standing committee to direct that any Member who disregards the authority of the chair or persistently and wilfully obstructs the business of the committee do withdraw immediately and directing the Serjeant at Arms to act on any consequent orders he may receive from the chairman."

Mr. Rogers: I am sorry that my hon. Friend is surprised at the behaviour of the Conservative party. The yob tendency has always been there. There was one occasion when the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) picked up the Mace to disrupt proceedings. I cannot quite see the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) being cast

in the role of Jane to the right hon. Gentleman's Tarzan. The Conservatives have always been a yob party. If they do not get their way, they behave like a bunch of yobs.

Mr. Hope: My hon. Friend is right. The anti-social behaviour orders that the Government have introduced to deal with yobs in the community may well have some bearing in the House.

Maria Eagle: Has my hon. Friend noticed from the debate in 1995 on disruption in Select Committees that the response of the then Government was immediately to come to the House to change a Standing Order to give a general power to Select Committee Chairmen to deal immediately with this kind of behaviour? Does he agree that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House might consider giving a general power to Standing Committee Chairmen so that we do not have to come to the House on every occasion to ask for a particular power?

Mr. Hope: My hon. Friend makes the very point that I was about to make. Although "Erskine May" makes it clear that there have been orders in the past on various occasions, some of which my hon. Friend the Member for Workington listed, there is no general power for a Standing Committee Chairman to impose his authority where there is and has been, as in this case, a persistent and wilful desire to obstruct the business of the House. It is therefore incumbent on the House to determine whether such a procedure, which currently applies to Select Committees, should now apply to Standing Committees to prevent the undermining of our democratic process.

The motion is before us because of the Conservative party's appalling behaviour. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald purports to support the rule of law and to condemn those who break the law, yet, with breathtaking hypocrisy, she deliberately set out to flout and break the rules of the House by which we make the very laws that she seeks to uphold. That exposes the arrogant contempt with which she treats our democratic—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's remarks about the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and about hypocrisy should be withdrawn and apologised for.

Mr. Hope: I apologise to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I have made any comments that are outside the accepted procedures of the House.

I hope that I am clearly making the point both to the House and to the external world that the contempt with which the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has behaved with regard to the Bill's Committee exposes the fact that she thinks that there is one rule for behaving outside but another way of behaving in the House.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): Will the hon. Gentleman explain to the House precisely how democracy is protected by a motion of one paragraph stating that the Bill shall be deemed to have been passed by the House? Is that not an outrageous breach of the rule that he is trying to establish?

Mr. Hope: Obviously the hon. Gentleman did not bother to listen to the first part of my contribution: the reasons we are debating this matter at this late hour are the contempt for the democratic procedures of the House and the anti-democratic behaviour exhibited by the shadow Home Secretary.

We have three tasks to undertake tonight. First, we must restore the proper democratic procedures of the House by passing the motion. Secondly, we must ensure not only that such behaviour is condemned but that the miscreants do not go unpunished.

Finally, on a point of parliamentary procedure, because of the anomaly as between Select Committees and Standing Committees, we should consider the introduction of new measures to ensure that never again will the procedures of the House be undermined by an Opposition who resort to breaking the rules of the House to have their way and to exert influence, because they cannot gain the support of the people through the ballot box.

11.57 pm

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The hon. Member for Corby (Mr. Hope) has got it wrong in a very big way. We are not in the Chamber this evening to discuss the behaviour of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and her colleagues; we are here because the Government are attempting to railroad through the House an extremely important and complex Bill in a way that shows utter contempt for the democratic procedures of the House.

Many years ago, when I was sitting on the Government Benches, I was so angry at the way the then Conservative Government were trying to guillotine a Bill that I walked out, saying that I would take no further part in the proceedings. At the time, I said that we should be careful about taking to ourselves powers that we do not want others to have. I commend that sentiment to the Minister of State and his hon. Friends. What we did in a minor way is being done in spades by the Labour Government—that lot opposite. It is quite disgraceful.

Mr. Charles Clarke *rose—*

Sir Patrick Cormack: Before I give way, I will give the Minister something else to talk about. Last Monday, he appeared as the first witness before the new Joint Committee on Human Rights, on which I am privileged to sit. We considered only one or two aspects of the Bill, but they showed—and the hon. Gentleman admitted in as many words—that the measure needs the most careful and detailed scrutiny. Indeed, he and I had a passage of arms over precisely what is meant by "quarrelsome" as distinct from "argumentative"—

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the hon. Gentleman to talk about unreported evidence?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: If the evidence is unreported, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) should avoid talking about it.

Sir Patrick Cormack: If I have transgressed in any sense, I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

The Minister knows that what we said during that sitting of the Joint Committee shows that the Bill needs the most detailed scrutiny. However, not only will a whole section of the Bill receive no detailed scrutiny—it will receive no scrutiny at all.

Mr. Clarke: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that none of the issues we discussed in that Committee were guillotined and that they were all debated fully? Will he take this opportunity to condemn the activities of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and say that they were wrong and out of order?

Sir Patrick Cormack: That is not the point at issue tonight. The hon. Gentleman made a very belligerent speech from the Dispatch Box. The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) adopted the advice given in Bardell *v.* Bardell in "Pickwick Papers"—weak case: abuse plaintiff's attorney. That is what he did this evening, and he has the good grace to laugh now. What we are really discussing this evening is the way in which the Government, without any regard for parliamentary propriety, seek to railroad Bill after Bill through the House with programme motions which are, in fact, guillotines in disguise.

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Patrick Cormack: Perhaps in a moment.

Few Members on either side of the House would have a legitimate argument against proper programming which gave proper time for all clauses in the Bill. When my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard)—a former shadow Leader of the House—and I briefly served on the Modernisation Committee, we made it plain, as did others, that we were prepared to discuss that proposal, but the Modernisation Committee has become the emasculation Committee; it is preventing the House from fulfilling its function. The prime function of the House is to subject to detailed and critical scrutiny measures introduced by the Executive, thereby holding the Executive to account.

Mrs. Beckett: Can the hon. Gentleman account for the fact that a similarly sized Bill was passed after half the number of sittings during the previous Parliament?

Sir Patrick Cormack: We are not debating that this evening; we are debating the way in which, time after time, the Government use a so-called programme motion as a guillotine—and use their massive majority, which is vastly in excess of the one we finished up with in the previous Parliament. The right hon. Lady should get the smile off her face and remember that she is, in fact, the Leader of the House; she has a responsibility to every Member to ensure that the procedures are properly followed.

Mr. Hope *rose—*

Mr. Frank Cook: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Patrick Cormack: No; I might give way later.

The right hon. Lady, for whom I have a high regard, is letting herself down very badly by putting her name to the motion. As Mr. Speaker said when he was in the Chair, it is a motion without precedent because we are being asked to deem something done which has not been done.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Sir Patrick Cormack: I should like to develop my argument, then I may perhaps give way again.

We are being asked to say that the House has done something that it has not done. We are being asked to be parties to a collective parliamentary lie. We are being asked to say that something has happened which has not happened.

Mr. Simon Hughes *rose—*

Sir Patrick Cormack: The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), in his admirable speech, made it plain that that is what we are being asked to do.

Mr. Cook: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has been a Member for longer than I have, and he has a very good memory. He is basing his argument on the fact that some clauses have not even been read, let alone debated. I ask him to cast his mind back to the Hungerford tragedy and the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1988, which was introduced as a result—the Minister then responsible is present this evening—when 67 clauses, many of which went against commitments given in Committee and which would not be applicable to Northern Ireland, were introduced on Report and the Bill was guillotined not against the then Opposition, on whose Front Benches I sat, but against Conservative Members, because the then Government had to deal with their own hunting, shooting and fishing crowd, who were very much against the measure. So let us have none of the misrepresentation about such a motion being unique and having been introduced for the first time, because that is far from accurate.

Sir Patrick Cormack: That was a very inexact analogy. However, I must inform the hon. Gentleman that I have spoken out—my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) has done so even more than I have—against guillotines by whomsoever they have been introduced. My hon. Friend's record is without equal, but I have a reasonable record too in that regard. I have never liked the instrument. I am not seeking to defend what may or may not have been done in the past.

Mr. Cook: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am sorry, but I will not give way again.

The hon. Gentleman has got it wrong. Labour Members are trying to rake up the embers of the past when we are concerned about the raging inferno of the present. We have a Government who are seeking to consign parliamentary procedures to the bonfire of their own vanity.

The motion is without precedent. We have never before in the history of Parliament had a Government who have come before the House and sought to persuade it to connive—I use my words deliberately and carefully—at the collective lie that something has been done that has not been done.

Dr. Ladyman *rose—*

Mr. Miller *rose—*

Sir Patrick Cormack: I will not give way.

We have not discussed the clauses and that is why the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey was right, in his admirable speech, to concentrate on that aspect of the issue. As he rightly said, we are discussing the Government's motion, which is urging us to deem something to have happened that has not happened.

Labour Members may laugh, but if any one of them goes into the Lobby to support the motion, he or she will be denying his or her parliamentary heritage. Any Member who votes for the motion is, in fact, voting for the Executive against the legislature. Any Member who votes for the motion is voting for the emasculation of Parliament and what it stands for and must continue for stand for.

Any Member who votes for the motion is voting against a free Parliament in a free country. [HON. MEMBERS: "Rubbish."] Labour Members may say that, but the Government have a massive majority. Of course, the real reason why we are being asked to accept the motion is that the Prime Minister—who has such a massive majority, who has 15 months of his mandate yet to run, who has, as he has readily told us many times, much unfinished business to do and who is now faced with a national calamity—now sees in the opinion polls what he believes to be a chance to renew his mandate. He will therefore rush anything through regardless of whether it is discussed or not.

Mr. Bercow: That is totally unacceptable.

Sir Patrick Cormack: As my hon. Friend says—but that is what the debate is all about.

Dr. Ladyman: I suspect that the hon. Gentleman deprecates what the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) did, but that he is too loyal to say so. However, will he at least accept that if we do not take action of the type the Government have proposed, what the right hon. Lady did will become the norm and we shall never again get business through the House?

Sir Patrick Cormack: What arrant nonsense. If we vote as we should for the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and his Friends, to which the Conservative party's Front-Bench spokesmen have attached their names, all that will happen is that Bill will receive adequate discussion and debate. That is what it must have and that is what it deserves. There will be no need for future protests. If the Leader of the House takes this lesson to heart, continues to hold her job and produces properly negotiated programmes that give adequate opportunity for all parts of all Bills to be fully discussed, the problem will not arise again.

At this late hour, we face an important matter. In my 31 years in the House, never has Parliament faced such a serious transgression of its rights and privileges by the Executive, who are trying to prevent the legislature from holding them to account. They are behaving with a draconian ferocity that is usually found only in dictatorships. For that reason, it is incumbent on every lover of parliamentary democracy to go into the Lobby to support the amendment.

12.11 am

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): I am amazed at the general air of hypocrisy that is seeping from Conservative Benches. It stinks. Those of us who sat through the 1980s and saw the Government use their majority to push through the privatisation of gas, transport, electricity and the atomic weapons establishment can only cringe. I understand why some older Members have sat through our proceedings with a smile on their faces, but I also understand the bowel syndrome of new Members. Their constipated look of pain has been fed by the oracle, the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack), who has suggested that something terrible is happening. It is a pretty awful scene. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said that he, too, understands the Conservatives' frustration—their bowel syndrome. However, I cannot bear to hear the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) bounce from pillar to post. He has more sides than an old thruppenny bit, which is typical of Liberal Democrats in action.

What happened last Thursday is regrettable, but the hon. Member for South Staffordshire should reflect on this thought: regardless of whether the Government were right or wrong to introduce a programme motion, they have a majority and the rules under which the Committee was to operate were set down. The Opposition have deliberately conspired to go against the wishes of the elected Parliament, but he should remember that the shoe is on Labour's foot, in the same way as it was on the Conservatives' foot in the 1980s—and, by gosh, did they use it. Talk about boots being made for walking—they walked over all semblance of democracy in the House and rammed through all the legislation that they wanted, so much so that someone said that a large majority might be bad for democracy. However, that is another argument. The Liberal Democrats will not like the system because they stand no chance of getting a majority.

Mr. Stunell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rogers: No. The hon. Gentleman can speak for himself later.

Some sanctions must be applied. If we do not accept that, we cannot accept that the House is able to set the rules under which we operate.

From the swinging of the mace to the swinging in the trees, Opposition Members want to make Parliament a jungle. It has been pointed out that the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) had a peerless record of standing against his own Government when he felt that something was wrong. I have such a record, but I cannot honestly see that any wrongdoing occurred in this case,

[Mr. Rogers]

except that the official Opposition deliberately conspired to break the rules of the House. If they are allowed to get away with it, parliamentary democracy will go out of the window.

12.15 am

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate, but I am rather sorry that it is taking place at all. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson), who is a Whip, seeks to participate. Perhaps he will deviate further from procedure and speak in the debate as he is already having a stab at it.

We are debating not the conduct of particular Members but that of a Government who are prepared to deem that a Bill has been considered in Committee—

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Brady: I cannot resist.

Mr. Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman take the opportunity to condemn unreservedly the activities of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe)?

Mr. Brady: I will take the opportunity to condemn unreservedly the arrogant contempt that the Minister and his colleagues show for the House. I shall express the strong views held by Conservative and, I am pleased to say, Liberal Democrat Members. We believe in parliamentary democracy, and the hon. Gentleman, as a Minister of the Crown, ought to have regard for Parliament and some understanding of why we were all sent here.

Mr. Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Brady: The Minister made a pathetic point the last time he intervened, so I shall not give way again. He and his colleagues must begin to understand that they are not here simply because of one day on which there was a general election—*[Laughter.]* Labour Members show how little they understand parliamentary democracy; it does not begin and end on the day of a general election.

We are sent here to do a job, not to be ciphers or delegates or to endorse the Labour manifesto, and even Labour Members frequently depart not only from the manifesto but increasingly from their pledge card. The essence of our job entails scrutiny of legislation and requires that all Members, even Labour Members, should devote their minds and their energy to considering the quality of legislation put before them in Committee. I have sat on Standing Committees and seen how rarely Labour Members do that. All Members have that obligation. The Government are prepared to ride roughshod over the rights of Members from all parties to perform that duty. In addition, I suspect that when we vote later this morning, Labour Members will simply accept this neutering of the role of Members of Parliament.

Mr. Ian Bruce: Is not the situation even worse than that? Police morale is at rock bottom. The Minister of State is responsible for police morale, yet he grins and keeps making inane points instead of saying why Members have not even discussed all the clauses that deal with the police.

Mr. Brady: My hon. Friend makes his point eloquently, and it will not be lost on members of police forces throughout the country that the Minister responsible for them is not prepared to allow parliamentary debate of matters relating to the police.

Mr. Heald: When I talked to the Police Federation about the matter this morning, its response was great dismay that discussion of whole clauses on which it wanted assurances was simply guillotined.

Mr. Brady: I am not surprised to hear that. The dismay of the Police Federation is mirrored not just by dismay but by cynicism and scepticism among the public, to which the Prime Minister has alluded. Is it any wonder that the electorate, whom we are meant to serve, hold the House of Commons in such low esteem, when it is clear that the Executive hold us in such low esteem and we are not permitted to do the job that we are sent here to do and raise our constituents' concerns?

Mr. Hogg: The position is even graver than my hon. Friend has said. It is not just that these clauses have not been discussed in Committee. Under the timetable motion that the House has passed, they cannot be discussed on Report or even, by implication, on Third Reading. There will not be enough time at those stages either, so they will never be discussed.

Mr. Brady: My right hon. and learned Friend has many more years' experience in the House than I have, but in my four years here I have seen the destruction of so much of the freedom and the power of the House of Commons that it appals me. It is frightening to contemplate what the Government are seeking to do: trying further to reduce the powers and the rights of the House of Commons to scrutinise legislation. In doing so, Ministers do a disservice not merely to the Opposition but to themselves, the House of Commons and to the office of Government.

Ultimately, the problem is not just that we will not be able to scrutinise the Government's legislation, or that the Police Federation and other interested bodies will not have their views expressed. As the Government have discovered so many times in the past few years, their all-too-shoddy legislation will not have the opportunity of scrutiny and, therefore, will not be improved by the consideration that it should receive in Committee. If Ministers had a little more humility and a little less arrogance, they might accept that Parliament has a genuinely important function in seeking to improve what the Government introduce. If a Government are not too arrogant to see that, they can benefit. An arrogant Government such as this will soon be discovered by the failures of their legislation.

Mr. Lock: The hon. Gentleman and I have been in the House for the same time, and I am trying to following his argument. Is he suggesting that the duty that he owes to people outside this House means that he has the right to override the House's rules and procedures in trying to fulfil that duty?

Mr. Brady: The Minister is trying hard but he is not doing very well. Surely the crucial point is that, when

the House behaves as a proper, functioning part of a free Parliament, procedural matters are dealt with broadly by agreement among all parties. This programming procedure manifestly does not have the support of the House of Commons. It has been forced through by the Executive, who object as a matter of principle to being held to account and do not like to face parliamentary scrutiny.

When the Executive are prepared to force their way in procedural matters and abuse the rights of the House of Commons, the procedure has less validity than when it is agreed properly by all parties. Ministers need to understand that if they are to ride roughshod over the interests of the House of Commons and ignore the rights of Back Benchers, and particularly the Opposition parties, they will lose. I happily give way to the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). *[Interruption.]* I could have sworn that he wanted to make another entertaining contribution to the debate. I wish that he had been about to; I would have enjoyed it immensely.

Ministers must understand that if they abuse the rights of the House, seek to suppress debate and to prevent scrutiny of their legislation, overturn and disregard its procedures and instead impose procedures on it rather than gaining agreement for them, the House must fight to retain its independence. It must fight to have the right to scrutinise legislation. It must hold Ministers to account.

12.25 am

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): I shall speak only briefly because I do not want to delay the passage of the excellent Criminal Justice and Police Bill.

I was pleased to be asked to be a member of the Committee that was to scrutinise the Bill. I took my role seriously. We had hour after hour to debate the detail of the Bill. Extra sittings were made available to us to debate—

Mr. Fabricant: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Humble: No, I will not give way. The hon. Gentleman can make his own contribution later.

We had plenty of time to debate the detail of the Bill. Yet the Opposition have said explicitly that they are seeking to delay it. They admit that last week's extraordinary behaviour was deliberate. The message that my constituents will take from this evening's debate will not be about the detail of parliamentary procedure but about the fact that the Opposition want to delay the passage of legislation that they want to see on the statute book.

I remind the Opposition of an occasion in Committee when Conservative Members agreed with me. I pointed out the need to consult local communities when areas were to be designated by local authorities for the purpose of making illegal drinking in public places. The Opposition also agreed with my hon. Friend the Minister of State on other aspects of the Bill. Yet now they are trying deliberately to delay the passage of the Bill.

The message that I will take back to my constituents is that the Opposition do not want to support measures to give the police powers to control drunken behaviour; or measures to allow licensed premises where disorder is taking place to be closed; or measures to limit the right of convicted drug traffickers to travel; or measures to protect workers who are engaged in legal employment. That is the message of the debate.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Humble: No, I will not.

My constituents want to see all those provisions enacted. They benefited from byelaws—

Mr. Heald: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Humble: Yes. I am a generous soul.

Mr. Heald: As the hon. Lady said, we did agree from time to time in Committee. Does she recall the Huntingdon Life Sciences new clauses, which were to be dealt with at the end of consideration of the Bill in Committee? That would have been the position if I had not moved that they should be brought forward. That was my idea, and it was accepted later by the Minister. Those new clauses would not have been brought forward if the order of consideration had remained the same.

Mrs. Humble: I remind the hon. Gentleman that several Members raised that issue in points of order. My hon. Friend the Minister listened to those points of order.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Does my hon. Friend agree that at the first meeting of the Programming Sub-Committee, and at all subsequent meetings, I said to the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) and to Members of other Opposition parties, in accordance with practice, that it was for the Opposition to determine the order of the amendments to be debated? When a proposal was made, I said that we would accept it immediately, and we did.

Mrs. Humble: I return to the point that I was making. In my constituency, Blackpool, we already have byelaws that cover some of the matters dealt with in the Bill, such as drinking in public places. Those byelaws have been extremely successful. The police welcomed them, as did the local community. However, that is a cumbersome way of dealing with an important issue. The Bill will enable many other local authorities to deal much more efficiently with the sorts of problems that we encountered in my constituency, with which the police are now dealing through byelaws. Unless the Bill is passed, other local authorities will not be able to do that without going through all the rigmarole of byelaws. My constituents want the Bill passed. The message that I shall take back after this debate is that the Opposition do not want that. Long may they stay in opposition, so that we shall have a Labour Government who will protect my constituents and deliver public safety.

12.30 am

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): It is unusual for me to be in the House at this time of night, and it is even more unusual for me to try to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, tonight is different. I am speaking because I am furious at the Government's action in putting before the House a motion that hits at the main purpose of the House, which is to give adequate line-by-line scrutiny to all legislation before us.

[Mr. John Townend]

I believe that the motion proposed by the Minister is an abuse of power and undermines the power of Members of Parliament. The Government are asking us to accept that the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, which has not been reported to the House, should be deemed to have been reported, even though 41 clauses, amounting to 85 pages of text, have not been discussed. That is particularly objectionable because this is a criminal justice Bill affecting individuals' rights before the courts.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Townend: In a minute. The Minister must be patient.

I shall point out just two items covered by the clauses that have not been discussed: inferences to be drawn from silence in police conduct proceedings, and courts to give reasons for granting opposed bail. Those are extremely important.

If I give way to the Minister, I hope that he will not ask me whether I condemn my colleagues on the Front Bench. I do not. I hope that the Minister will agree that the proposition that something should be deemed to have been done is a serious matter and would set a very serious precedent. Will the hon. Gentleman give an undertaking to the House that such a motion will never be moved in respect of a Second Reading or a Third Reading?

Mr. Clarke: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the reason why the Committee's proceedings were not completed was the yobbish behaviour of the right. hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe)? Will he condemn that behaviour?

Mr. Townend: The Minister does not seem to have been taught when he was a small boy that two wrongs do not make a right. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I must tell the House that he is entitled to a respectful hearing, as is any hon. Member.

Mr. Townend: The Minister has forgotten that even if members of the Government think that Opposition Members have acted incorrectly, that is no justification for bringing before the House a motion that undermines the House and sets a precedent, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) said, by asking the House to accept a lie and to state that something has happened which has not happened.

Mr. McCabe: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. If I accept his argument, will he tell me in return what he thinks would be the appropriate response of the House to gross disruptive behaviour that was deliberately designed and organised to disrupt parliamentary procedure? What would be the appropriate way forward?

Mr. Townend: It is appropriate for the House to behave properly and send the Bill back to Committee.

Mr. McCabe: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Townend: No, let me answer your question first. You are setting a precedent—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is an experienced Member. He must use the correct parliamentary language.

Mr. Townend: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What point was the hon. Gentleman making?

Mr. McCabe: I remind the hon. Gentleman that I was asking what would be an appropriate response. He has kindly told the House that it would be appropriate to send the Bill back to Committee. What steps would he take to ensure that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and her colleagues would not do exactly the same thing the minute the Bill went back to Committee?

Mr. Townend: The hon. Gentleman seems to have missed the point made by the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours). There are numerous occasions on which such things have happened; Government Members' objection is that, this time, instead of being organised by the Whips Office, as it probably was in the past, it was done openly and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) led from the front. Government Members are not objecting to the principle; they are objecting merely because those on our Front Bench were involved.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) asked what the answer is. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire said, the Government have a large majority and ample time. They have another 15 months. My hon. Friends are talking about another two or three days. There is no need for the Government to rush into an election—*[Laughter.]* The hon. Member for Hall Green may laugh, but I have a rural seat and, as all of the countryside is coming to a halt, it is strange that the Government are proposing to have an election and force things through. They have tabled a motion that sets a dangerous precedent.

Mr. Blunt: Of course, there is an answer to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe). If the Bill went back into a Committee without an artificial timetable and deadline, the Committee would be able to take powers to tackle any disorder without our having to come to the House to deal with it. The deadline imposed by the Government is the cause of the entire problem.

Mr. Townend: As I said, this is not the first time that the Government have sidelined Parliament and reduced its powers. One reason why I decided to stand down at the election, even though my constituency party wanted me

to do another term, is that Parliament has been undermined. When I came here 22 years ago, I was proud of our unwritten constitution, monarchy and parliamentary democracy. Parliament was supreme; one Parliament could not bind the next. We did not have a supreme court; the people of this country were the supreme court, through their elected representatives in Parliament. If the courts did not interpret legislation correctly, Parliament could pass further legislation and impose its will on them.

Now, Parliament has lost that right. With the incorporation of human rights legislation in British law, we can be overruled by judges. Every day, more power is transferred to Europe—it is all part of the same programme, as has been brought home to me. To be fair, the previous Government allowed power to go to Europe. At that time, I remember fighting for my constituency, as a parliamentarian should. I have a fishing constituency; we persuaded the Government to stop quota hopping, and they passed the Merchant Shipping Act 1988. They were overruled by the European Court of Justice and had to pay the Spaniards millions of pounds in damages.

It is worrying that more power has gone to Scotland and Northern Ireland. Eventually, it will go to the British regions. Parliament has been neutered—indeed, it has been castrated. What the Government are suggesting tonight is just another step in that process. That is very serious, and I do not want to be part of it.

12.40 am

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): It is extraordinary to consider, having heard the hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend), that only a week ago Conservative Members were putting forward exactly the opposite argument. They were seeking to argue, on Standing Orders issues, that it was appropriate that the House should bind a future Parliament. However, the hon. Gentleman now seems to be arguing a different point. *[Interruption.]* If he does not understand what I am saying, he should read the debates on procedural motions that have taken place in the House.

I understand the frustration of being on the Opposition Benches. I sat there for five years.

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think that the hon. Gentleman might unwittingly have misled the House. He said that certain statements were made by hon. Members on this side of the House when they were not. Would he now like to say precisely when those statements were made?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is a matter for debate.

Mr. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If the hon. Gentleman cares to read *Hansard*, he will understand what I am saying.

Mr. Bercow: When?

Mr. Miller: The hon. Gentleman shouts "When?" from a sedentary position. With his photographic memory, all that he needs to do is get his photographs processed. Then he would understand.

I was saying that I understood the frustrations of being in Opposition. Five years was long enough for me. I understand even more the frustration of the Liberal Democrats. The frustration of sitting on their Bench must be absolutely enormous.

We must understand, looking back at the history of this place, that Governments get their business through and Oppositions try to amend it. Sometimes, in periods of great frustration, Oppositions fail to achieve that.

The Opposition—fragmented, split, and not understanding the will of the people of this nation—have failed to understand the golden offer given to them by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House when she presented the changes with which we are now experimenting. The Opposition misunderstood the difference between time and timing. They have this daft idea that, by keeping things going for ever, they are going to convince members of the public of the wisdom of their way. Would not it be better if they used the opportunities in the Chamber and upstairs in Committee to use timing, like a good cricketer? A good cricketer can score more runs by using good timing than by stonewalling for ever.

Mr. Heald: I am not going to talk about cricket, even though the English team was so successful recently. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that during the Committee—in which the Minister said that there was time-wasting—the Chairman of the Committee said:

> "My view, and that of my co-Chairman, is that, to date, there has been no untoward or over-lengthy debate . . . we are dealing with intricate issues".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 15 February 2001; c. 199.]?

That is exactly the view put forward by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). This was not a case of time-wasting; this was simply a case of not having enough time to do the job.

Mr. Miller: If I had suggested that the hon. Gentleman was deliberately time-wasting in Committee, I would clearly have been out of line with the views of the Chairman of the Committee, and Mr. Deputy Speaker would quite rightly have called me to order. I was trying to explain to the hon. Gentleman in the Smoking Room the other day that if he looked at a Bill, as it was published, identified the parts on which he thought that the Government Front Bench was on shaky ground, and negotiated with the Leader of the House to ensure that those parts of the Bill had substantive examination on prime time television, he would get far more out of it. But no; as with many other Bills, the Opposition did not see the wisdom of that approach. The truth is that they have nothing to offer. They have no challenge to Ministers that they are even prepared to have exposed on prime time television. We are considering an issue of law and order.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, but really the debate is about proper scrutiny of legislation, not prime time television. Does he think that every part of a Bill should be considered in Committee?

Mr. Miller: Members of the House and of the other place should ensure that, before they cast their vote on Report, they are satisfied that that which they are voting on meets the will of the House. I apologise for intervening on the hon. Gentleman during his speech, but I thought

[Mr. Miller]

that, tactically, he was going down a dangerous route. He needs to understand that, whatever the rights and wrongs of the way in which Ministers presented the issues, the bottom line must be that the House cannot accept hooligan behaviour. Democracy cannot be conducted in such a way.

Mr. Hogg: I put to the hon. Gentleman the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack). In Committee, there are essentially two matters at stake: policy and the language used to reflect that policy. If the language of the statute is not right, that will cause immense problems in the courts and elsewhere. It is the business of a Committee to consider the language of each clause in order to perfect it, if perfecting it needs.

Mr. Miller: I would be more sympathetic to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's views if guillotine after guillotine had not fallen when I sat on the Opposition Benches. Those guillotines were operated by Conservative Members, including him. We are dealing with issues of law and order. I genuinely thought that all Members of the House wanted to stamp out the criminality, bad behaviour and anti-social behaviour that goes on throughout the nation. How can the nation accept leadership from the House if we accept hooligan behaviour?

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is entitled to make such points, but they are not the central issue. Will he deal with that? Why do not the Government support the amendment? It would allow us to complete consideration in Committee and the Bill to complete all its stages. It would allow democracy and would prevent nothing. Let us leave to one side the punishment of people who may have disrupted the House, as I gather that another motion has been tabled for debate tomorrow. We can debate that matter another time.

Mr. Miller: I am not aware that such a motion has been tabled as I have not seen tomorrow's Order Paper, although I look forward to reading it. I may seek to amend the motion because I might not think that the proposed punishment is sufficient. *[Laughter.]* There is laughter, but the simple fact is that we need to set standards. We have sought to set standards in respect of football hooligans by preventing certain people from travelling to away matches. Perhaps that means that Opposition Front Benchers must not travel away to the Committee Corridor. We have introduced anti-social behaviour orders, which constrain people. We have considered introducing curfews. Those punishments may be appropriate.

The bottom line is that we cannot have one law for Members of the House, in any aspect of life, and another for private citizens. How can the nation be expected to work with us and the forces of law and order to improve standards in society if it is considered acceptable for an official Opposition to act in such a manner? Whatever the rights and wrongs of the programming of a Bill, I will not be drawn into the particular by the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), because I was not on the Committee. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] That is a matter of record. As I was not on the Committee, I do not know precisely what people said to each other.

We must ensure that a Bill has adequate time. I raised the point on the Floor of the House in respect of the Vehicles (Crime) Bill, because 14 out of 18 columns dealing with one of its clauses were taken up by an Opposition Front-Bench spokesman. If we analyse the content of those 14 columns, we realise that only three columns dealt with the substance of the clause.

Mr. Bercow: Read them out.

Mr. Miller: The hon. Gentleman has a photographic memory, so I am sure that he can remember every one of his own words.

Dr. Ladyman: Would my hon. Friend take it from someone who was on the Committee that the constructive element of the Opposition's case, if it had been put by a private company and someone was paying the bill, would have been contracted into about 30 minutes?

Mr. Miller: My hon. Friend's recent, high-level experience in the private sector may legitimately lead him to that conclusion. As he was on the Committee, I accept his judgment.

The House must set standards. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and her cohorts in this disruption have set standards that are unacceptable to the House and to a nation that is crying out for leadership on law and order. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is seeking to give that leadership, and any respectable Opposition would support him hook, line and sinker in his attempts to do so.

12.52 am

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I am glad to make a short contribution to the debate. It is noticeable that Government Members have not addressed the motion. The problem is that the motion asks us to deem that black is white, and that something that ought to have happened, but which everyone in the House knows has not happened, has happened. That is why it is unprecedented and wrong, and we should not accept it.

The problem comes about because the Government have gone in for programme motions, pushed through with their large majority, that do not give sufficient time for an important Bill of this nature. The Government describe it as their flagship Bill, but they have allowed only 15 sittings for this important criminal justice legislation. I should like to compare that with the way in which the Conservative Government behaved when we put through important legislation. I shall give two examples of criminal justice legislation that I think are fair. The first is the Criminal Justice Act 1982, and the second is the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. I sat on both Committees—for obvious reasons, I had a close relationship with almost all the criminal justice legislation that went through in those 18 years.

The Criminal Justice Act 1982 set the scene, as everyone who follows the courts knows, for the

magistrates courts, the Crown courts and criminal justice powers for a generation. It had 45 clauses, was considered during 22 sittings, and went through at exactly this time of year, between January and the end of March. It went through as a result of sensible agreement. We did not sit late, we did not waste time, and we had a full debate.

Mrs. Beckett: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Of course.

Mrs. Beckett: Would the right hon. and learned Gentleman care to include in his example the Bill that became the Police Act 1997, debated in 1996–97? It was about the size of this Bill, and went through at the same time of year with half the number of sittings.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Let us consider my example for a moment. The Bill went through and was fully debated, and that could have happened in this instance.

I cited the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 because it started life as the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill 1983. Again, it was a highly important piece of legislation, which appeared in the run-up to the 1983 general election. It fell because, although it completed all its stages in the House in the early part of 1983, there was no time for it to go through the other place. It therefore did not become law.

Every Member present tonight must accept the overwhelming probability that this Bill, too, will not become law because there is likely to be a general election on 3 May. If that does not happen, there will be plenty of time for the Bill to be taken through the House properly; if it does, the Bill will fall. When we had the power, we allowed a reasonable and proper time, and that is what ought to be done now.

Mr. Straw: May I return the right hon. and learned Gentleman to the point put to him by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House? The 1983 example is a very poor one for the Opposition to use. It is true that we were in "oppositionist" mode in that year: we refused to agree to legislation going through in a truncated form before the election, although we broadly agreed with it. That is one of the reasons why we paid such a heavy price in the polls. *[Interruption.]* It is true. It is a matter of record.

Let me bring the right hon. and learned Gentleman up to date, and return him to 1996–97. The Police Bill to which my right hon. Friend referred was of a similar length to this Bill and similarly non-controversial, but it nevertheless required examination. It had much less examination in practice, and we agreed it. That strikes me as a far better precedent; why do the Opposition not follow it?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: The difference between the Home Secretary and me is that I was a member of the Committee considering the 1983 Bill, while he was not. Yes, there was a good deal of opposition for opposition's sake on Labour's part, and Labour Members were wrong to do that, but the 1983 Bill is not a good example. The debate was constructive, the Bill went through all its stages in the House of Commons, and it was scrutinised sensibly.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): The right hon. and learned Gentleman will recall that I was a member of that Committee. My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman) led for the Opposition. We had a constructive debate, which resulted in the enactment of the Bill. What would the right hon. and learned Gentleman have thought had my right hon. Friend led a sit down strike in the Committee?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: That is not the point. *[Interruption.]* Hold on a second: I will respond to the hon. Gentleman's intervention before returning to what I was saying.

Complaint is made about the manner of protests here, but the fact that a protest may transgress rules does not justify oppression if oppression has given rise to that protest. That argument would have been used against John Hampden, the Tolpuddle martyrs and Mr. Gandhi.

Mr. Hogg: My right hon. and learned Friend referred to the Police and Criminal Evidence Bill. I was the Whip on the Committee considering the second Bill. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Mr. Bell) asked what our reaction would have been to the intervention of the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Mr. Kaufman). He would never have acted in that way because there was no timetable. The Committee ensured that there was adequate time for the Bill to be debated, so there was no reason, justification or need for such action.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: My right hon. and learned Friend is exactly right. Both those Bills were properly scrutinised and, as I think that the whole House would agree, became good legislation.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Why is it that after five interventions on the Police Act 1996, no Tory Member is prepared to address himself or herself to the questions that are being asked, which are very simple? In our consideration of the 1996 Act, 18 clauses and schedules were dealt with per sitting. In our consideration of this Bill, nine clauses and schedules are being dealt with per sitting. In other words, in 1996, under the Tory Government, twice as many provisions were considered per sitting. Rather than waffling, why does not the right hon. and learned Gentleman address the specific issue of the 1996 Act?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I have heard special pleading before, and I hear it from the hon. Gentleman now. Labour Members really have to make up their minds about the 1996 Act—are they saying that it was pushed through with or without adequate consideration? We are saying that this Bill—it cannot be denied—is not being adequately considered and that it is being pushed through unreasonably fast. I have participated in the Committee's consideration of the Bill, which has had 15 or 16 sittings.

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

If it had had about 22 sittings, it could have been perfectly adequately dealt with. If it could not have been so considered by the general election, it could have been reintroduced after the general election.

There are reasonable ways of dealing with these matters. It is not right that we have not had time to address really important issues such as the disclosure of material from the Inland Revenue to overseas Governments. Those issues have given rise to very sensible letters to all Committee members. Some of those letters, however, arrived only the day before or on the very day on which we reached the aspects with which they deal. There has therefore been no time to deal with those aspects. The legislation is being handled badly.

Mr. McCabe: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Forgive me, but no.

This motion tries to say that black is white and it is a precedent that should not be followed. It should be opposed and defeated in the Lobby today.

1.2 am

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): As a Committee member, I should like to make just a couple of brief points. We are being told by the Opposition that it would be an outrage and disgraceful for Parliament to pass the motion. Perhaps I take an over-simplified view of these matters, but it seems to me that the reality is that there was a programme motion on which there was a vote. The Chairman often acknowledged that fact to the Committee. Earlier, the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) said that the Opposition had agreed to an experimental programme motion.

Mrs. Browning: I think that the hon. Gentleman must have misheard me. Conservative Members opposed the programme motion on principle and voted against it. We particularly opposed the programme motion for consideration of this Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) tabled an amendment to that motion, but Labour Members voted against it, so the amendment was not agreed to.

Mr. McCabe: I am grateful. I must have misheard the hon. Lady. I thought that she said that the Opposition had agreed to the experiment although they had some reservations about it.

The point is that the events occurred with fewer than 10 minutes to go in the Committee's consideration of the Bill. After those 10 minutes had elapsed, the outstanding matters would have been guillotined regardless, putting us in exactly the same position as we are in now.

It is possible for experienced and honourable Conservative Members to huff and puff about the outrage and the affront. However, the reality is that we were within 10 minutes of the end of the Committee's proceedings—exactly the position that we are in now. At that point the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) chose to prevent that from happening by barging into the Committee and disrupting its procedures. That is what happened, no matter how it is dressed up or described. We should not delude ourselves about what actually happened.

Whether Conservative Members liked it or not, the programme motion had been put to a vote—the Chairman reminded them of that on numerous occasions in Committee. We had reached the stage at which the Committee had run out of time, and we would have guillotined the outstanding items. However, we were prevented from doing so because of the actions of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): In Committee, the hon. Gentleman appeared to have reservations about some aspects of the Bill. Does he think that adequate time was given for proper consideration of all the 132 clauses as well as the new clauses? If not, will he vote for the amendment tonight?

Mr. McCabe: First, let me say that I thought that the hon. Lady's contribution in Committee was extremely helpful. She was very constructive in her opposition.

To answer her question, I thought that when members of the Committee turned their attention to the content of the Bill and the issues of substance that it contains, there was effective scrutiny. As she knows, there were matters on which I and others had reservations. I felt that my hon. Friend the Minister did his level best to take on board many of those reservations. The record of the Committee's proceedings show numerous examples of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) thanking the Minister for the consideration that he gave to the objections cited. My view is that when the Committee turned its attention to the substance of the Bill, scrutiny was ideal.

The difficulty is the amount of time that was wasted, a point which the official Opposition cannot escape. We had numerous references to and complaints about the programme motion, despite the fact that the Chairman made it plain what his ruling was and that he did not want to pursue the matter further. We had a lengthy debate on whether the term "British islands" should be in the Bill. At the end of that debate, we discovered that that term had been in use since 1978. No Conservative Member had chosen to table an amendment challenging those words in any piece of legislation that had gone through the House since 1978, yet they spent at least an hour debating whether "British islands" was an appropriate term. What that has to do with the police or the criminal justice system in this country, I do not know.

There were lengthy references to the "Dangerfield" television programme regarding the use of samples and whether a doctor or a registered nurse might be the appropriate person to take a sample. It is worth right hon. and hon. Members hearing about the effective scrutiny to which the Bill was sometimes subject. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) told us:

"I was especially interested in the series because a great deal of its filming took place in and around the courts where I practised. The Parliamentary Secretary is not with us at the moment, but he was also on that circuit. Much of the filming was done in and around towns such as Warwick, and the exteriors of real police stations were quite often used. It was a successful series with a wide and large audience, and doubtless there is now greater appreciation of the serious risks that sometimes face not only officers but police doctors".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 8 March 2001; c. 602.]

That added a great deal to the scrutiny of the Bill.

Mr. Stunell: Do I understand the hon. Gentleman to argue that two wrongs make a right? Is he entirely happy with that argument?

Mr. McCabe: Either I am doing a very bad job of explaining myself or the hon. Gentleman is not hearing me properly. I am making the point that it is not a question of two wrongs making a right; there was a vote on a programme motion and, as is normal, we accepted the ruling of that vote and the ruling of the Chair. It was only when the Opposition realised that they were not going to have their way—after deliberately wasting time throughout the Committee's proceedings—that they chose to use a further parliamentary, or non-parliamentary, device. Those were the actions of a flying picket—an attempt to block our legitimate procedure. That is not a question of two wrongs.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I shall not ask the hon. Gentleman to give his views on flying pickets in public.

Putting aside the people involved, does the hon. Gentleman agree that what happened on Thursday was that Members of the House used a tactic open to any Member to try to prevent the fulfilment of the timetable? It was just as proper a tactic to try as any other. In the event, it has brought us to the Chamber tonight. However, whether or not the Committee stage is guillotined, that does not answer the question why we should not go back to finish the Bill's Committee proceedings.

Mr. McCabe: I have great respect for the hon. Gentleman's views, but he is fundamentally wrong on this matter. Whatever his view, he knows that if that spectacular intervention had not taken place—with less than 10 minutes to go—the Bill would properly have completed its proceedings. The hon. Gentleman may have disagreed with the manner in which the procedure was organised, but that would have been the outcome. The only reason that did not happen was that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald was unhappy about it.

The Opposition freely admit that they had used all the normal procedures of the House to try to prevent the Bill's proceedings. Not content with the outcome and unprepared to accept the judgment of the House, they decided to ignore that judgment and to take another course of action. If we were to take the position advocated by the hon. Gentleman—to go back to the point at which the right hon. Lady disrupted the Committee's proceedings—I have no confidence that, as soon as something occurred that the Opposition were not happy about, they would once again dispense with parliamentary rules and go back to the same bullying tactics. That is how they are prepared to behave.

Mrs. Beckett: Of course, I understand the point that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) is trying to make. However, does my hon. Friend agree that the danger with the course of action for which the hon. Gentleman argues is that it creates an incentive for people to repeat conduct that we all deplore?

Mr. McCabe: It would be difficult to arrive at any other conclusion. That is exactly what would happen. It appears that we are being told that the House can vote and take decisions on procedure, but that at any point when the Opposition lose a vote—fairly and squarely—and are unhappy about it, they can tear up the rule book. We are being asked to agree that if they take such actions, we should go back to square one and let them do it again. For the life of me, I cannot see the sense of that.

Tonight, as my constituents in Hall Green look at the broken glass outside rowdy pubs or wonder what is happening down the street, not many of them would be too happy if we let offenders have a second chance.

Earlier, we talked about police morale. The morale of the police officers whose pensions would have been sanctioned by the provisions in the Bill that we were due to discuss will not have been particularly reinforced by the actions we witnessed on Thursday—especially if we are not allowed to complete our proceedings. The decision to prevent us from reinstating the rank of chief superintendent—that reinstatement was largely supported by the vast majority of police officers—will not necessarily boost police morale; the police have been asking for that reinstatement for years.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): I am interested to hear my hon. Friend's account of the proceedings of the Committee, although I am not sure that his description of the antics of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) as "spectacular" is appropriate. Does he agree that those events demonstrate not only the need for the programming of legislation but that perhaps we need more effective programming to ensure that all the important parts of a Bill are debated?

Mr. McCabe: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. We are still in an experimental phrase, and we need to learn from the experiment. I am sure that improvements can be made.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McCabe: Not just now, thanks.

Undoubtedly, improvements can be made, but the bottom line remains that there must be good will and good faith on both sides when we enter into any experiment. We must believe that, having voted for something, other hon. Members will respect that decision. We must also believe that the time made available will be used constructively. Let us not hear lengthy discussions about the British islands, the "Dangerfield" television series, the virtues of Mr. Matthew Gullick—the son of a High court judge and a junior Conservative party researcher, who is paid to write amendments occasionally. If we have to listen to his suggestions and those of his colleagues being read into the record—

Mr. Heald: Matthew Gullick—a Conservative researcher—was mentioned because the Government accepted three of the amendments that he drafted. Should he not have been mentioned? He did rather well.

Mr. McCabe: It is perfectly true that Matthew Gullick was mentioned on day one, when the hon. Member for Surrey Heath said that the score was three nil. He was mentioned the following day. On the third day, the Chairman of the Committee said that he need not be mentioned again. That certainly was three nil.

If there is time wasting, inevitable repetition and less focus on the content, it ill becomes anyone to talk about having insufficient time to scrutinise the Bill. As I said at the outset, I welcomed Opposition Members' efforts when they turned their attention to the content. It is an important Bill and there have been important issues to discuss, but it is too late to bleat about running out of time when the time available has been used for everything but consideration of the Bill. To block the Bill by the outrageous behaviour that we witnessed on Thursday, involving discourtesy to the police and the Chairman of the Committee, and then to say tonight that the motion it is an outrage to parliamentary democracy beggars belief.

1.17 am

Mr. Richard Shepherd (Aldridge-Brownhills): The motion seeks to do two things. First, it states that the

"Bill shall be deemed to have been reported to the House, as amended by the Committee, and as if those Clauses and Schedules the consideration of which had not been completed by the Committee had been ordered to stand part of the Bill".

Secondly, it states:

"with the outstanding Amendments which stood on the Order Paper in the name of Mr. Charles Clarke."

The Minister's amendments—no one else's—will be deemed to have been discussed, so a clear distinction has been made.

Why am I concerned about the motion? It does not take any great feat of imagination to think that it reinvents history. Four days ago, the House failed to do something. The Government have moved a motion that states that it has done something. Stalin rewrote history. I am concerned about the rewriting of history by deeming things to have happened that have not—because what else can be deemed to have happened?

A Minister of the Crown could say that he deems that the Bill has completed all its stages. That is why Mr. Speaker said, when sitting in the Chair, that the motion was without precedent. That is why it is very serious. The Minister's belligerence made me think that he was nervous about the case that he was presenting.

The motion and the amendment test the Government's response. The Bill has not been debated properly. If it reports back to the House under a guillotine, it will be smuggled back to us outside the attention of the wider world and large parts of will remain undiscussed. The Opposition's protests are designed to show that the House must now consider the consequences of the Committee's reporting that it had been unable to complete the Bill's consideration.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Shepherd: Not just yet. The Government have been presented with two choices. They could have done what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) suggested and the Bill could have been returned to Committee with sufficient time to discuss the 42 amendments that have not yet been debated. The Government did not choose that route. They chose to table this motion. They are saying that what they say is the law. The Government are not suggesting that we should debate the issues in the way that has been offered by the Liberal Democrats, who have been supported by my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench. The Government motion, in effect, says, "What we say shall be the law."

The issue of majorities is a theme that has haunted the new Labour Government. Within four years, they have reached for the old Stalinist trick of putting on the Order Paper—*[Interruption.]* Government Members may laugh, but the Order Paper now suggests that what is not true is true. That is what the House is being asked to say. Each one of us must consider where that leaves us. What are we being reduced to? *[Interruption.]* I agree with that point about the poll tax. I do not think that guillotines should be thrown around in the way they have been. My concern about the Bill is deeper. I wonder how we have come to this pass.

The motion has been tabled under the name of the Leader of the House and is supported by the Home Secretary. The Leader of the House does not even deign to "deem" in person and the Home Secretary, whose Bill it is, has not yet spoken. Standards are changing. The Government are becoming so grand that, in less than four years, they insist that they should have a Bill under their own timetable even though there is always a rhythm to a Bill.

Sessional Order (b) was accepted on 7 November 2000 and it lies behind these problems. Despite the objections of the Opposition parties and individuals, a majority determined that the Government should be given the power to guillotine every Bill. However, we have debates of only 45 minutes to discuss these matters. What has been the consequence? Every Bill that has been guillotined—that is, every Bill this Session—has been opposed by those on the Opposition and Liberal Democrat Front Benches. Can we now talk about a Government who seek acquiesence and government by consent? Not a bit of it.

The Leader of the House is almost the Caligula of the House. She insists on things that are not true and is trying to bring about a culture change. If the House is to give authority to a Government and their actions, its whole purpose is to debate their actions. How else can they seek consent and attest to the fact that the issues have been considered?

We are now telling ourselves that we are redundant. If every Minister can deem, with a majority behind him, that something has happened, we can cut out the process of debate and transfer the business to the other end of the Palace. The reformed or unreformed House of Lords will become pre-eminent. That is the cause of our anger. A process has been forced through by the Modernisation Committee, which has not listened with the necessary tolerance to other views. Steam is now building up in a Chamber that has no exits or valves to allow it to be released.

How do I make representations to the Government? How do those on the Opposition Front Benches even begin to negotiate with the Government as to how to consider each part of a Bill? The Modernisation Committee has prattled on about holding the Government to account, but do the most important people—the majority in the House—hold the Government account? All they are doing is marching through the Lobby to support the cutting off of the historic role of Parliament.

Even this debate is being held at 1.24 am. The Government, confident and secure of their affection in the opinion polls, think that such matters are not important and that the public do not care. That is not the issue. Vasari once said something important. Why was it, he reflected, that the Florentines had reached a particular level of excellence in the arts? His response was that it related to the spirit of criticism: the brutality of the critical approach ensured that the second rate could not survive.

The spirit of criticism is essential to the way in which the House has always done its business. No one can be under any illusion about what the Government are arguing for, but the second rate cannot survive in such a system. Yet as we close down all the hatches for reasonable and

[Mr. Shepherd]

detailed investigation of how the law bears down on each one of us, we sink into the mediocrity exhibited by the Labour Front Bench. It is not dignified.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): My hon. Friend mentions the other place. Not content with neutering this House, Lord Falconer will tomorrow propose a motion to instruct a Committee of the whole House

"to whom the Hunting Bill has been committed, that, notwithstanding the normal practice of the House in Committee, no amendments be considered except any amendments to leave out clause 1 . . . and insert a new clause".

Is he aware that the Government are now also working on the other place, which appears to be the only forum for real debate?

Mr. Shepherd: I am sure that the other place will address the issue tomorrow in the appropriate form. However, I am concerned with the motion before the House, which directly affects the only democratically elected body in Parliament. Each of us has been sent here to represent someone. We are all equal in those terms. That is why the Government have become second rate. No Government could table such a motion. Never before have a Government have sought to say that the House of Commons has considered a Bill when it has not. They say that our right to ask them what they mean, what something is about and whether it can be amended is just part of an arcane principle.

It is not just me, on my own, opposing the guillotine. The entire Opposition oppose it. The Government should reflect on that. The motion should not be before the House. As the Government, and the Leader of the House in particular, know, this inconvenience is the result of the imposition of their will on the Opposition. If we punch someone, he responds.

I regret that that is the state of affairs. Even Mr. Attlee's Government of 1945, which was far more radical than this Government, except in constitutional matters, did not act in such a way. Most of us are beneficiaries of some of the profound social changes that that Government introduced, but they needed only three guillotines. My right hon. Friend Baroness Thatcher presided over a major radical Government, from whom the mediocre bunch on the Labour Front Bench inherited the economy. In 11 years, she used fewer guillotines than this new Labour Government have imposed in under four years. It is an extraordinary record. One wonders, on reflection, how any business was ever conducted in the House in those days.

By trying to meet a 10 o'clock rule, the Government have ensured that the House sits later because of the principled opposition of Liberal Democrats and Conservatives to this systematic guillotining of Bills after Second Reading without knowing where the opposition to them lies or what debate is needed. They assign an odd number of days that, by their divinity, they have chosen as appropriate for discussion.

The House would work much better if it returned to the situation prior to the introduction of these new Standing Orders and if the Government had the necessary tolerance. However impatient a Government may be, they must occasionally listen to the contrary view. Each of us is now regularly prevented from speaking, and then the Government chant at us, "But it is the will of the majority that you shall not speak, and we were elected as a majority." I have always been against that attitude. As Burke said, and as I have said enough times in the House, a Government seek not just acquiescence; they seek consent. They do so not by dividing x by 2 plus 1 but through the process of allowing each of us the opportunity to speak on behalf of our constituents. That is what lies behind the motion.

In truth, Labour Members should reflect on why they came here. Their purpose is to represent and speak up for their constituents' interests. No one doubts that their support is for a Labour Government, but nothing is divine. We have to subject the propositions of Government to criticism. Without that, they will remain as they are—arrogant and mediocre.

Mr. Keith Bradley (Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household) *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question put, That the Question be now put:—

The House divided: Ayes 240, Noes 142.

Division No. 144] **[1.32 am**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*

Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Kevin Hughes and
Mrs. Anne McGuire.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David

Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Owen Paterson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question put accordingly, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 143, Noes 240.

Division No. 145] **[1.44 am**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and
Mr. Adrian Sanders.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David

Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Anne McGuire and Mr. Kevin Hughes.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 238, Noes 142.

Division No. 146] **[1.57 am**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blizzard, Bob
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Drew, David
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kilfoyle, Peter
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lock, David
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John

Mahon, Mrs Alice
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Miller, Andrew
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Mudie, George
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
Organ, Mrs Diana
Pearson, Ian
Perham, Ms Linda
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Raynsford, Nick
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tynan, Bill
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Worthington, Tony
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Don Touhig and
Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Owen Paterson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That, following the Report of the Chairman of Standing Committee F on 9th March, the Criminal Justice and Police Bill shall be deemed to have been reported to the House, as amended by the Committee, and as if those Clauses and Schedules the consideration of which had not been completed by the Committee had been ordered to stand part of the Bill, with the outstanding Amendments which stood on the Order paper in the name of Mr. Charles Clarke.

Bill, as amended in the Standing Committee, and pursuant to Order [this day], to be considered this day.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [28 February],

That the Motions in the name of Mr. Secretary Straw relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if they related to instruments subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118

(Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) in respect of which notice has been given that the instruments be approved.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [23 January],

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Cromer Hospital

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

2.11 am

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): It is a great pleasure to have the chance to debate the redevelopment of Cromer hospital—a pleasure that might be slightly diminished by the fact that it is 2.15 am, but a great pleasure none the less.

The first Cromer cottage hospital was established in Louden road in 1886. It was funded by local people, as were all subsequent additions and improvements. In 1932, it moved to its current site, and it was taken over by the national health service in 1948. However, the tradition of local involvement, personal donations and local fundraising activities has remained a hallmark of Cromer hospital to this day. The friends of the hospital are a dedicated and hard-working organisation, raising thousands of pounds a year and ensuring that the local community enjoys a close involvement with the hospital.

The atmosphere in the hospital reflects that close involvement. It is happy, friendly, relaxed, welcoming and caring. This is a genuine community hospital, and it is essential that, whatever its future development, its character is preserved. I have spoken to a great many people over the last few years—patients, and people who have known the hospital for years—who have praised it and its staff for the care and love that they devote to it. The hospital can be proud that it stands for all that is best in the great vocational tradition of the health service, but it stands for something else as well: it is a 1930s building, which has been added to piecemeal ever since.

A report prepared by Norfolk and Norwich Health Care NHS trust, of which Cromer hospital is a part, stated in 1998:

"Facilities within the Hospital are not efficiently organized.

Accessibility to critical areas is hindered by the current configuration.

Parking is increasingly a problem.

Entrance to the hospital grounds is narrow and makes access difficult.

The current facilities at Cromer are old, ill maintained and not best suited to modern medicine. The building requires substantial investment to meet the minimal requirements of relevant statutory regulations and it is likely that increasingly large amounts of investment will be required in the future as the buildings age and deteriorate further. Current estimates of the potential cost of carrying out the backlog of maintenance required at Cromer put the cost as high as £2.2 million over the next three years in order for the hospital to meet its statutory obligations for health and safety.

The report continues:

"The two wards currently cater for patients of varying ages and recovering from various ailments. This situation is by no means ideal as providing care on this basis greatly increases the risk of cross infection. At present strict procedures are in place for disease management in order to minimize this risk requiring extra resources for disease management."

In many ways, therefore, Cromer hospital is a symbol of the NHS: it has outstanding and caring staff supported by the community, but working with substandard

[Mr. David Prior]

facilities. For those reasons, since 1994 Norfolk and Norwich Health Care NHS trust has generally accepted that Cromer hospital should be substantially redeveloped. The recent dedicated cataract surgery and gastroenterology services are examples of the trust's commitment to that.

In July 2000, a resident of Cromer, Mrs. Sagle Bernstein, died, leaving Cromer hospital a fantastically generous legacy of £10 million. The trustees of the legacy are the board of Norfolk and Norwich Health Care NHS trust. To avoid any misunderstandings, I wish to state unambiguously, first, that no NHS funding will be lost as a result of that legacy. The legacy must be additional to NHS funds.

Secondly, the legacy and all the accumulated interest are for the benefit of Cromer hospital; that will not be siphoned off for use elsewhere in the health service. That has been confirmed to me by the chief executive of the acute trust. I hope that the Minister will confirm those two vital points in her reply, as I know that that would go a long way to putting at rest the minds of many of those who live in Cromer.

That incredibly generous bequest allows the trust to create a world-class hospital in Cromer. It means that we can now look forward for the next 100 years, not only the next two or three. It also allows the nursing, clinical, caring and community traditions of Cromer hospital to be allied to world-class facilities, operations and resources. It is an opportunity that I as the Member of Parliament for North Norfolk am determined to see grasped.

The acute trust and the primary care group in north Norfolk have promised that they will deliver a business plan by the end of March 2001, setting out their joint agreed proposals for the future. It will bring together primary care, intermediate care, elderly rehabilitation and acute care. It will also need to take into account the location of the general practitioner's surgery in Cromer and the rehabilitation facilities currently located at Benjamin court, in Cromer, as well as the acute services.

It is generally agreed that all the existing services in the hospital will be retained and enhanced with major expansion in ophthamology, dermatology, endoscopy, cardiology, diagnostics, maternity services, diabetics, neurology—including a service for stroke victims—renal dialysis, minor surgery and post-operative cancer treatment. That is not a comprehensive list; nor would it be appropriate for me to submit one as I am not a clinician. By the end of March, however, there will be agreement between the primary care group and the acute trust on what should be included.

There must also be proper consultation with the community. It is essential that the deadline, at the end of March, is adhered to, so that local people feel that, after so many years of uncertainty, progress is at last being made.

Some 35,000 to 40,000 people in North Norfolk are over 65. By 2011, the number is predicted to increase by 20 per cent. That will lead to increased demand for intermediate care services, day care, rehabilitation and out-patient services. It is essential, therefore, that the plans for the hospital take those requirements into account. Cromer should become a centre of excellence for the treatment of older people, with intensive physio and occupational therapy services such as hydrotherapy. I support also the provision of general practitioner community beds in the new hospital.

A few years ago, when the acute trust drew up its plans, it was looking at Cromer primarily as a satellite of the Norfolk and Norwich. That has changed. Rightly, the future of Cromer hospital requires an integrated approach from primary care through to rehabilitation. That may mean that the current site is not large enough or adequate and that alternative sites in Cromer will have to be investigated. If so, I am that sure that the district council will be supportive. A new state-of-the-art hospital could play a major part in the regeneration of Cromer, to which all of us in north Norfolk are committed.

I am anxious, however, that the involvement of different parts of the health service—the Norfolk and Norwich health authority, the acute trust, the community health trust and the primary care group—does not lead to unnecessary, bureaucratic delay. When the plan has been put together, it needs one organisation to be in charge to drive it through. The Minister needs to address that issue urgently.

I remember well when, in the early 1980s, Sir Roy Griffiths produced a report on the national health service and said that if Florence Nightingale was walking through an NHS ward, she would ask who was in charge. The issue of who is in charge at the new Cromer hospital is a very important one for the Minister to grasp. As I said, it is essential that there is open, transparent and genuine consultation with local people.

Cromer hospital is very much north Norfolk's hospital. It belongs to the people of north Norfolk, not to Whitehall or even to Norwich. We want a world-class hospital in Cromer, but we also want it to retain the character that it has developed over the past 100 years. It needs to reflect the great voluntary tradition of all those who have supported it for so many generations.

I hope that when the plan to redevelop the hospital emerges at the end of March, as has been promised, the Minister will lend her support to it. I also hope that she will lend her weight and authority to ensuring that the lines of responsibility are clear and that action is taken.

We have a chance that comes once in a generation to create something really special in Cromer. Let us make sure that we do the right thing and let us get on with it.

2.20 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Yvette Cooper): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Mr. Prior) on securing this debate on the redevelopment of Cromer hospital. However, I commiserate with him about the late hour at which the debate has been called.

I am aware that there has been considerable local interest in the redevelopment of Cromer hospital and the proposals for it. It is clear from the hon. Gentleman's remarks that the local support for Cromer hospital is something of which the local community can be proud.

The hospital's services provide a vital local resource which is clearly valued by local people and the town's many visitors alike. It currently provides a wide range of out-patient and day-case services, including neurology, orthopaedics and ophthalmology, as well as a minor injuries unit. The services provided by the hospital and

the dedication of its staff have rightly been given the recognition they deserve by the remarkable legacy of Mrs. Bernstein.

Cromer faces a number of challenges in terms of its health and its regeneration, particularly in relation to the decline of traditional industries such as fishing. There is widespread determination by the local NHS to ensure that all stakeholders, especially the public, will be involved in decisions on the future of the town and its services.

As the hon. Gentleman explained, there have been various and lengthy discussions about the future redevelopment of Cromer hospital to provide more efficiently organised, expanded and modern services. He is right to say that many challenges are faced by the hospital facilities. It is important that the discussions about the modernisation and development of Cromer hospital reach fruition and can make progress to benefit those living locally.

The hospital was built in 1932 and is run by the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital NHS trust, which provides the majority of services currently on the site. I understand that in 1995, and again in 1998, discussions began with local commissioners about what services should be included in a redeveloped Cromer hospital site. However, on neither occasion was it possible for commissioners to determine the scope of services required. That was due partly to the anticipated intermediate services strategy which was being developed by the then East Norfolk health authority, but also to uncertainties about future commissioning arrangements. As a result, no business case was produced at that time, and there was no tangible progress for Cromer hospital and its patients. These previous efforts to determine how Cromer hospital should be redeveloped have clearly contributed to an understandable local feeling that more needs to be done to progress Cromer hospital and that the investment needs to be secured and made without further delay.

This is a matter for the local health authority, the trust, the community health council and local people to determine, through formal consultation, if required. If there is still local disagreement, the community health council can, of course, refer the matter to Ministers. However, this is first and foremost a local matter, and it should be resolved locally.

I understand that progress is being made on the redevelopment of Cromer hospital. The proposals being considered include diagnostic and treatment services, pathology and primary care, such as general practitioner services, as well as the future configuration of community care in Cromer. No decisions have been made to date, and it is anticipated that the proposals will be completed in the near future, when there will be an opportunity for the public to have their say. The proposals will then be developed into a strategic outline case by the local NHS, led by the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital NHS trust. The strategic outline case will be submitted to the regional office later this year. The production of the proposals is, of course, not the end of the process, and it is important that this is understood by all; even after the proposals have been made public, discussions will need to continue on development, the cost of the proposed services and how they will be provided, and other details. I look forward to the conclusion of that work and the publication of the proposals as soon as possible.

One of the most fundamental issues that will have to be thought through as part of that process will be the running costs of the redeveloped Cromer hospital. That matter must be resolved before any work can begin on the ground. Agreement will need to be reached on the revenue implications of the developments. All local parties, including the public, must satisfy themselves that the benefits of the improvements to Cromer hospital and health services in Cromer are sustainable, adaptable and robust for the long-term future.

Public involvement and support will be key aspects of the proposals for Cromer hospital. There is a great deal of local interest in the future of the hospital, so it is crucial that patients and local people support the future developments.

The NHS plan demonstrates the Government's commitment to patient-focused services, and it is essential that services meet that aspiration; after all, that is what patients and the local community expect. Those proposals must have local support, so the involvement of the local community health council in the working group is also a key part of the process.

The working group that has been established to consider the redevelopment includes Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital NHS trust, the North Norfolk primary care group, local GPs, the Norwich Community Health Partnership NHS trust, local authorities, including North Norfolk district council, and the local community health council.

It is extremely important that we take a partnership approach to the development of Cromer hospital. I take on board the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about the need for clarity in developing the proposals and his argument that a partnership approach should not entail too many discussions that do not lead to a conclusion. I do not think that is the consequence of a partnership approach; it is clear that Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital NHS trust would take the lead in developing the strategic outline case. However, I shall bear the hon. Gentleman's points in mind as the plans progress. It is important that the partnership is conducted so as to deliver the results that local people expect.

Fresh impetus has been brought to discussion of the proposals by the substantial and completely unexpected bequest of Mrs. Bernstein in summer 2000. Mrs. Bernstein's regard for the excellent care and services provided to her sister by the staff of Cromer hospital led her to bequeath the remarkable sum of approximately £10 million to the hospital for the improvement of its general facilities. Understandably, that has invigorated discussions about the hospital's future.

Of course, the size of the bequest and its significant implications for the hospital mean that decisions about the future redevelopment have to be the right ones. An opportunity on that scale is unlikely to be repeated, so there is an obligation on the people drawing up the plans locally to ensure that the money is used to benefit local people for the long term. The public will have to be satisfied that the plans are right for the local area and will deliver the maximum possible benefits.

In response to some of the points made by the hon. Gentleman, I can reassure him that no money from Mrs. Bernstein's legacy is being spent on any other project; it is not being used to support the new Norfolk and Norwich hospital or any other health project in the area. It will be used specifically for Cromer, as stipulated

[Yvette Cooper]

in Mrs. Bernstein's will. It will make a significant contribution to the capital expenditure on the redevelopment of Cromer hospital. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it would be completely unacceptable if the area's fair share of NHS funding for a wide range of projects were affected by Mrs. Bernstein's bequest—it was clearly intended to improve facilities and to make a real difference for the people of Cromer.

The bequest represents a huge opportunity for those in Cromer, for the local community and for those in the NHS. It coincides with a big increase in funding to the NHS in Norfolk. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, the Chancellor announced in his Budget statement the biggest ever increase in funding for the NHS in England. I am sure that he is also aware that, in his Budget speech on 7 March, the Chancellor announced extra resources for the NHS in England in each of the next three years, with an extra £300 million in 2001–02. That involves additional revenue and capital resources; provides a chance to improve NHS facilities across the board in Norfolk and the Norwich area; and comes at a useful time in the debate about Cromer hospital's future.

I am sure that all parties in the process are working towards a common aim—providing the best possible health services for the people of Cromer. I look forward to the speedy development of the proposals for the future of Cromer hospital and to those proposals being made public in the near future, as well as to partnership work involving not only all those in the NHS but local authorities, voluntary groups and the local community. Things are not standing still in Cromer while those discussions are taking place. Developments continue at the hospital—for example, improvements to the dermatology department are currently being implemented.

The redevelopment of Cromer hospital will be a very significant milestone for health services in Cromer, so all parties must ensure that the best possible solution is found. The health authority, the trust and those involved in the local discussions will take note of the points that the hon. Gentleman has made in this debate. All local stakeholders owe it to the people of Cromer, the hospital's staff and Mrs. Bernstein, who had regard for them all, not to waste this opportunity.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 13 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

MEDWAY COUNCIL BILL *[LORDS] (BY ORDER)*

Orders for consideration, as amended, read.

To be considered on Thursday 22 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Breast Cancer (Nottingham)

1. **Mr. Vernon Coaker** (Gedling): What discussions he has had with Trent regional health authority about a new breast cancer unit at Nottingham city hospital. [151948]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): The Trent regional office and the Nottingham health authority strongly support the scheme for a new breast care unit at Nottingham city hospital. It will replace the 23-year-old prefabricated accommodation with a new purpose-built unit. The local breast team is internationally recognised as being at the forefront of clinical care and research into the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer. The regional office expects to receive the full business case by September this year, at the latest.

Mr. Coaker: Will my right hon. Friend take a personal interest in the development of the breast cancer unit at Nottingham city hospital? There has been some slippage over the past couple of years, so his intervention would be very welcome. As he said, this is an internationally renowned breast cancer unit, and many people come from abroad to see it. At the moment, it is housed in prefabricated buildings. Will my right hon. Friend take a personal interest in the matter and ensure that if September is the target date for the business plan, September is also the reality for Nottingham city hospital's breast cancer unit?

Mr. Denham: I will certainly take a personal interest in the matter, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his keen interest in the success of the project. It is planned to spend more than £5.2 million on it from different sources, and it is clearly in everyone's interest to get it under way as quickly as possible.

Mrs. Marion Roe (Broxbourne): As one of the chairmen of the all-party breast cancer group, I welcome any new facilities for the new breast cancer unit at Nottingham city hospital. However, will the Minister tell the House what role clinical need plays in the treatment of patients who present to their general practitioners with suspected cancer? What response would he give to the president of the Royal College of Surgeons, who claims that clinics are being snowed under with inappropriate referrals for breast cancer because of the Government's two-week target?

Mr. Denham: The whole point is to ensure that patients with the highest clinical need are referred urgently to a consultant. The two-week waiting time is for urgent referrals. In support of that, we have published referral guidelines for use by general practitioners that have been drawn up with leading clinicians. The whole point is to enable general practitioners to identify women in need of an urgent referral. I believe that we have a policy that is designed and aimed to give the highest priority to those with the greatest need.

NHS Plan

2. **Mr. Paul Burstow** (Sutton and Cheam): What assessment his Department has made of the number of additional nurses required to meet the requirements of the NHS plan and enable private sector providers to comply with the Care Standards Act 2000 and regulations made thereunder. [151949]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The NHS plan contains a commitment for 20,000 more nurses to be provided by 2004. Private sector providers are represented on the new local organisations charged with planning the numbers of nursing staff needed in local communities.

Mr. Burstow: The Secretary of State will know that about one in four nurses is due to retire in the next four to five years. The Royal College of Nursing, in its report last year, said that there would be a shortage of about 57,000 nurses over the next five years. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept, therefore, that increasing the number of posts in the NHS potentially increases the number of vacancies? Will he guarantee that in the effort to recruit more nurses, the international recruitment nursing director will not strip bare developing countries of their valued nurses? Will he also ensure that there will be a dramatic expansion of nurse training places in this country, so that we can grow our own nurses to fill the vacancies?

Mr. Milburn: That is precisely what is happening. It is true that nurse training places have been cut in the past; they were certainly cut under the previous Government in the mid-1990s. The number of nurses was cut in the mid-1990s, too. The national health service is still feeling the effects of that. However, the number of nurses is now consistently rising, the number of training places is up by one third, and the number of UK-based

applications for nursing and midwifery courses has increased by more than 56 per cent. in the past two years alone.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): Will my right hon. Friend make it clear to the private sector that before it gets the same input of taxpayers' money that it got last year, it is essential that it complies with care standards? That is a question of the private sector having to come up to those standards not after new nurses have been trained, but before. That is a simple lesson that I would have thought would be in the interests of every patient.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend is right: standards should be high wherever care is provided. That is particularly the case if the resources for that care, whether it is given in the private or the public sector, are provided at NHS expense. Standards are what count, which is why the action that we are taking to raise standards and to expand the number of nurses working in the NHS and the health care system overall is so important.

Mrs. Caroline Spelman (Meriden): The RCN survey shows that 70,000 trained nurses are staying at home, but in his evidence to the Nurses and Midwives Pay Review Body the Secretary of State said:

"The central message of the evidence from the Departments was that there was no case for a special pay response from us this year on grounds of recruitment and retention."

What changed his mind?

Mr. Milburn: The difference between this Government and the previous one is that we are paying nurses' pay awards in full, not staging them. Indeed, there is extra pay to address shortages in particular areas, so where need is highest, but where the cost of living is also the highest, we are paying extra money to nurses—up to £1,000 a year extra. There is more money for ward sisters. Last year, there was more money for staff nurses. The year before, there was more money for newly qualified nurses. All the investment that we are making is contributing to the expansion in NHS nursing numbers.

We all know the hon. Lady's view of the NHS. She says that she occasionally visits NHS hospitals to see what they are like for those who do not have the privilege of private health insurance. There are two views of the NHS: there are those who use it and those who regard it as a spectator sport.

Cancer

3. **Dr. Phyllis Starkey** (Milton Keynes, South-West): What progress is being made in improving services which will cut the incidence of cancer and improve cancer survival rates. [151950]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): National health service cancer services are receiving more investment and greater priority than ever before. Waiting times are falling, the number of cancer specialists is rising and I can tell the House today that the NHS has the fastest-improving cancer services in Europe.

Dr. Starkey: I thank my right hon. Friend for the investment that he has so far made in cancer services in Milton Keynes. My constituents welcome the priority that has been given to improving cancer services, but if he had a further half a million pounds to invest in Milton Keynes, would he rather spend it on further improving cancer services or subsidising private health insurance?

Mr. Milburn: For a moment or two, I thought that that question would cost me money, so I approach the answer with trepidation. It is right that we invest in our cancer services. Cancer kills well over 100,000 people a year and we know that many of the deaths could have been prevented had earlier action been taken. Although the focus will inevitably and rightly be on improvements in treatment services to get waiting times down, to ensure that more operations are carried out and to provide more scanners and more equipment, the biggest gains in improving cancer care will come from improved prevention.

That is why the action that my hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health and others are taking to improve smoking cessation services, reduce cigarette consumption and ban tobacco advertising is so critical to the future of cancer care in our country. There is a choice: either spend an extra half a billion pounds a year on modernising cancer services, as we are doing, or spend half a billion pounds a year on subsidising those with private health insurance, as the Conservative party proposes.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will the Secretary of State consider for a moment prostate cancer? The excellent service that I have received from the national health service at Charing Cross hospital only goes to prove what can be done if such services are carried through properly. How much extension work is being done to provide radiotherapy at more hospitals to deal with the problem of prostate cancer?

Mr. Milburn: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman; his comments about improvements in prostate cancer services will provide reassurance to many men. Inevitably, when people read newspaper reports about the state of cancer services, they do not always get the most accurate picture. As he knows fine well, by and large NHS cancer care is of a very high standard. We need to expand the range of services available and, most importantly of all, we need to ensure that those services are timely and of the highest possible standard.

That is why more investment is being made, particularly with the new generation of scanners—magnetic resonance imaging scanners, linear accelerators and computerised tomography scanners. Some investment comes through lottery money and some through mainstream NHS money. I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that additional investment is going into research into prostate cancer because treatments are not as good as they should be. However, I hope that, in time, we shall discover new ways to treat a deadly disease that kills far too many men in our country.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): When a patient with suspected cancer visits a GP, often the GP's first question is, "Do you smoke?" That is an important question, but patients are seldom asked where they work or used to work, and in what conditions. The ex-vinatex workers group in my constituency feels that GPs and consultants should ask those questions, so that the position

can be checked and action can be taken to ensure that workplaces are safe environments. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend makes an important point, although there is a direct correlation between smoking and cancer—and, indeed, between smoking and heart disease. If we succeed in doing what we want to do—improving heart-disease and cancer services, especially on the prevention side, and cutting tobacco consumption—we shall save an awful lot of lives in our country. Finding out where people have worked provides an important clue to the cause of problems, and we are certainly prepared to think about that.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I am sure the Secretary of State agrees that a key part of the Government's strategy is the pledge in the NHS cancer plan that there will be nearly 1,000 extra non-surgical cancer consultants by 2006. Does he deny that that figure is acknowledged in his own Department to be unachievable, that Ministers at the highest level—including the Prime Minister—were advised at the time that it was unachievable, and that it was included in the cancer plan only on the Prime Minister's specific insistence?

Mr. Milburn: I would be amazed if that were the case, but if the hon. Gentleman hands me his briefing I shall gladly look into it for him.

The figures that we have announced in both the NHS plan and the cancer plan are based on modelling done in the Department. They show that over the next five years we will increase the number of cancer specialists by 25 per cent. We are having to do that precisely because of the failure to invest in cancer services in the past—a shameful failure, in my view.

When the Government came to power, we found that not a single penny piece had been earmarked for improvements in cancer services. That cash is now being earmarked: there will be hundreds of millions of pounds of extra investment in cancer services next year, rising to £570 million in just two or three years' time.

GPs

4. **Mr. Andrew Stunell** (Hazel Grove): What steps he plans to take to improve the retention of experienced general practitioners within the NHS. [151951]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): GPs do a vital job exceptionally well, so the retention of experienced and skilled GPs is crucial to the successful delivery of the NHS plan and a modernised NHS.

In his Budget statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a new fund to tackle shortages of key staff in the health service. Some of it will be devoted to the creation of incentives for experienced GPs to remain in practice, and to encouraging GPs currently on retainers to increase their NHS commitment. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will give further details later.

Mr. Stunell: I thank the Minister for his answer. Three quarters of general practitioners consulted in a recent survey in my constituency said that they were less satisfied with their conditions in the NHS than they had been two years earlier, and 60 per cent. said that they were considering leaving. Does the Minister accept that there has been a catastrophic drop in morale among GPs? Does he agree that it is vital for us to plug the gap and to restore confidence in their work and in the NHS?

Mr. Denham: What is important is that we underline our commitment to putting general practice at the heart of our NHS reforms. We are already doing that with the creation of primary care groups and, now, primary care trusts. Measures that we are taking today to encourage further GP recruitment will help to bring into general practice the extra numbers that we have promised. We are also taking measures to reduce GPs work loads by cutting bureaucracy, and we wish to develop extended roles for other members of the primary care team staff so that GPs can concentrate on the patients who need their support most.

In all those ways, we are committed to improving the working and the professional life of GPs, because they play a particularly important role in the delivery of a modern NHS.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement on the provision of additional support for GPs, which is obviously an urgent matter. However, will he also take into consideration current patient waiting times to see GPs? I have problems in my constituency with that matter, and it would be helpful if he would examine it with some urgency with a view to reducing waiting times for patients.

Mr. Denham: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We have said that by 2004 we want patients to be able to see a GP within 48 hours. We are already showing, in the work done by the primary care development team, how practices can reorganise themselves to meet that access target without—this is very important—increasing the work load and burden on GPs. Additionally, we have allocated funds from the record investment that we are making this year in the NHS to enable primary care practices to extend and improve patient access.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the best ways of retaining GPs and cutting surgery waiting times is to make greater use of complementary and alternative therapies? Is he also aware that many doctors refer to a proportion of their cases as heart-sink patients whom they cannot help, whereas 70 per cent. of those patients get relief if they are referred to acupuncturists, herbal medicine practitioners or homeopaths? Does he not think that now that 30 per cent. of the United Kingdom population have tried herbal medicines, it is time that the Government responded positively to the Lords report on complementary medicine and made such medicine more widely available on the national health service at the point of delivery?

Mr. Denham: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman—whom I always think of as the hon. Member for Holland and Barrett—on his consistent contribution to our debates. Clearly, there is a level of interest among GPs in making use of complementary medicines. The British Medical Association has produced guidance which has been

circulated to all primary care groups and primary care trusts on the prescribing of and referral to complementary medicine. Additionally, as the hon. Gentleman has said, the House of Lords has produced an important report on the issue, which the Government are considering.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Does my right hon. Friend accept that Burnley and east Lancashire are areas of deprivation where there are health problems because of some of their traditional industries? Does he also accept that they are also the very areas where it is difficult to retain GPs and to attract new GPs? Will he ensure that money is targeted towards attracting and retaining the GPs whom we need to provide services in such areas?

Mr. Denham: One of the measures that my right hon. Friend has announced today is a £5,000 payment to newly qualified GPs finishing their period as a GP registrar and entering general practice. The payment will be £10,000 in deprived and under-doctored areas. We have taken that action not only to increase the proportion of doctors entering general practice, but particularly to encourage them to work in areas that are currently short of doctors or facing high deprivation levels. I hope that my hon. Friend will feel that we have tried to design the scheme that we have announced today around the types of needs that he has described.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): We welcome the attempts being made to reimburse GPs. However, as the father of a GP—I declare an interest—may I ask what research has been done into why 40 per cent. of GP trainees do not enter general practice? Is the Minister convinced that it is simply a matter of money, or does he think that other action is needed to reform the system, so that we can not only attract GPs but retain them?

Mr. Denham: That is a very good question. There is no doubt that the financial incentive that we announced today, which has been welcomed by the BMA, will help. However, there are other barriers. One is that it can seem to be a fairly daunting step to move from the fairly structured environment of training to taking on the full responsibilities of a GP principal. Therefore, one of the additional measures accompanying the financial package which we have announced today is 20 days of additional training in the first year of practice as a GP principal—something that has been argued for by the BMA. By doing that, we hope to provide greater support for doctors who want to go into general practice. We want to ensure that they can maintain their professional skills and overcome the inevitable challenges of their first year in practice.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): According to this week's edition of the *Doctor* newspaper, 70 per cent. of GPs surveyed supported some form of action to highlight their "anger and disillusionment" with the Government. The Government have been in office for four years, so how does the Minister account for that finding?

Mr. Denham: One of the things that GPs know is that for the past three years this Government have paid pay review body awards in full and without staging. In contrast, the Conservative Government regularly failed to implement those awards in full and without staging. GPs therefore know the difference between this Government and the previous Conservative Government.

One of the problems is that there are currently too few GPs. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the number of GP registrars fell by 20 per cent. under the previous Government. Under this Government, there have been four consecutive years of increase in the number of GP registrars in training. That means that there will be more GPs in the future, and that we will achieve our target of at least 2,000 more GPs by 2004. As has so often been the case, we have had to undo the damage done by the previous Government. If there had not been the cut in the number of GPs in training under the previous Government, it is a reasonable assumption that we would have 700 more GPs in the NHS today than we do.

Dr. Fox: The real causes of GPs anger and disillusionment have been four years of non-stop reorganisation and change, increased centralisation by the Secretary of State, the scapegoating of the profession by Ministers in this House, increased paperwork and form-filling, and less time for patients. All of that has led to the lowest morale that anyone can remember.

The Minister has just told the House that he accepts that there are too few GPs. Will he therefore say why his team of Ministers told the pay review body this year that the Department's findings showed no support for suggestions of a retention problem? They said that

"the findings were very encouraging, pointing to the continuing improvement in recruitment indicators".

Which version of those two truths would the Minister like us to believe?

Mr. Denham: The number of people leaving general practice is at its lowest level for five years. That is a fact. We are addressing the real problems that we inherited from the previous Government, who failed to train enough GPs and nurses or to invest enough in primary care. We have shown our commitment to putting primary care at the front line of the new NHS by saying that we will devolve £25 billion of NHS resources to primary care, to be controlled by primary care groups and primary care trusts. Those resources will give GPs and other practice staff a say in and an influence over the shape of the NHS that they have not had previously.

Practice facilities will improve as we continue to invest in GPs and link them to NHS Direct. In addition, the 3,000 premises that will be modernised under NHS LIFT will mean that GPs will have better premises from which to work. The neglect of the NHS that was the hallmark of the previous Government is being reversed—in primary care as well as in hospitals.

Hospital Waiting Times (South-West)

5. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): If he will make a statement on hospital waiting times in the south-west. [151952]

The Minister for Public Health (Yvette Cooper): At the end of January 2001, the number of south-west residents waiting for in-patient treatment in the region was 98,579—a drop of 10,422, or 9.6 per cent., on the position that we inherited in June 1997. As waiting lists have come down, the number of long waits is also falling.

Mr. Heath: I asked about waiting times. Does the Minister accept that the money given to acute hospital trusts under the Budget will often be soaked up by the financial deficits that the trusts have accumulated over recent years? Constituents of mine who need routine operations, such as hip operations, do not want to pay for private treatment, which is what the Conservative party advocates. However, neither do they want to wait for 18 months for the operation, which is the current waiting time at the Royal United hospital in Bath. When are things going to get better?

Yvette Cooper: I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that the NHS in the south-west is treating more patients than ever, and is carrying out more hip operations than ever. I think that the trust in his area, along with the trust in my area and those right across the country, will strongly welcome the extra money that they have been allocated in the Budget, on top of the boost to their resources that they have had from this Government, who are doubling the real increase that they have had over the past 20 years.

The hon. Gentleman is right that we need to bring down waiting lists. That is why we have set a target in the NHS plan to bring down waiting times from 18 months to six months by 2005. That requires extra investment, which this Government are putting in and which, frankly, the Opposition could not match.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Will my hon. Friend congratulate staff at Swindon's Princess Margaret hospital who have worked extremely hard to reduce waiting times in ophthalmology and audiology? The dedication of staff teams and the Government's investment in resources have led to massive reductions in audiology and cataract waiting times. Will my hon. Friend assure my constituents that this investment will continue and that we will see further reductions in waiting times, increases in the quality of services and less pressure on our very hard-working NHS staff?

Yvette Cooper: I assure my hon. Friend that the increase in investment in the NHS of more than 6 per cent. in real terms each year will continue for the next few years. I congratulate staff across the NHS who are working to bring down waiting times, often through new innovative programmes, including the cancer collaboratives. It is not simply about extra resources—it is about modernisation as well.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Does the Minister understand the deep-seated resentment of the droves of people in the south-west who languish indefinitely on the waiting list to get on the waiting list? Does she recognise that it is unacceptable that in many cases cheap, simple and non-urgent operations are leapfrogging expensive, complicated but urgent operations simply to satisfy the Government's ludicrous waiting list initiative? In answering that question, will she bear it in mind that her response is of the keenest possible interest throughout the south-west, not least to the excellent prospective Conservative parliamentary candidate for the Somerton and Frome constituency, Mr. Jonathan Marland, who will shortly be replacing the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath) as that constituency's representative in this House?

Yvette Cooper: I am reluctant to intrude on this private argument. The extra investment in the NHS is about bringing down waiting times across the board. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should consider the fact that his party's policy to cut £340 million from resources for tackling waiting lists would push up waiting times. Patients would have to wait longer, apart, of course, from people needing hip, hernia and cataract operations—they would not have to wait at all, because Conservative party policy would deny them any treatment on the NHS.

Community Hospital (Gravesend)

6. **Mr. Chris Pond** (Gravesham): If he will make a statement on the proposed timetable for establishing the new community hospital in Gravesend. [151953]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): The public consultation on the proposal to develop integrated health and social care facilities on the Gravesend and North Kent hospital site is due to begin this month.

Mr. Pond: I thank my hon. Friend not only for that reply but for the considerable support that she has given to our efforts to rebuild the health service in Dartford and Gravesham and for the extra resources to open the new ward at the Gravesend and North Kent hospital and to keep it open. In addition, there are plans for a community hospital of more than 100 beds with the full range of out-patient services.

Does my hon. Friend understand that after years of neglect of the health service in our area under the previous Government, my constituents are impatient to have the new community hospital in Gravesend? Will she make it clear to everybody involved in the project—and I pay tribute to the primary care trust for its work—that it is essential to stick to the time scale proposed for the community hospital? Will she also make it clear to all concerned that this is a hospital? If it has beds like a hospital, if it has nurses like a hospital and if it has out-patient services like a hospital, it is a hospital, and that is what we should call it.

Ms Stuart: Under the private finance initiative, my hon. Friend's constituents have benefited from a £94 million new hospital. In due course—I share his impatience, and certainly want it to happen on time—they will benefit not only from a new community hospital with about 100 beds and 200 day care places per week, but from extended new community facilities. The hospital is in addition to the new facilities—a new, innovative project with social services. People will benefit from extra investment and see in reality what modernisation means—bringing health and social care together under one roof.

Health Care (Older People)

7. **Mr. Tom Clarke** (Coatbridge and Chryston): What measures he has taken to promote a strategy of health care for older people that is based on keeping them in the community. [151955]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Hutton): The Government are committed to promoting older people's independence and ensuring that they are helped to remain in their own homes for as long as possible. The NHS plan announced a range of measures to promote independence and improved quality of care for older people, including additional intermediate care beds and places, extra rapid response teams, additional home care and other support services, improved community equipment services, and carers respite services. In 1999–2000 an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 more older people were being helped to live at home than in 1998–99.

Mr. Clarke: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that for many disabled elderly people the provision of aids and equipment can make the difference between enjoying living in their own homes and being forced into residential care? Does he agree that tackling that approach and ensuring that there is proper funding lie at the heart of modern care in the community?

Mr. Hutton: I certainly agree with my right hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to his work in the House and outside to support people with disabilities. He is right about the importance of community equipment services. That is why in the NHS plan we announced a further £100 million of NHS expenditure in the next three years to support new types of equipment and ensure that they reach older people more quickly. That is the key to improving the independence of older people. By the same token, it is a matter of real regret that the Conservative party has not yet been able to match our commitment to making those investments in community equipment services. The Conservatives have refused to match our spending on social services, which lies at the heart of the new investments that we are making. Until they do so, their promises to older people will be treated with utter and total contempt.

Mrs. Lorna Fitzsimons (Rochdale): Is my hon. Friend aware that the report that, thankfully, he commissioned in Rochdale on the care of older people looks as if it will show that there has not been enough investment in intermediate and intensive home care for the elderly? Will he do everything he can to ensure that the investment is there to help our council to prioritise that much-needed home care, rather than there being an over-average reliance on putting people into residential homes?

Mr. Hutton: I agree with my hon. Friend. Most Members, and most of our constituents, would certainly prefer to be looked after at home whenever possible—it is certainly where I would want to be, and I am sure that every right hon. and hon. Member would want that option too. For far too many older people that option has not been available because the necessary health and social care services have not been available. We are putting that right. Nearly £900 million in new investment is going into health and local authorities in the next three years. I repeat that the Conservative party will not match that expenditure, and that would compromise the health and well-being of millions of older people—I am sure that my hon. Friend will want to take advantage of that fact in the next few weeks.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Whatever the Minister's plans for home care for elderly people, may I urge him not to allow the Nunnery Fields geriatric and stroke hospital to be closed until alternative provision is genuinely available? It is now only a few weeks since 97-year-old Connie Jones died after a two-day wait in a corridor for a proper medical bed. Yet again, over the weekend all three of our accident and emergency units were completely overloaded, leaving many elderly people waiting; one unit was closed to new entrants. Will the Minister ensure that we have enough bed provision for elderly people before that hospital closes?

Mr. Hutton: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand that I am not familiar with the facility that he describes—but I will certainly write to him about the issue that he has raised. I am sure that he will be the first to acknowledge that the Government are making significant additional resources available both for the NHS in Kent, and for Kent county council to improve the range of services for older people. I know that it is the common practice of the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends to bemoan rates of expenditure, but until he can persuade his right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench to match the expenditure to which we are committed, his words will sound rather hollow.

Mr. Nick Harvey (North Devon): I welcome the objective of treating more people in their own homes. However, is the Minister not alarmed that social services budgets throughout the country are expected to finish the financial year more than £200 million overspent? Although he has announced rises in the standard spending assessment for next year, social services directors expect next year to be even tougher. What hope is there that the services the Government talk about can be provided for people in their own homes, if social services departments struggle to meet even their existing commitments out of their existing resources?

Mr. Hutton: I am aware of the concerns to which the hon. Gentleman rightly draws attention—as are most right hon. and hon. Members. However, during the past three years we have provided 12 per cent. real-terms growth in social services spending. More real-terms growth is coming. It is worth comparing like with like: during the previous Parliament, real-terms growth in social services spending was 0.1 per cent. During this Parliament and over the comprehensive spending review period, it will be 3.4 per cent. in real terms.

The hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends are always saying that we must have more—I am sure that is what he is saying today—but when we look at the small print of the Liberal Democrats' policies on public finances, we realise that that is a complete load of old cobblers. The money does not add up; there is the same one penny on income tax—they recycle it time after time after time.

The hon. Gentleman's policies on public finance are kindergarten economics; they stand up to no scrutiny whatever.

Mr. David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire): Most Labour Members support the sentiments in the main question. However, when I addressed the Caretalk conference for care home proprietors and managers at Leicestershire county cricket club last Friday, I heard that far too many elderly people, when they are eventually admitted to care, are poorly nourished, lonely, depressed, frail and more ill than they might otherwise have been, because of the failure of home care services. Is the Minister confident that we can improve those services so that it really is worth while to encourage elderly people to stay at home?

Mr. Hutton: If more older people are to be looked after properly at home, there is no doubt at all that we shall have to provide not only more but better quality services to support them in that environment. Last year, through much hard work and sensible use of resources, local authorities were able to provide a significant number of additional care packages to support more older people so that they could remain independent at home for longer. We intend to build on and develop that, but it is important—and fundamental to our plans—that if we are to encourage more older people to stay at home, which is the right thing to do, we provide better and more easily accessible services that are better supported and resourced. That is precisely what we are trying to do.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The Minister knows, however, that from time to time older people have to go into respite care. Is he aware that in my constituency, South Staffordshire health authority now plans to close Hammerwich hospital and to halve the number of beds in the Victoria hospital in Lichfield? Is he further aware that Staffordshire MPs held a meeting with the health authority, and were told that the Government had uplifted prescribing costs by 9 per cent? That is good, except for the fact that the full cost of prescriptions is likely to be 12 per cent.—bad—and that, as a result of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, the Government have made an extra commitment of £500,000 for South Staffordshire health authority—good—except that the result of the cost will be an extra £2 million—bad. We currently suffer a £4.7 million rolling deficit. Come on, let us have adequate funding.

Mr. Hutton: I am probably not the only hon. Member in the House who did not follow the hon. Gentleman's question. Perhaps there is a chance that when I read it in *Hansard* it might make better sense. The hon. Gentleman ended his question—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) has asked a question. The Minister must be allowed to reply.

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to you, Mr. Speaker. The only point that I understood in the question put by the hon. Gentleman was the request that the Government should spend more on the national health service. No one in the House could regard that as a serious question or a serious proposition. The official Opposition have not even committed themselves to matching the expenditure that we have provided for. [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes, we have."] No they have not. Of course Opposition Members want to claim that, but it is complete and utter nonsense.

One of the points that the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends refuse to deal with is their plan to spend £500 million more on subsidising private health insurance. Where is that going to come from? The hon. Gentleman should have a conversation about that with the hon. Members on the Opposition Front Bench. His party will not match our expenditure on health and social services, so his question is complete nonsense.

Coronary Heart Disease

8. **Ms Sally Keeble** (Northampton, North): What progress is being made in improving services which will cut the incidence of coronary heart disease. [151956]

The Minister for Public Health (Yvette Cooper): Two of the biggest causes of heart disease are smoking and lack of access to fruit and vegetables. That is why the action to cut the incidence of heart disease includes comprehensive support for smokers who want to give up, and rolling out free fruit in infants schools.

Ms Keeble: I thank my hon. Friend for that response. Is she aware that this Friday, a new chest pain clinic is opening at Northampton general hospital, and does she agree that such measures will not only help to cure heart disease but will help people to monitor their own condition and get it under control?

Yvette Cooper: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I certainly welcome the arrival of the new rapid-access chest pain clinic in Northampton. In the national service framework we have set out plans for rapid-access chest pain clinics throughout the country. Those are being opened as we speak, and are starting to provide services throughout the country, because it is important that when people are suspected of suffering from heart disease they can be seen very swiftly and properly diagnosed.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): Is the Minister not concerned about the lack of fitness among our young people, and does she not consider that that is due to a lack of sporting facilities and sports education in our schools? We may accept that that is largely due to the selling of school playing fields and the requirements of the national curriculum, but what talks is the Minister having with her counterparts in the Department for Education and Employment to ensure that sport is made compulsory in our schools?

Yvette Cooper: We have had considerable discussions with the DFEE and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about promoting sport in schools. The hon. Lady will be aware that considerable work has been done to promote sport in schools, and to create school sports co-ordinators to increase access to exercise among young people. However, this issue is not just about sports; it is about exercise and access to exercise across the board.

The creation of safe routes to school for many of our young people is another important way of increasing their access to exercise.

Mr. Dennis Turner (Wolverhampton, South-East): I am not sure whether Ministers, particularly my right hon. Friend himself, are aware of the deep affection in which the Secretary of State is held by my constituents, following his recent announcement of a state-of-the-art £44 million coronary care unit for Wolverhampton and the black country. My right hon. Friend is aware, as all our Ministers are, that we have the highest incidence of heart disease in the whole west midlands region, but the lowest access to such important life-saving facilities. Thank you very much, Ministers.

Yvette Cooper: I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the new state-of-the-art cardiac surgery centre in Wolverhampton, and pay tribute to his very persistent lobbying on behalf of his constituents for the cardiac centre these past many months. He is right that it is important to increase access to heart operations and to increase the number of heart operations taking place in this country. He is also right that it is important to target those services exactly where we need them, in order to tackle the health inequalities as well, because the blunt fact is that a person on a low income is three times more likely to suffer from heart disease than a person on a high income. That health inequality is morally wrong.

Consultants Contracts

9. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): What representations he has received on the negotiations for new consultants contracts. [151957]

13. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will make a statement on the recruitment and retention of consultants. [151961]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): The Government's proposals for a new consultants contract were published last month. We are now in negotiation with the British Medical Association on our proposals and its own. In the meantime, the number of consultants in the NHS has increased by almost 3,000 since 1997. We are committed to further significant increases as part of the NHS plan. By 2004, there will be 7,500 more consultants working in the NHS.

Mr. Amess: I take all that with a pinch of salt. Surely the Secretary of State realises that, even by the standards of this deeply sinister, incompetent—[HON. MEMBERS: "Rotten Government"]—rotten Government, his policy on consultants contracts is wrong. Will he now undertake to look carefully at the evidence given to the Select Committee on Health, which showed that morale in our health service will plummet as a result of that policy? Will he undertake to stop his wicked attack on our hard-working consultants and realise that although we need more hospital consultants, we certainly do not need a Labour Secretary of State for Health?

Mr. Milburn: I know that the hon. Gentleman is parliamentary adviser to the Caravan Club—which probably explains why he is undertaking his political tour of Essex constituencies at the moment—but not everyone has the luxury of having two jobs at once. It is right that we correct this historic anomaly, and our proposals are designed to do something very simple indeed. The consultants contract has remained unreformed since 1948; it is about time it was changed. I want to put the NHS in a better position to compete for consultants valuable time, expertise and skills, for the benefit of NHS patients.

Dr. Lewis: Does the Secretary of State's policy not show that he thinks he knows a lot better than the founding fathers of the NHS, who recognised the problems that would be caused if consultants were forced into the NHS and not allowed to engage in private practice? What makes him think that he has a better solution to the problem, which is fundamentally the same now as it was when Aneurin Bevan and other Labour Ministers, who knew what they were doing, decided that the course that he proposes to adopt was totally wrong, counter-productive and would result in consultants being lost from the NHS?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman is the oddest looking Bevanite that I have ever seen in my life; poor old Nye would be turning in his grave at the prospect of the hon. Gentleman supporting him. The contract has remained unreformed since 1948. It has remained as it was then for the past 53 years, and it has to change. The whole assumption behind the consultant contract has been that the best way for NHS consultants to get on is by opting out of NHS work. We must turn that on its head. There is a fair deal on offer for NHS consultants. We will pay them more for doing more NHS work, in exchange for which we expect them to do less private practice. We have proposed the deal, and we shall negotiate it.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): The Health Committee's inquiry into consultants contracts was mentioned a moment or two ago. Does my right hon. Friend remember that during that inquiry, we received evidence that, in certain parts of the country, NHS waiting lists were being artificially lengthened to stimulate a demand for private consultations and private treatment? In the negotiations with the consultants, has that matter been considered?

Mr. Milburn: I understand that there are concerns about precisely those issues. Many patients find being confronted with such potential conflicts of interest extremely uncomfortable, but that is not the primary purpose of what we seek to do. Given that we have a limited number of NHS consultants—we shall have more in future—our primary purpose is to ensure that we get the maximum amount of NHS time from them. That seems reasonable; it is not a something-for-nothing deal.

We are seeking to pay NHS consultants more for doing more NHS work. They will receive an average of £10,000 a year extra when they start out as NHS consultants. They will have extra access to discretionary points and extra access to £20,000 worth of extra rewards in exchange for doing less private practice. That is the deal that we have proposed. It makes a fundamental break from what has

gone before, but I believe that in the end, it will be welcomed not only by NHS consultants, but, most importantly, by NHS patients.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I wish my right hon. Friend well in his endeavours. Do we not all know that, contrary to what Tory Members have said, Nye Bevan wanted to do exactly what my right hon. Friend is attempting to do today? The money was not there then, but we have now got an economy that enables us to achieve what we could not do in the 1940s. My right hon. Friend should not worry when the Tories talk about doctors and consultants with more than one job, because nearly every Tory MP moonlights as well.

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend, as always, makes a very good point. I will not take much notice of what the Conservatives say, but of course we shall listen to what the consultants say. There will be a negotiation, and we have set out our position very clearly indeed. We shall negotiate on it, and I fully expect us to make progress.

Mr. Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden): Although I accept that it is normally desirable to retain experienced and dedicated consultants in the NHS, will the Secretary of State set up an inquiry into why Mr. Lennox Kane, a consultant gynaecologist at Hemel Hempstead who had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, was allowed to continue operating? Will the inquiry investigate the complaints of 27 of his women patients about the treatment that they received? Will the right hon. Gentleman use his good offices to ensure that the chief executive and chairman of the health authority and the trust agree to meet the members of the action group that was set up to represent those patients before such an inquiry, not after, which is all that they have agreed to at present?

Mr. Milburn: The circumstances that the right hon. Gentleman describes are extremely disturbing. As I understand it, the trust is already reviewing the way in which the complaints were or were not acted upon. I promise him that I shall look into precisely the matters that he has raised with me.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): On 11 June last year, the Secretary of State told BBC television:

> "In most walks of life employees have got a choice haven't they about whether they work part-time or whether they work full-time . . . We are not going to deny that to consultants. Surely, why should we? It would be a pretty odd state of affairs if we said to highly trained consultants, some of the most expert people, professionals that we have in the Health Service, you are going to be denied a set of rights that everybody in the NHS has."

Can the Secretary of State explain what change has brought about the pretty extraordinary state of affairs that we now find, or was that statement, like the concordats with the private sector, just part of the mood music? Is not the authentic Secretary of State the authoritarian that we see before us at the Dispatch Box now?

Mr. Milburn: Welcome to Health questions. The hon. Gentleman should read the Government's proposals.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Answer the question.

Mr. Milburn: If the hon. Gentleman will stop hollering, I will try to answer the question. If he calms down and keeps taking the pills, he will be fine.

If the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) reads the Government's proposals, he will see that there is perfect consistency between what was said then and what is being said now. We have made it perfectly clear that, in exchange for extra rewards, we will expect newly qualified consultants not to work in private practice for up to seven years. Following that seven-year ban, it will be perfectly permissible for consultants to undertake a limited amount of private practice. That seems to me to be the right thing to do. It is right for consultants, because it gets them extra rewards, and it gets NHS patients the extra skills, the extra commitment and the extra expertise that they need.

Pace of Change Policy

10. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): If he will make a statement on the pace of change policy. [151958]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. John Denham): Each year, the Government decide how extra resources should be deployed between across-the-board increases to maintain continuity and stability in the service and to make progress nationally in priority areas, and differential distribution to bring under-target health authorities nearer to equity.

Dr. Iddon: Whichever indicators are used, they show that people in my constituency are desperately in need of extra resources to improve their health. Figures in my possession show not only that in the financial year 1993–94, the Bolton part of Wigan and Bolton health authority was 6 per cent. off its target, but that the situation has not improved in the current year, and we are still 6.5 per cent.—£13 million—under target.

I congratulate the Government on allocating, this year and next year, the most extra resources to the health authority that it has had since the NHS was created—but will my right hon. Friend ensure that the money is targeted at people such as my constituents, who are in the greatest need?

Mr. Denham: Four years ago, Wigan and Bolton health authority was almost 5 per cent. below target; now it is less than 3 per cent. below target. The important point is that it has received a cash increase of 9.1 per cent. for next year. My hon. Friend will know that the health authority's ability to address poverty and inequality is far greater with such an increase in resources than it would be if the Conservative party was in power, implementing its pledge to cut £16 billion from public spending—which would of course include cuts in health service spending.

Points of Order

3.31 pm

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. The ministerial code of conduct published by the Prime Minister states:

"It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity. Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister".

In recent days, an account has been published of events surrounding the publication of the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone and, in particular, reporting certain actions of the Foreign Secretary and his press secretary, Mr. John Williams.

It has been alleged that those actions, whose factual accuracy has not, I understand, been challenged, are simply inconsistent with the account given to the House and its Committees on no fewer than three separate occasions. In particular, the apparent telephoning of a reporter by Mr. Williams at 6.45 am on the day of publication seems inconsistent with the Foreign Secretary's assertion:

"There was no briefing—no leak to the press in advance of publication by the Foreign Office or any Minister in the Foreign Office."—[*Official Report*, 24 February 1999; Vol. 326, c. 416.]

Also inconsistent is the allegation that the Foreign Secretary himself also phoned the same reporter some hours before publication.

Next week, the Foreign Secretary has to represent Britain at the Stockholm summit. His ability to do so has been seriously affected by the cloud now hanging over him. It is urgently necessary in the national interest that the matter be resolved at the earliest possible opportunity. Has the Foreign Secretary asked to make a statement to the House which would clear up this disturbing matter for good?

Mr. Speaker: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that the Foreign Secretary has not asked me whether he can make a statement.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I seek your guidance on a matter raised in paragraph 50 of the fourth report of the Public Administration Committee, which states that

"the Official Opposition and its auditors were unable to give a categorical assurance that its Short Money funding was used exclusively for parliamentary business."

It states also that the Opposition afterwards approached the Fees Office to arrive at a new description of parliamentary business, without consideration by the House. Is it in order for any party to act in that way, without recourse to the House? Will you investigate the matter and ensure that any rule changes are introduced by the House and no one else?

Mr. Speaker: I feel that it would have been helpful if I had received notice of that point of order. I will look into the matter and get back to the hon. Lady.

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I want to raise a matter relating to motion 13 on the Order Paper. On 7 March, European Standing Committee C spent some two hours debating issues of interest to millions of people about the pricing and servicing of new cars in the context of the European Commission review of the exemption enjoyed by motor vehicle manufacturers from the general ban on anti-competitive agreements. I moved an amendment tabled by the Chairman of the Trade and Industry Committee, the hon. Member for Normanton (Mr. O'Brien) and others of that Committee's members. At column 26 of *Hansard*, the Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs said:

"I am happy to accept the amendment because it reflects the Government's intentions."

He also said:

"It sharpens the motion and is a good indicator of our thinking".—[*Official Report, European Standing Committee C*, 7 March 2001; c. 26.]

The amendment was agreed, and the amended motion was carried unanimously and reported to the House by the Chairman of the Standing Committee. Today, without warning, the Government have tabled motion 13, which is the unamended version. What is the purpose of a Standing Committee if amendments that are agreed with Government support are, a few days later, deemed not to have been accepted? Will you, Mr. Speaker, accept a manuscript amendment phrased in the same terms as the amendment that was accepted in Committee so that the motion can be amended if the Government press it?

I remind the House and you, Mr. Speaker, that in 1991, the Procedure Committee said that tabling a motion which did not reflect the Standing Committee's decision made a mockery of the scrutiny process. In 1997 it further said that the outcome of Committee proceedings should not be swept under the carpet if the system is to retain credibility. The Government are riding roughshod over the procedures of the House and the scrutiny process.

Mr. Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order. If he tables such an amendment, I shall give it careful consideration. In addition, I am sure that Ministers heard what he said.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. My concern is straightforward. You will be aware that we were due to finish the Criminal Justice and Police Bill in Committee last Thursday. You will also know that we debated the Government motion on that until the early hours of this morning and that, at about 2 am, we agreed to go ahead without finishing the Committee stage. The Bill is due back on the Floor of the House tomorrow. In the light of the fact that some hon. Members do not have the normal opportunity for tabling new clauses or amendments, would you be willing to select such proposals for debate if they were tabled today for consideration tomorrow? In such circumstances there is usually at least an intervening weekend, giving hon. Members five days' notice, but last night's unprecedented decision means that notice has been shortened to less than a day and a half.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman asks whether I would select new clauses and amendments for debate.

I can only do that when I see what is on the amendment paper. When I see what is tabled, I shall give the matter due consideration.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. You will be aware of the devastation that is being caused in the west country by the foot and mouth crisis. It is affecting not only agriculture but other industries, especially tourism, which is suffering from massive cancellations of places and hotels. With that in mind, have you received a request from the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions to make a statement to the House on today's announcement by the Prime Minister that a taskforce will be set up under the chairmanship of the Minister for the Environment, to consider—as we understand it from press reports—compensation arrangements that flow from the foot and mouth crisis? I should like to think that you have received such a request, which you would, no doubt, treat favourably. Once again, an interesting press statement has been released, but its terms of reference need to be examined in the House. That issue is of vital concern to anyone who comes from an area where foot and mouth is rampant.

Mr. Speaker: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I have not received such a request, but I am sure that Ministers will take on board his deep concerns.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, a Committee of this House reported on the conduct of the Minister for Europe, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz). One of the many disturbing features of the report was a statement that several important allegations could not be properly investigated by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards because the Minister and some of his close associates in his constituency organisation were not prepared to co-operate with the inquiry.

Is there a way that the commissioner can be asked to reopen the inquiry and that the Minister and his friends and associates can be required to comply with the wishes of the House? I thought that the Government wanted to bust sleaze, but now we have a Minister who does not. Many of us think that the hon. Gentleman should resign while the matter is investigated. Can you advise us on how to pursue that?

Mr. Speaker: That is a matter for the Committee; it is up to it to look at it.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. At Health questions, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), announced that the Secretary of State would make a statement on GP recruitment and retention payments, which are a new Government initiative. However, that was announced on the lunchtime news today, and was also in *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Independent*. Is that not an abuse of the House by a Government who make a habit of abusing the House?

Mr. Speaker: That is a matter for the Minister, not the Chair.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Yesterday, the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) commented on concern about the transportation of cattle slaughtered because of foot and mouth; the carcases were going through Cheshire to a rendering plant in Widnes in my constituency. That has caused great concern in my constituency, and I have asked several questions and made representations to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I received a phone call late this morning from a local radio station saying that some farmers in Cheshire were threatening to block roads into my constituency, to stop the carcases getting to the plant.

As I said, there is general concern about that. I am worried that, if transportation were stopped, that might cause more of a problem. Would you look favourably on any request for a statement on transportation, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker: I understand that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is coming to the House. If the hon. Gentleman catches my eye, he may be able to put the matter to him.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Pursuant to your ruling on the point of order raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope), would it be appropriate to remove motion 13 from today's Order Paper until the full text has been agreed by European Standing Committee C—on which I too serve—so that it can be considered by the whole House?

Mr. Speaker: I have been told informally that there was a mistake and that the motion may not be moved. That may be helpful to the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope).

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. A moment or two ago, you indicated that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food was coming to make a statement. Could you clarify that, please?

Mr. Speaker: Not today, but this week. I understand that the Minister has indicated that he will come this week. [HON. MEMBERS: "Tomorrow?"] It may be tomorrow; it is certainly not today.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Further to the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg), Mr. Speaker. The transportation of infected carcases through Cheshire is causing grave concern. I raised that in a point of order yesterday and, quite rightly, the hon. Member for Halton has referred to farmers' anxieties. No one in the House would condone actions that did not conform with the law but, apart from the dangers of vented trucks carrying carcases passing through an area, neither the police nor the trading standards authorities were informed of the transportation before it took place.

I urge you to use your best offices, Mr. Speaker, to ask the Minister to attend the House as soon as possible so that those matters can receive proper attention and so that assurance can be given to farmers, who are desperately worried.

Mr. Speaker: I understand that it must be a worrying time for hon. Members who have farming communities.

[Mr. Speaker]

but I have to say that many of the questions being asked by hon. Members on points of order are really matters for the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I have said that I understand that that the right hon. Gentleman is coming to the House this week.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Further to the report in that journal of truth and wisdom, *The Sunday Telegraph*, to the effect that the application for a passport by Mr. Duncan Fletcher, the excellent Zimbabwe-born coach of the England cricket team, has been refused, have you received any indication from a Minister at the Home Office that he or she intends to come to the House to explain that curious conduct, particularly to assure hon. Members that the rejection is not explained by the fact that Mr. Fletcher is neither a donor to the Labour party nor a sponsor of the millennium dome?

Mr. Speaker: I have had no such indication.

Mr. Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. This is a separate point of order from my earlier one. First, may I apologise to you, and give an explanation for losing my normal calmness and amiable demeanour following the answer to my question at Health Question Time? May I explain that I was quoting from the South Staffordshire health authority report, so I could not understand why the Minister said that the contents of the report were nonsense? Furthermore—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that he is not raising a proper point of order.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am grateful to you for showing your understanding and sympathy for constituencies that are badly affected by outbreaks of foot and mouth disease. It is encouraging that you have informed the House that we can expect a statement some time later this week. However, we ought to have had a statement today, following the Prime Minister's summit, because our constituents are ringing us and asking us about the television and radio reports of that meeting. It would have been a little more respectful if the Government had arranged a statement today on these important matters. Many people in my constituency just want information about the restrictions on movement that are being discussed.

Mr. Speaker: Once again, I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman, but I can do nothing about the matter.

Recycling (Doorstep Collection)

3.46 pm

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the doorstep collection of recyclable waste from all residential properties in England and Wales; to set 20-year targets for increasing levels of recycling in accordance with European Union requirements; and for connected purposes.

The Bill has cross-party support and is also supported by various environmental organisations, including Friends of the Earth. I thank Martyn and Claire from Friends of the Earth for their support in preparing the Bill. Recycling makes sense and is popular among constituents. People taking bottles, cans and newspapers to the supermarket recycling banks are a familiar Sunday sight. I have taken my children there on many occasions.

The environmental benefits of recycling are clear. It reduces the need for landfill sites, and we should remember that to meet EU targets we must reduce waste to landfill sites by 25 per cent. by 2010, and by 65 per cent. by 2020. We must reduce the need for incinerators and their potential for giving off cancer-inducing dioxins. We need to protect the earth's resources, which continue to be plundered, and we must reduce the potential for pollution.

There are clear cost benefits. Recycling aluminium cans alone could save £21 million a year, and in the process cut greenhouse gas emissions by 95 per cent., compared with the use of raw aluminium. Recycling can create jobs. Wastewatch, the organisation that prepared a report on the subject, found that a 30 per cent. recycling target could create 45,000 new jobs.

The benefits are evident. The question is how much recycling is already undertaken. Nationally, 9 per cent. of household waste is recycled. In Shrewsbury, we are above average, with 11 per cent. household waste recycling covering 87 per cent. of that rural borough. My congratulations go to Shrewsbury and Atcham borough council on what it has achieved, but I know that the council wants to achieve far more.

In their document entitled "Waste Strategy 2000", the Government set out a series of targets. Within two years, 17 per cent. of household waste should be recycled. By 2010, the target is 25 per cent., and by 2020, it is 33 per cent. In the next two years, we need to double the amount of household rubbish being recycled, but after that, the increases tail off. That is not good enough. The targets are too low.

Let us consider the position further afield. In Switzerland, 52 per cent. of rubbish is recycled, and in Holland the figure is 48 per cent. Even the United States, which is renowned for its greedy culture, recycles 22 per cent. In the Scandinavian countries, Austria and Germany, the recycling of half of household rubbish was achieved more than five years ago. The potential is massive, but we need a new partnership between businesses, councils, residents and the Government. In "Recycler Review" this month, it is reported that Daventry district council recycles up to 70 per cent., Wealden council 53 per cent. and Sutton council 44 per cent. I believe that 60 per cent. of household rubbish could be recycled, and that that is achievable in the short term. It is not rocket science; it is simply a case of being serious about recycling.

My Bill would make the process far more efficient by ensuring doorstep collection for all households. We already collect rubbish door to door, so we need only to build on the best available practices and ask people to separate waste ready for collection. Once we have created a recycling network, we can include batteries and electrical goods in addition to newspapers, tin cans, food cans in general, glass bottles and plastics. The cost, about which everybody invariably asks, is £10 per household, or an estimated £240 million a year. Where would that money come from? Last year alone, the landfill tax brought in £462 million, so all I ask is that the Treasury give half that money directly to recycling schemes so that we can extend them nationwide.

The Government—especially my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for the Environment—are to be congratulated on their dedication to pushing a green agenda. On 24 October last year, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said in a speech to the Green Alliance:

"I want to see every local authority offering doorstep recycling to take advantage of these new markets."

If we harness my right hon. Friend's new determination to use the latest technology, establish partnerships between the public and private sectors and enlist public support, we can, at the dawn of the 21st century, begin the task of protecting the environment with far more recycling. Once and for all for future generations, we can then begin to save the environment as we keep promising to do.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Paul Marsden, Mr. David Chaytor, Mr. Lembit Öpik, Sir Sydney Chapman, Valerie Davey, Mr. Don Foster, Dr. Doug Naysmith, Mr. Tom Brake, Ms Joan Walley and Mr. Simon Thomas.

RECYCLING (DOORSTEP COLLECTION)

Mr. Paul Marsden accordingly presented a Bill to make provision for the doorstep collection of recyclable waste from all residential properties in England and Wales; to set 20-year targets for increasing levels of recycling in accordance with European Union requirements; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 6 April, and to be printed [Bill 61].

Orders of the Day

WAYS AND MEANS

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [7 March].

AMENDMENT OF THE LAW

Motion made, and Question proposed,

(1) That it is expedient to amend the law with respect to the National Debt and the public revenue and to make further provision in connection with finance.

(2) Subject to paragraphs (3) to (6) below, this Resolution does not extend to the making of any amendment with respect to value added tax so as to provide—

(a) for zero-rating or exempting a supply, acquisition or importation;

(b) for refunding an amount of tax;

(c) for varying any rate at which that tax is at any time chargeable;

(d) for any relief, other than a relief which—

(i) so far as it is applicable to goods, applies to goods of every description, and

(ii) so far as it is applicable to services, applies to services of every description.

(3) Paragraph (2) above does not exclude the making of amendments with respect to value added tax—

(a) providing for refunds of the kind specified in paragraph (4) below;

(b) providing for that tax to be charged at a reduced rate of 5 per cent. on supplies of the descriptions specified in paragraph (5) below (and on equivalent acquisitions and importations); or

(c) making provision of the kind authorised by paragraph (6) below.

(4) The refunds mentioned in paragraph (3)(a) above are refunds of value added tax where—

(a) that tax is chargeable on a supply to, or an acquisition or importation by, a museum or gallery, and

(b) the supply, acquisition or importation is attributable to supplies of free rights of admission to the museum or gallery.

(5) The supplies mentioned in paragraph (3)(b) above are—

(a) supplies, in the course of a conversion of a building (or part of a building), of services related to the conversion if after the conversion the building (or part) contains living accommodation;

(b) supplies, in the course of the renovation or alteration (including the extension) of a dwelling that has been unoccupied for at least three years, of services related to the renovation or alteration;

(c) supplies of goods by a person making a supply of services within sub-paragraph (a) or (b) above if—

(i) those services include the incorporation of the goods into the building concerned (or its site), and

(ii) the goods are building materials within the meaning of Group 5 of Schedule 8 to the Value Added Tax Act 1994;

(d) supplies of children's car seats.

(6) The provision authorised by this paragraph is provision re-enacting, without altering any person's liability to value added tax or the amount of any such liability, provisions providing for that tax to be charged at a reduced rate of 5 per cent. on certain supplies, acquisitions and importations.—[*Mr. Gordon Brown.*]

Question again proposed.

Budget Resolutions and Economic Situation

3.52 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): Our first duty in government has been to secure economic stability for the country. Stability is the foundation on which prosperity and progress can be built and is the basis for sustained investment in strong public services. In last week's Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer locked in the stability that the Government have created.

When the Government came to office in 1997, inflation was back in the system, interest rates were rising and the public finances had spiralled out of control. In the previous 18 years, the national debt had doubled and the economy had been allowed to lurch between the deepest recessions and ever-shorter periods of unsustainable growth. Mass unemployment and a growing debt burden had skewed public spending. For every £1 of extra public expenditure, 42p was being spent on servicing the national debt and paying the social security bills of economic failure.

Today, just 16p in every pound is spent on those debt and social security payments. Interest payments on debt used to exceed payments on schools, but today, schools are the Government's priority. The public finances are back under control. Interest rates, and therefore mortgages, are averaging half their rate under the previous Government. Our inflation rate is among the lowest in Europe, there are 1 million more jobs in the economy, and manufacturing, despite its significant difficulties, is expanding, investing and exporting. After decades of neglect, public investment is also growing, especially in the key services: health, education, transport and the fight against crime.

None of that has come about by chance. It has happened because of the choices that the Government have made. New fiscal rules, independence for the Bank of England, and new programmes to create jobs and to make work pay have all helped to secure prosperity and progress for our country.

Each and every step of the way, those choices have been opposed by the Conservative party. In August 1998, the shadow Foreign Secretary predicted a bleak outlook for the economy. Today, Britain has the lowest inflation that it has had for 30 years. The Leader of the Opposition said that independence for the Bank of England was dangerous arrogance. Today, Britain has the lowest long-term interest rates for 35 years.

The shadow Chancellor warned the House that a minimum wage would lose the country more than a million jobs. Today Britain has a minimum wage; it also has the lowest unemployment for 25 years. Rather than a million jobs being lost, a million have been created. Today's Conservatives, therefore, have been wrong on economic performance, wrong on the Bank of England's independence, wrong on ending poverty pay, and wrong on every prediction and forecast. Not even Michael Fish gets it that wrong. *[Interruption.]* I am glad that the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) is perking up.

The Budget has been well received precisely because we avoided the temptation, to which Chancellors have traditionally succumbed, to make judgments for the short term that could not be sustained in the longer term. The shadow Chancellor still advocates precisely that approach today. As history proves, that is an economic policy that can end only in boom and bust.

The right hon. Gentleman will recall that when he was a member of the Government in 1988, the then Chancellor, Lord Lawson, declared that there had been an economic miracle in Britain. The problem was that the then Government assumed that surpluses one year were sustainable every year. The Budget that year cut taxes by £6 billion in 1988 prices. Within just three years, Britain was in the deepest recession that it has ever seen. Where was the right hon. Gentleman at the time? He was in the Treasury, presiding over 15 per cent. interest rates, 10 per cent. inflation rates, 3 million people unemployed, 1 million people in negative equity and a £50 billion public sector borrowing requirement. That truly was a recession made in Downing street. Today, he claims to have enough credibility to run the economy. Frankly, with his record, he does not have the credibility to run a bath, never mind the economy.

Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer consciously took a balanced approach, involving the repayment of national debt alongside targeted tax cuts for hard-working families; help for pensioners, motorists and savers alongside action to increase employment opportunities; and new measures to boost private sector productivity alongside prudent public sector investment.

The national health service is a major beneficiary of our approach. The NHS in England will receive an average of £275 million extra a year for the next three years. That is in addition to the record levels of investment that we are already making. Health service spending is now growing by an average of 6.6 per cent. a year in real terms this year and over the next three years. In the previous Parliament, when the right hon. Gentleman was in the Treasury, health service spending grew by just 2.6 per cent. Indeed, in the previous Conservative Government's last year in office—with him in the Cabinet alongside the Leader of the Opposition—they cut health service spending in real terms.

Today, under a Labour Government, the NHS is the fastest growing health service of any major country in Europe. The whole nation knows that there is a huge amount of catching up to do. Real problems remain in the health service, but real progress is being made too. This year, for the first time in years, the NHS overall will balance its books. Just as we have sorted out the state of the overall public finances, so our prudent management has paid off the NHS debts that we inherited.

Hospital waiting lists have fallen below the 100,000 target that we promised at the previous general election, and outpatient lists are now falling as well. There are improved waiting times for cancer patients. More heart operations are being carried out than ever before. For the first time, cancer and cardiac services for prevention and for treatment are receiving earmarked funding worth hundreds of millions of pounds.

This year, for the first time in 40 years, there are more beds in hospitals. The biggest new hospital building programme in health service history is under way. When the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea was Chief Secretary, he cut capital investment in NHS buildings and NHS equipment by almost 6 per cent. in

real terms. Capital spending in the NHS was lower at the end of the previous Parliament than at the beginning. Over this Parliament, capital investment is growing again by an annual average of almost 10 per cent.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Even in my own West Surrey health authority area, the number of beds in the system has been cut by 25 per cent. since the Government came to power. If the investment is coming through, it follows some of the most savage cuts ever witnessed made in the shortest time on record.

Mr. Milburn: With due respect, the hon. Gentleman is on shaky ground. After all, over just 10 years, his party in government cut NHS beds by 40,000. This year, for the first time in 40 years, the number of NHS beds is growing. Indeed, during the next few years, that number will grow still more precisely because of the investment that we are making in the NHS—investment that the Conservative party still refuses to match. The biggest problem that the NHS faces is a shortage not of cash or even of the latest equipment or modern buildings, but of capacity.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Does not the Secretary of State recognise that there is still a shortage of cash as a result of the Government accepting two years of Tory spending plans? A lot of the extra spending goes to meet previous deficits. I hope that I can share his optimism that, a year from now, we shall see some real outputs, but the majority of health authorities are still in debt.

Mr. Milburn: That is not the case. I can tell the hon. Gentleman, who is normally more assiduous on such issues, that this year, for the first time in seven or eight years, the NHS overall will balance its books. The extra money does not go to paying off debts. It goes on new hospitals, new primary care premises, extra pay for nurses and doctors and more doctors, nurses, therapists and scientists.

The Liberal Democrats tell us that not enough money is going to the NHS, but at the previous general election they promised a meagre increase of only £700 million a year, which is dwarfed by the amount that we have invested. The Liberals are in danger of becoming the Oliver Twists of modern party politics—they always beg for more and nothing is ever enough. They always want to spend money that they do not have.

The problem in the NHS is not so much a shortage of cash as a shortage of capacity and of trained qualified staff—doctors, nurses, midwives, therapists and scientists—who have the skills on which NHS patients depend. Those staff are the best asset of the NHS and the NHS simply needs more of them. Here, we have made a start.

There are 17,000 more nurses working in the NHS than when we came to office. There are 6,700 more doctors, but we need to do much more. The NHS is still short of doctors, nurses and other qualified staff. The NHS plan, which we published last year, sets out our ambition to have by 2004—compared with the 1999 position—20,000 more nurses, 7,500 more consultants and at least 2,000 more general practitioners working for the health service.

Last week, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor outlined a new £135 million fund to help us to achieve those ambitious plans for staff expansion in the NHS. Today, I can give the House the details of how we shall deploy those extra resources. I begin with nurses, who are the backbone of our health service. From this Government, they get the recognition and, indeed, the pay rises that they deserve—pay rises paid in full rather than staged. There is extra pay, too, of up to £1,000 in those parts of the country where shortages are greatest and the cost of living highest.

Mr. Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks): Will the Secretary of State reconsider the criterion for his cost-of-living supplement, which classifies the whole of west Kent—including high-cost areas in Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells—as not eligible, while towns much further away, such as Swindon and Portsmouth, seem to qualify?

Mr. Milburn: Of course that issue, which the hon. Gentleman has raised with me before, is one that we keep under review. This is the first year in which there will be an increase in the cost-of-living supplement, targeting extra money on areas where we know that, for a variety of reasons—largely to do with property prices—the cost of living is highest. We will continue to keep the matter under review, and I am aware of the representations made by him and, indeed, many of my hon. Friends about the situation in Kent.

Not every nurse shortage problem has been solved, but progress has been made. Under the present Government—but not under the last—nurse numbers have risen every year: they have risen by more than 6,000 in the last 12 months alone. Nurse training places, which were cut in the last Parliament—incidentally, at precisely the time when the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea had his fingers on the purse strings—have risen under this Government. Training places are up by 36 per cent., and there has been a 56 per cent. increase in United Kingdom applicants for nursing and midwifery courses.

There is more that we can now do. We will take three steps. The first relates to nurses who are considering returning to work in the NHS. In the last two years, more than 7,000 nurses who left the health service have rejoined it. Many may not have been in nursing for many years, and may need training to get them up to speed with modern practice. Return-to-work courses last an average of 12 weeks. Currently, there is no direct financial support for nurses during that period of retraining; that is a significant disincentive, which I intend to remove. From next month I will introduce a new payment for nurses, midwives and other health professionals who are retraining for a return to work in the NHS. Each payment will be worth at least £1,000. We will consult nursing and other unions on how best to make the new payments work.

Secondly, there will be more help for nurses with child care responsibilities. About 50 per cent. of nurses have children, and many find it difficult to combine their family and work responsibilities. In the NHS plan, we committed ourselves to spending more than £30 million by 2004 to provide more child care, including 100 on-site nurseries. Today I intend to go further: I will increase spending by half—by £15 million—over the next two years, to provide a further 50 new NHS nurseries. I can confirm that no new NHS hospital development will get the go-ahead unless it contains plans for such a workplace nursery.

[Mr. Milburn]

Thirdly, we will increase the incomes of student nurses, midwives and therapists. For much of the 1990s, the student bursary was frozen; in the last three years we have increased it. Each of the 50,000 students currently studying for a nursing diploma now receives £4,805 a year.

Student nurses are crucial to the future of the health service. One in six currently give up a course before completing it, and that must change. Student nurses deserve more than they are getting now. I can announce that, from September, each student nurse studying for a diploma will receive a £500 bursary increase. That is a 10.4 per cent. rise, and it will extend to all NHS-funded students studying for degrees. It is the biggest increase since the bursary was introduced in 1989.

Let me say something about family doctors. General practitioners do a brilliant job for the NHS. They are working under real pressure; we have shortages of GPs, and we need more of them. Under the last Government, GP training numbers fell by more than 20 per cent., which has cost the NHS more than 700 family doctors. After big reductions in the number of GP registrars in the mid-1990s, their numbers have risen by more than a quarter.

In the NHS plan, we said that we wanted to increase GP numbers by at least 2,000 by 2004. We have already taken action to improve both recruitment and retention, but today I can go further still.

First, we want to retain GPs in the NHS. So today I can announce that GPs who continue working in the NHS beyond 60 will receive a golden thank-you payment on their 65th birthday as an incentive to remain in general practice. On their 60th birthday, £10,000 will be set aside. On their retirement, they will receive the lump sum plus interest.

Secondly, many family doctors have left general practice but could be persuaded to return—*[Interruption.]* Even the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) might be persuaded. With the prospect of a general election around the corner, he should think about it. It might be a good career opportunity for him.

The improvements that we have already made to the GP retainer scheme have enabled more than 1,000 GPs, mainly women, to keep in touch with practice. I intend to do more. From next month, I propose to pay up to £5,000 to GPs on the scheme who return to a permanent post, either full-time or part-time, in the health service.

Thirdly, I want to deal with the imbalance between the supply of GPs and the health needs of the poorer parts of the country. The Government are determined to tackle the health inequalities that scar our nation. We have set new demanding targets to help us do so. Currently, the areas with the greatest health needs often have the lowest numbers of family doctors. The introduction of the new personal medical services contract is of course helping to deal with that historic problem.

Today, we can take another step. From next month, we shall make payments of £5,000 to every new GP who chooses to practise in an under-doctored or deprived area for at least three years. Places that will benefit include Barnsley, Brighton, Bristol and Birmingham. The new incentives will be good for family doctors, good for the health service and, above all else, good for families in those parts of the country where, for too long, there have been shortages of GPs.

Our country as a whole is short of family doctors. So today I am making available extra funding for training GPs and for supporting newly qualified GPs in all parts of the country. There is one further step that I want to take to make general practice a more attractive career for young doctors. I have already announced the £5,000 extra for GPs who choose to work in deprived areas. I can also announce that, wherever they work, in any area, north or south, rich or poor, every new family doctor will receive a £5,000 payment for working in general practice in the health service.

Details will be discussed with GP representatives, but the package that I have been able to announce today will involve new GPs in all parts of the country receiving £5,000, with new GPs in the poorest parts of the country receiving a total of £10,000. Those measures are an important recognition of the work that family doctors do and the need to make their careers more rewarding.

The measures that I have taken today—for nurses, midwives, therapists and GPs—will help to expand the numbers of those key staff working in the health service. In the next few years, the measures will help to bring more family doctors than ever before, and an average of 5,000 extra nurses per year, into the NHS. Consequently, patients will receive better, faster treatment.

As a Government, we can make that investment because of the choices that we have made. As the Budget makes clear, our choice is for economic stability, for targeted tax cuts that are affordable and for extra investment in our key public services. As announced in the Budget, spending growth will now average not the 3.4 per cent. annually that was promised in the spending review, but 3.7 per cent. annually in the next three years. That investment is targeted at our priorities: health, education, transport and the fight against crime.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Perhaps uncharacteristically, I should like to put an entirely non-partisan question to the Secretary of State. Is he aware that 1.4 million people have been diagnosed with diabetes, but that another estimated 1 million people have not been diagnosed? Is he also aware—I suspect that he is—that serious complications can result from late diagnosis, including heart trouble, kidney failure and even blindness? In the light of those disturbing facts, will he endorse the call by Diabetes UK for commitment to the diabetes pledge, which is a pledge for the Government to commit themselves to a thorough and continuing screening programme?

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point. Diabetes is a disease that affects very many people in our country. If it is not diagnosed and treated early, it can have precisely the effects that he described.

The hon. Gentleman will be interested to know that I hope over the next year or so to put together a new blueprint for improvements in diabetes services. The new national standards will apply everywhere, and not just in one part of the country. He will be aware that there is a lottery in care in diabetes services, but that lottery has existed for too long in too many NHS services. However, the choices that we have made and the investment that we are putting in means that we can change that.

For example, the hon. Gentleman will know that diabetes patients need the support of social services as well as of the NHS. The question for him is whether the shadow Chancellor will promise at the Dispatch Box to match the Government's increases in spending on social services and on the NHS. The hon. Gentleman should understand that I mean not only the social services spending that comes from the Department of Health, but the local government spending through the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. The hon. Gentleman's constituents—those who are diabetes patients, and those who are not—will be listening carefully to what the shadow Chancellor has to say on the matter.

The Government are to increase public spending by 3.7 per cent., but the shadow Chancellor, in contrast, has committed the Conservative party to spending rises of just 2.25 per cent. a year, or even less. How will the Opposition fill the spending gap? That is the challenge that they face. If they grow spending at just 2.25 per cent. a year, they will have to cut the Government's spending plans by more than £16 billion by 2003–04. If they postpone cuts for just one year—as they now say they will—they will have to find more than £10 billion of cuts over the following two years.

As the Opposition have failed already to find £8 billion of savings to close the spending gap, there is precisely no chance that they will find £10 billion in savings unless they do what they have promised to do in the past—cut into the country's vital public services. Those services—health, education, transport and the fight against crime—are now under threat from the choices made by the Conservative party and the shadow Chancellor. They have chosen unaffordable tax cuts, instead of investment in our key public services.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Wrong.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Gentleman says that that is wrong, but he should read more carefully what the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea has had to say on the matter. Otherwise, he—and, I suspect, his constituents—will be in for a surprise at the next general election.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Surely it has entered the Secretary of State's brain that the tax cuts proposed by the Conservatives amount to £8 billion, not £16 billion. They have all been carefully costed outside the areas of health and education that we are discussing this afternoon.

Mr. Milburn: Careful costing is not the preserve of the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea, his Front-Bench team or today's Conservative party. They cannot commit to invest to modernise the NHS, so that is why they are now committed to privatising it. We know that from what the shadow Chancellor and other Conservative Members have said. The shadow Chancellor could not have made it clearer. I think that it was in October last year that he told the "Today" programme that he expected those who were able to do so to make "a little extra contribution".

Day by day, the Opposition's economic policy becomes more threadbare. They claim savings that they cannot make, they make tax cuts that they cannot afford, and they make spending pledges that they cannot meet. It would be laughable were it not so serious. The party that once naturally assumed the mantle of economic competence now lives on the never-never, in a world of fantasy economics, spurious spending pledges and unsustainable tax cuts.

The Opposition's policies do not make sense. Their sums do not add up: they are unaffordable, unsustainable and unbelievable. The choice before the country could not be clearer—between policies that bring economic stability and policies that would bring a return to boom and bust, between sustained investment in public services and a return to cuts in public services, and between an expanding, reforming NHS and a contracting, privatising NHS.

Those are the choices for Britain. They are the choices today, and they will be the choices at the next general election.

4.19 pm

Mr. Michael Portillo (Kensington and Chelsea): I refer the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Interests.

I believe that the House will not be overly grateful to the Secretary of State for coming here this afternoon and making a series of announcements that we all read about in this morning's newspapers and heard about from this morning's media. It is typical of the Secretary of State and of the Government to display such discourtesy towards, and contempt for, the House of Commons.

Every time the Government announce more money for the national health service, they tell us that they will revolutionise the service, but nothing ever improves. Before the last election, the Prime Minister stood in front of posters that said that waiting lists would be shorter, but, in fact, they are longer. Doctors in today's national health service are forced to put Ministers' political priorities ahead of patients' clinical needs, which means that the sickest patients are often those who are made to wait the longest. There are 20,000 nursing vacancies in the national health service. The Government promised to end postcode prescribing, but they have not. They promised to end mixed-sex wards, but they have not. They have imposed dogmatic restrictions on new consultants, which means that many doctors could be leaving the national health service.

Nothing that the Secretary of State said today was new because we had already read it. Nothing that he said today changes any of the underlying conditions in the national health service.

Mr. Milburn: Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify one aspect of policy? He has made much of matching our spending on the national health service. Will he give a cast-iron guarantee that, were there to be a Conservative Government, he would match our social services spending across the piece and not just in the Department of Health?

Mr. Portillo: The right hon. Gentleman has obviously forgotten a lot since he left the Treasury. The Government are not in a position to guarantee social services spending because much of it is controlled by local government.

We have illustrated our £8 billion of savings against the Chancellor's plans; they could be made without affecting social services. We have not had to propose any

[Mr. Portillo]

reductions in the Government's plans on social services. The right hon. Gentleman knows that perfectly well. That is what made the last part of his speech so appallingly shabby.

This year's Budget, like all the Chancellor's Budgets, has unravelled very quickly. Now that we have had a chance to study the details, six points emerge. First, it is evident that the Chancellor's speech was, as usual, more spin than substance. That has become a new Budget tradition. Secondly, the Chancellor's claims about economic management completely ignore the golden inheritance that we bequeathed him. In his review of the economy, the right hon. Gentleman completely overlooked the fact that most of our competitors are doing better than we are.

Thirdly, the Budget continues the process of undermining this country's competitive position. Fourthly, it confirms that the Government plan a programme of unsustainable increases in tax and spending. Fifthly, the Chancellor continues his mission of taking money in taxes from those who can ill afford to pay them and forcing them to go cap in hand to the Government for benefits. Sixthly, the Budget did nothing to reduce Government waste and bureaucracy, so that despite the relentless increases in taxation that the Chancellor has imposed, our public services are actually getting worse. The Government have taxed more and delivered less.

Under this Chancellor, the Budget speech has become a series of soundbites, intended to mislead rather than inform. For example, the Chancellor claimed that the rate of increase in Government spending was to rise from 3.4 per cent. to 3.7 per cent., something that the Secretary of State for Health dwelt on towards the end of his speech. More plainly, the Chancellor meant that he had underspent this year by £3.4 billion, that he would underspend over three years by £5 billion and that the figure for 2003-04, which is the last year of his plans, is virtually unchanged. That is a very curious way of presenting his figures.

Similarly, the Chancellor greatly overdid his pre-Budget spinning. The House will remember that there was much talk of tax cuts in advance of the Budget. In the event, the Chancellor brought forth a mouse. The flagship of his tax cuts was his plan to widen the 10p band of income tax. Now that we have analysed it, it turns out to be worth 69p a week.

When people next go to the petrol station and see that Britain still has the most expensive fuel in Europe and that it still costs £50 to fill the tank of a Mondeo, I do not think that they will feel overly grateful to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for the fact that he has allowed them to keep an extra 69p. After 45 stealth tax rises, the right hon. Gentleman has responded with a miserly 69p.

The Chancellor approached the Budget with a very large surplus, but it is not his surplus; it is the people's surplus. The Government's money is not theirs; it is the people's money. The people have been overtaxed and they had every reason to expect that they would get their money back in this Budget.

The Chancellor trumpeted his tax cut, which turned out to be worth 69p, but he did not want to talk about the new taxes that he had invented. Even in an election Budget, he managed to smuggle in tax rises, for example, £2.90 a week more in national insurance for people earning more than £28,400 a year. There was a new energy tax, which the Confederation of British Industry said will seriously damage United Kingdom competitiveness. Council tax is up on average by £1 a week. A new tax on quarrying will be introduced next year. There are higher fuel scale charges for those who have company cars and extra value added tax is to be imposed on spectacles. None of those merited much of a mention in the Chancellor's Budget speech.

The Chancellor was not much more frank when he spoke about the economy, which has been growing not, as he would like us to believe, since May 1997, but since the beginning of 1992. By definition, five of those nine years were under the previous Government. Unemployment has been falling not, as the Chancellor would like us to believe, since May 1997, but since the middle of 1993. Indeed, it has been falling more slowly since 1997 than it did between 1993 and 1997.

It is true—I give the Chancellor this point—that economic growth and falling unemployment enable Governments to spend less on debt interest and on benefits for people who are out of work, but the foundations that brought about those possibilities and changes were laid by the Chancellor's predecessors. In fact, the proud boast of this Government is that, uniquely among Labour Governments, they have not reversed the improving economic trends that they inherited—they have merely slowed them down.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): I grant the achievement of the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), but four years have been added to the period from 1993 to 1997. Has the right hon. Gentleman ever known eight years of such stability in the post-war years?

Mr. Portillo: It was the 18 years drubbing that the Labour party took in opposition that at last convinced it that it had to commit itself to sustainable economic development and the control of inflation. However, I am about to come to the right hon. Gentleman's point, as I think that it is not sufficient for the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the right hon. Gentleman to say that we have had growth for a long period and that that has not happened before.

We are in a new world and it is not sufficient to say that we are growing. What matters is whether we are growing by comparison with our competitors and the answer to that question is that we are not; we are under-performing the competition. The Chancellor and the right hon. Gentleman need to bring themselves up to date. We may have longer economic cycles, but that is no reason for complacency. This country must benchmark itself against the performance of other countries.

If they have proved anything, the past four years have proved that the spending plans of the previous Government were economically sound. The Secretary of State for International Development claimed last week that the Government had been prudent for the first two years, thereby betraying the fact that they had ceased to be prudent now. The Chancellor stuck to the Conservative spending plans for two years and, sure enough, he has got his reward for doing so. We do not yet know—we cannot

know it because it is too early—what will be the economic cost of the rapid acceleration in Government spending that started last year: the return to Labour's tax and spend policies.

In answer to the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), the long period of growth that Britain has experienced should not be a reason for complacency. What matters is how well we are doing by comparison with our competitors. During this period of Labour Government, our rate of growth has been half that of the United States and lower than the average rate of the eurozone. Our productivity is growing at half the United States rate; the rate of growth was 50 per cent. higher under the previous Conservative Government. Unemployment has fallen, but 14 OECD countries have had a better record on unemployment during the period that the Labour Government have been in office.

We have rapidly lost our share of world trade, which went down from 5.1 per cent. to 4.5 per cent. in only three years. Our balance of payments shows an £18 billion deficit and the Chancellor expects to double that during the coming years—I have every confidence that this Chancellor of the Exchequer will do so.

It is true that during the 1980s and 1990s, Britain developed a reputation for being competitive. That reputation was based on maintaining lower taxation in this country than in Europe and on creating flexible labour markets. British companies succeeded and inward investment flowed. During the past four years, however, the Labour Government have begun to reverse those hard-won gains. The Red Book shows that the burden of taxation has risen by 3 per cent. of national income. Under the Labour Government, since the Chancellor came to office the tax burden has risen by £28 billion. None the less, the Prime Minister takes every opportunity to tell the House that the tax burden is not rising, but falling—something he could accomplish only by holding the graph upside down.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): My right hon. Friend describes the balance of payments problem that this country is encountering and the increased tax burden we face. Is he aware that the OECD has said that since 1997, because of the increased tax burden and regulation imposed by the Labour Government, our competitiveness has fallen from fourth to ninth place in the world league?

Mr. Portillo: My hon. Friend is right. Those are new figures. When the Government came to office, we were in fourth place in the competitiveness league. By 1999, we had fallen to eighth place and figures that have just been published show that we have fallen to ninth place. That is hardly surprising, not only because of the relentless increase in taxation and regulation under the Labour Government, but because other Governments are moving in the opposite direction. That is why we are losing competitiveness.

Mr. Bercow: Does my right hon. Friend recall that, for 15 successive years, the previous Conservative Government published an assessment of the impact of both direct and indirect taxes on the average family and on families in other income deciles? Is it not a disgrace that the current Chancellor has refused to continue that sensible practice? Was it not, therefore, entirely appropriate that, in March 2000, the Select Committee on the Treasury published a report that criticised the Chancellor for his failure in that regard, denouncing him with particular severity at paragraph 35?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. Before the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) replies, may I point out to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) that he needs to practise brevity? He has had a great deal of opportunity—I am looking at the length of his interventions.

Mr. Portillo: My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) was right on both counts. It is indeed a disgrace that the Chancellor suppressed information in that way and he was criticised by the Select Committee. However, I am not sure that it makes much difference whether the information is published. Information on the tax burden is published, but we cannot get the Chancellor or the Prime Minister to admit to the House what it says—that the tax burden is rising. They simply refuse to admit the truth. They are capable of any amount of wriggling in order to avoid addressing the fact that the tax burden has risen under the Labour Government.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that the Red Book for the last Budget delivered by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) predicted that the tax burden would rise during every year from 1997 to 2002? Why did the Conservatives propose that rise?

Mr. Portillo: I recall clearly that the tax burden fell by 2 per cent. when I was at the Treasury—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ooh!"] Hon. Members are hopelessly ignorant. I was at the Treasury with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). The tax burden fell by 2 per cent; it was 5 per cent. lower than at present. I just want the House to focus on that fact. The tax burden has risen by 5 percentage points from where it was under the last Conservative Government. That is an extraordinary change in the tax burden.

Our competitive advantage is being whittled away. PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates that two thirds of the competitive advantage that Britain enjoyed in the mid-1990s has been frittered away. As the Government remorselessly impose taxes on business and impose regulation, other countries are cutting their taxes. The Labour Government are swimming against a global tide, blunting Britain's competitive edge while other countries are busy sharpening theirs. The CBI estimates that the extra burden of tax on business is £5 billion a year, and the Institute of Directors estimates that the extra burden of regulation on business is £5 billion a year, yet the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry just haughtily dismisses all the worries of business.

In this election Budget, the Government have added a higher minimum wage and have extended paternity leave, without—

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr. Gordon Brown): Maternity leave.

Mr. Portillo: So, the Chancellor of the Exchequer can listen sometimes. That is very revealing. I am so sorry; I thought that the Chancellor of the Exchequer was

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involved in a much more interesting conversation. I did not think that he would be listening to me, but I am very pleased that he has been.

The Chancellor should, however, have listened to the end of the sentence. The Government have added a higher minimum wage and have extended maternity leave, without any commitment to make offsetting reductions in the administrative burden elsewhere. The Government should, for example, commit themselves to remove from employers their responsibility to pay the working families tax credit. That is something that should be paid by the Government to parents, who have responsibility for the children.

The Red Book reveals that the Government's receipts from corporation tax are to rise by £5.7 billion in the coming year. The Chancellor of the Exchequer never indexes the thresholds for corporation tax; he just gets a windfall every year from business. After all, business does not have votes, so what does it matter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer? Surely those windfall gains should have prompted the Chancellor to do something for the businesses that are in difficulty at the moment; for manufacturing, which Labour Members are meant to represent; for small businesses everywhere; and for farming. Instead, he used this Budget as another opportunity to demonstrate his complete indifference to the suffering of those sorts of business.

Many Labour Members know that people in the countryside are deeply dismayed that the Budget offered absolutely nothing to them in their hour of need.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): The right hon. Gentleman is talking about burdens on business. I understand that one of his proposals for savings is to privatise industrial injury compensation benefit and make businesses take out insurance policies against disease or injury that may befall their employees. Is that not a burden?

Mr. Portillo: When we announced that proposal, we said that we would relieve the burden for business elsewhere, and we have a series of proposals to do so. *[Interruption.]* Ministers crow and groan because they have never heard a straight answer before. *[Interruption.]* That is right; things must add up. The Chancellor of the Exchequer would always talk about the national insurance reduction without talking about the climate change levy, for example. I say that if a change is made, an offsetting change must be made elsewhere. I believe that it is absolutely responsible that employers should be obliged to insure their employees against industrial injury, because then they have an even greater incentive to ensure that their employees are safe. If the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) thinks that it is wrong to do that, let him get up and campaign. I am sure that his opponent in Shipley will be happy to take him on on that exact territory.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): May I take my right hon. Friend back to the points that he made on the countryside? He said that many people would have been very disappointed to have heard nothing about the countryside in the Budget. Why should they be disappointed? After all, as far as the Government are concerned, the crisis is over.

Mr. Portillo: Ministers have made a series of very unwise statements that are reminiscent of the Prime Minister's statement during the fuel crisis. The House will recall that he said that it would all be over in 24 hours. That leads us to a broader point. The whole of the Chancellor's strategy is based on never-ending economic growth. Ministers as a group put themselves in a very precarious position when they make such predictions—when they commit themselves to controlling things that are inherently uncontrollable—but the Chancellor is an example writ large of what my hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) has just pointed out in relation to agriculture.

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The shadow Chancellor has just clarified the extra costs involved in industrial injuries benefit—incidentally, this year's pay-out is £750 million, which is a burden on business. Will he clarify whether the abolition of the energy levy will be paid for by increasing employers national insurance, the tax on jobs, under his plans?

Mr. Portillo: The Chancellor of the Exchequer has promised to reduce people's national insurance in return for the energy levy. The energy levy is an absurd, bureaucratic tax, which will make no difference to our environment. However, it will be extraordinarily damaging to manufacturing, farming, small businesses, newsagents, pubs and all sorts of businesses in this country. Yes, I proudly say that I would reverse it absolutely.

The Chancellor is raising spending much faster than the economy's underlying growth rate. He is doing so just when caution would suggest that we should be prudent, given the slow-down in the United States and as other Governments around the world are being prudent. It is no wonder that the European Union and the International Monetary Fund have criticised the Government for their lack of prudence; nor that the *Financial Times* has said that the Chancellor's self-advertised prudence is now much more a matter of faith than of fact.

The Chancellor's policy is based on being able to increase the tax burden without limit. He has made a lot of his so-called golden rule that the Government should borrow only to invest, but he offers us no definition of the word "investment". Indeed, he daily abuses the word "investment" and now uses it as though it were absolutely the same as the world "spending", even though we all know that the Government waste much of the money that they spend. We all know how much money was invested in the dome, and we all know what we have to show for it. If the Chancellor's rules have any effect at all—

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): What are the right hon. Gentleman's rules?

Mr. Portillo: I am coming to my rules; they have all been set out, and I shall set them out again in this speech.

If the Chancellor's rules have any effect at all, it is merely to impress on him that if he is to spend a lot, he must tax a lot—a point fully demonstrated by his first four

years. His rules allow him to spend and tax any proportion of gross domestic product. Irrespective of whether the figure is 40 or 50 per cent., or whatever, it fits his rules so long as taxing and spending increase together.

The Chancellor is committed to a path of Government spending that will require further tax rises, if he wins the next election. As the Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

"If spending is to grow by more than GDP growth beyond 2003-04 then further increases in taxes will be required."

That is undeniable, and because it is undeniable we can expect the Chancellor to deny it with ever-mounting bluster. Perhaps he would like to begin his denials now. No, apparently he would not, but in due course he will, no doubt, deny what the institute says and plain common sense. Increasing public spending relentlessly faster than the growth rate of the economy means that he will have to raise taxes again. Again, they will be stealth taxes, directed at the poorest members of society.

It is clear that the Chancellor will need to raise taxes further because he can take one of only two positions: either he continues on his current spending path, which means higher taxes; or he admits that Conservative policy on spending is right and he reduces his spending after the three years of his plan. I am absolutely confident that he has put behind him his days of Tory prudence, so I have no doubt that he wants to increase taxes.

The Chancellor may resemble his Labour predecessors in his addiction to tax and spend, but there are differences between him and his predecessors. Previous Labour Governments prided themselves on taxing the rich; this Government pride themselves on mixing with the rich and taxing the poor.

The Chancellor has been too cunning to raise income tax rates, so he has adopted every sneaky means of raising revenue, most of which have fallen most heavily on those least able to pay. There have been 45 stealth taxes. He patronisingly believed that his tax increases were too complicated for most people to understand. He does not care that the tax on pension funds will make people much poorer in their retirement than they would otherwise be. All that matters to him is that people should not find out that that is the case before the election.

The Prime Minister betrayed the Government's real cynicism in answering questions last week. He chose to defend his Government's attack on our pension funds on the ground not that his policies are in any way morally defensible, but that, as it happens, the stock market has risen. That speaks volumes for this Government. They do not think that they have to explain to people why they have the right to take away their hard-earned money; they assume that people should give them a good reason why they should be allowed to keep it. That, in a nutshell, is the difference between the two parties.

The Chancellor's stealth tax policy was rumbled last September with the fuel protests. He had been too clever by half. No pensioner could overlook—I do not believe that any pensioner will ever forget it—the cynicism with which the Chancellor raised the price of petrol by the rate of inflation, which he calculated at 3.4 per cent., and raised pensions by the rate of inflation, which he calculated at 1.1 per cent. When he was shadow Chancellor, he told a Labour conference that he would do away with the means-testing of retired people, but what he has actually brought about is the most massive increase in dependency. Well over half our pensioners—56 per cent. of them—will be required to reveal their intimate details to the state in the hope that they may be granted an income sufficient to pay the Chancellor's 45 stealth taxes. The form that they are asked to fill out runs to 40 pages and it even asks pensioners whether they are expecting a baby.

There is a better way. We should leave people with more of their own money. This is not just about economics; it is about creating a better society—one in which people are encouraged to save for the future and are rewarded for doing so. People who save have more choices, can face the future with more confidence, and are better able to take responsibility for their families and to recognise their wider obligations to society.

The Conservatives recognise that the money politicians spend is not their money. We do not believe that we know how to spend it better than the people who earned it. We do not adopt a tone of moral superiority when we take hard-earned money from parents, who would have spent it on their children, and, instead, hurl it into the bureaucracies of the state.

The Conservative party will campaign on removing savings from income tax. Why should people who have paid income tax on the money that they have earned then be taxed again if they decide, instead of spending their money straight away, that they will put some of it into savings? We want pensioners who have saved to enjoy independence in their retirement, because that was the very reason for which they saved in the first place. We want them to be able to look back on a lifetime of savings and believe that they did the right thing and that they were rewarded for doing so.

The Chancellor boasts of 7 million pensioners who will pay no tax or pay only at the lowest rate. There are two ways of increasing that figure of 7 million. The Chancellor's way is to tax pensions funds and discourage saving. In that way, the majority of people reaching retirement will have incomes too low to pay income tax, and the Chancellor can gloat as, year by year, the figure of 7 million increases.

However, there is a different way—our way—which is to encourage saving and to reward those who have saved by a massive increase in the income that they can have before they pay tax. In that way, pensioners will be better off and fewer of them will pay tax. We shall take 1 million of the pensioners who currently pay tax out of income tax altogether and, for many of the remainder, the weekly tax bill will be reduced by £8.50 a week.

The Chancellor boasts of helping families. Again, there are two ways to do that. The right hon. Gentleman has created hugely complicated systems of dependency, which trap more and more people in the indignity of the means test. The Conservative way is to simplify the system and leave people with more of their own money to spend or save as they wish.

We shall also remove the tax from the widowed parents allowance and give married couples more choice about whether to work or not to work, enabling a man or woman to transfer his or her allowance to the spouse. Each of those two reforms will be worth about £20 a week off parents' tax bills.

After the Budget, we should perhaps be grateful for small mercies. I do not mean the crumbs that the Chancellor has handed back, but the collapse of most of the Government's economic arguments. Until recently,

[Mr. Portillo]

they claimed that it was impossible simultaneously to cut tax and spend more on services. I think that we will hear rather less of that economic illiteracy from now on. In the late summer, the Prime Minister claimed that petrol tax could be reduced only if hospitals and schools were closed. As he now claims to have cut the price of fuel, we should expect to see the list of closures.

Over the winter, the Labour Party spent millions on advertisements that referred to the Tories alleged £16 billion of public spending cuts. In his Budget speech, the Chancellor was forced finally to abandon that false claim. In fact, our policy is to raise Government spending in line with what the country can afford, which is by very large amounts.

The Conservative campaign, "You've paid the tax, so where are the improvements in public services?", has been rather more successful. The Government spend money with extraordinary incompetence. How do they manage to tax so much and end up with 2,500 fewer police officers? How could they take so much money from retired people in extra taxation and in return ask those same elderly people to wait still longer before they can have an operation that will transform their quality of life?

On education, I received a letter today from a head teacher in Wales, who says:

"The governors are finding it more and more difficult to support the excellent teaching staff . . . with the limited and reducing funds at their disposal, whereas the publicly announced Budget"—*[Interruption.]*

I know that the Government like to intimidate people and to yell down any public servant who dares to speak up, but I am quoting a head teacher. She says that

"the publicly announced Budget proclaims that the government is spending more on schools. Not at this school, they aren't!"

That is what people are saying.

Throughout the country, even people who voted Labour are frantically calling on the Government to improve services, not to produce meaningless statistics, to double count, to spin and to blame the previous Government. They just want them to do something that means that we can have better schools and hospitals and make our streets safer. The Chancellor's response in his pre-election Budget was to move from double counting to triple counting. He claimed to be adding £1 billion to health, but it turns out to be £290 million in 2003–04. The Secretary of State for Health did not even attempt to repeat the Chancellor's claim, which demonstrates that the deception did not survive even the first 24 hours after the Budget and merely added powerfully to the Chancellor's reputation for being unable to represent any figure accurately and fairly.

Mr. Fabricant: Is my right hon. Friend aware that health authorities have informed me that the Government have increased funding for the NHS assuming inflation of 2.5 per cent., whereas inflation in the NHS is now running at 5.2 per cent.?

Mr. Portillo: I am pretty sure that the Government are doing exactly as my hon. Friend says, and calculating their increases using an inflation factor that is flattering to them. My hon. Friend can also count on the fact that they will use the much higher NHS inflation factor when they calculate the figures under the previous Government. That will almost certainly be part of their subterfuge and double counting. Fortunately, no one believes anything that the Chancellor says any more.

In place of spin and double counting we shall introduce truly rigorous economic disciplines. We shall have our own currency, and interest rates will be set in Britain. We shall enhance the independence of the Bank of England and appoint an independent committee of economic advisers. We shall ensure that there are proper national accounts to end the Chancellor's fiddled figures and we shall increase Government spending within the limits of what the nation can afford. We shall set about making Britain competitive, responding to tax cuts abroad with tax cuts at home and lifting the burden of regulation.

We shall slash taxes on saving and leave pensioners with more of their own money. We shall cut taxes for families, giving help to them when their children are youngest, and giving women more scope to choose how they balance their family and career. The Chancellor has broken his promise not to raise taxes. He has over-taxed the British people and hit hard those who can afford it least. People have seen no improvement in their public services and received almost nothing back in the Budget.

The Prime Minister once said that a high spend economy is not a high success economy. In that respect at least, time is proving him right. If Labour were returned at the election, we would see higher taxes, more stealth taxes and more crises in our hospitals, schools, transport and the police. Fortunately, there is a better way, and the Conservatives will lead the country along that better way.

4.54 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) referred to productivity. I have found the document "Productivity in the UK: Progress towards a productive economy" most valuable. Its publication is an interesting aspect of the Budget, which I hope will be repeated. I intend to cover that document in detail.

Every Budget has two maxims. One is that a Budget that looks good in the spring appears less favourable in July. The other is that before a general election, bribes must be delivered. Everyone can see that the Budget is consistent with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer's aims as they have shown themselves for the past four years. It is a responsible Budget, which will continue to look good in the coming months and perhaps even longer.

My right hon. Friend has shown himself to be a successful long-term planner—we have not had such a person before in the post-war years. From Hugh Dalton to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), the consideration has essentially been to keep the show on the road. From the time of his appointment as Chancellor, however, my right hon. Friend began the task of planning for the whole of this Parliament. Right at the beginning of his term of office, he made the momentous decision to give interest rate policy to the Bank of England. That has worked beyond the expectations of many and has underpinned the stability that he sought to bring to public finances.

I have one comment to make on that aspect of policy. I do not want a wide range of interests to be represented on the Monetary Policy Committee, but it could do with

having one member who understands manufacturing and who could perhaps reflect a more regional outlook. Apart from that, the change in responsibility for interest rates has been a foundation of my right hon. Friend's success. In the past, the pressures on a Chancellor for decisions on interest rates have been constant—at times weekly, and even daily. As a consequence of removing that pressure, he has been able to devote his energies to economic reform and long-term plans.

Initiatives include the welfare-to-work programme, greater control of public expenditure, investing for the long term and—of great importance—my right hon. Friend's concern for productivity and the manufacturing industry. I should declare an interest in a small textile company. In the absence of any comments on that industry, I do not believe that it is necessary to inform the House of that, but the Standards and Privileges Committee considers it to be a grey area.

As I have already said, I especially welcome the document "Productivity in the UK", which was published with the Budget. Although our performance is lower than that in the United States, France and Germany, some factors are more encouraging. First, unemployment has fallen by 1 million under the Government. Although that means that many new employees are entering the work force with less in the way of skills and consequent productivity than those already employed—that is mentioned on page 11—with levels of unemployment much greater in France and Germany, any sharp reduction in their unemployment rates would be likely also to reduce their levels of productivity.

Secondly, I find it much harder to measure productivity in services than in manufacturing. For example, how do we measure productivity in retailing? Do we consider values sold per member of staff? Should that take into account the kind of services on offer and the arrangements in place? What about cleaning services? There are other examples. Now that the service industry has grown so large and the number of people in manufacturing has fallen, the computation of general productivity is uncertain at best.

Thirdly, I believe that productivity is closely related to demand. It is when the pressures to produce are great that improved methods of working are devised. It is one aspect of necessity being the mother of invention. With a pound that is not as competitive as we should like, the demand effect of exports is not as high as I would hope. My right hon. Friend has produced his five economic tests for entry into the euro. I am strongly in favour of entry, but I would add a sixth test: we need to have a competitive exchange rate on entry.

The relationship between productivity and demand is important. Many years ago, I was the manager of a machine shop for the refrigeration company for which I worked. It had about 100 employees then. There was a problem with a machine doing the boring for compressor heads, which was a limitation on production. Because demand increased so much, all of the company's attention focused on that single machine and, eventually, we managed to raise production levels from eight to 20 compressors a day. That kind of pressure brings about such solutions. Productivity is related to demand, and I hope that demand will come from overseas in due course.

Finally, on that point, I take issue with box 2.3 on page 8 of "Productivity in the UK", which seems to suggest that gross domestic product per capita is the same as productivity. Of course, GDP per capita is greater in London than in the regions. Wherever the more affluent live and work, the more they earn. To say that productivity is greater in the London area than in the regions is too simplistic. In London, people earn more and spend more on goods and services. The entire question of productivity is more complex than the explanation set out in the footnote to box 2.3.

The table on page 32 is encouraging; it represents a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development showing that barriers to entrepreneurship are lower in Britain than in any other country. Britain beats the United States, which is in sixth place; Germany, which is in 16th place; and France, which is in 20th place. In terms of administrative burdens on start-ups, we rank third; for regulatory and administrative capacity, we rank first; and on barriers to competition, we rank fifth. The ranking on regulation and administrative burdens is particularly encouraging. Quite rightly, we draw attention to those barriers to entrepreneurship, only to find that we are so much better at removing them than others. That makes one wonder about the bureaucratic labyrinth devised by some countries.

Mr. Portillo: Hear, hear.

Mr. Radice: Although the shadow Chancellor says "Hear, hear," he spent most of his speech criticising the Government for putting administrative burdens on industry. The evidence that my right hon. Friend has read out demonstrates quite the reverse; we benefit and are in a good position.

Mr. Sheldon: There is no doubt about that. However, the position accords with our general understanding. One only has to go to some of those countries and see the bureaucratic nightmare involved in the simplest transaction to realise that, although there is much to be done in this country, we do a lot better than others.

On investment, at the micro level, I am a great believer in capital allowances for plant and machinery, and, of course, information technology equipment—even up to 100 per cent. I am very pleased indeed that the Chancellor of the Exchequer shares many of my concerns. As Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, which looks after the operation of the National Audit Office, I had been a little uneasy about the NAO being given the task of verifying the assumptions and conventions underlying the fiscal projections of the Budget. That task was given to the NAO in the Finance Act 1998, so it has a responsibility for what is published in the important document, "Productivity in the UK".

We now have had experience of such reports, which show that the Treasury's assumptions and forecasts on important matters, which are given to the NAO, are reasonable. At first, there was a little anxiety about involving the NAO in that novel task, as there was concern that it should be a little distant from the Government. However, involving the NAO in that task imposes discipline, not on the present Chancellor—who does not need it—but on those who, from time to time, have strayed outside the areas of proper financial prudence. It would be an interesting exercise to work back and see if previous Chancellors could always claim the same kind of endorsement as that gained by the present holder of the office.

[Mr. Sheldon]

One great achievement of the Chancellor has been his welfare-to-work programme. With the establishment of the minimum wage, higher levels of employment are reducing the connection between poverty and low paid work. However, poverty and unemployment have still gone hand in hand, so we have the continuing drive to get people into work. The new deal programmes, the child care provisions, and the schemes set out in the "Budget 2001" document on page 71, under the heading "Easing the transition to work", all set out the way in which employment is the key to ending poverty.

I find all that impressive, but there is one issue that is not fully addressed in the Budget: the high cost of earning a living. Earning a living is an expensive business. It was not always so. In the days when the cotton industry was the mainstay of my constituency, women did not need any encouragement to work. We had one of the highest proportions of working women in the industrialised world.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Does he find it equally impressive that according to Government figures, the number of registered child minders is falling? He expects people to move from welfare to work, but how does he expect them to find the necessary child care to allow them to do so?

Mr. Sheldon: In the Budget, the Chancellor has given encouragement to those very schemes.

In my constituency, the work was always there—just along the road or alleyway—and the cost of earning a living hardly existed. There were grandmothers and aunts to look after the children, transport costs did not arise, as people walked to work, and income tax was for the better-off only. Now we have the expense of travelling to work, the cost of eating away from home and the need to dress more suitably for work. All those large expenditures must be paid for from taxed income and they act as an disincentive.

Fundamental changes have been necessary for a long time. Ideally, one would wish the costs of transport to be tax deductible, but I know the problems associated with that. The child care provision is a recognition of some of those work-related expenditures. In London, of course, we have the London weighting allowance, but many of the Londoner's expenses are now being faced in other cities around the country, without any comparable allowance. I believe that more should be done to meet the Chancellor's objective of making work pay and reducing the barriers to full employment. These matters need to be considered further.

I come to a little hobby-horse of mine, concerning hypothecation. As anyone who has worked at the Treasury knows, one must always agree with the Treasury line on hypothecation. To earmark an expenditure is to lose the ability to decide on priorities. That is the argument against it, and it is compelling. Not only that, but the amount of tax collected may not accord with future expenditure plans. For some years, however, I have been pursuing a case for hypothecation—for earmarking some money from taxation for particular purposes. The one case which, to me, satisfies the rare condition that might justify its introduction is expenditure on the health service. I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is present.

It is clear to me that the cost of the NHS will rise ever faster than the rate of inflation or even growth in the economy. That is because the population is ageing. As needs are met, health needs become a, or perhaps the, major area of increasing expenditure. The time is coming when we shall need to think more about private medicine, which I do not favour, or a special NHS tax.

Anyone who has served in the Treasury has a visceral feeling about hypothecation. The road fund licence still casts its shadow 70 years later. One important weakness of hypothecation is that it does not take account of changing patterns of priorities in expenditure, but, as I said, one certain aspect of the health service is that demand will increase into the indefinite future. People may be more willing to accept an NHS tax if they can see the consequences of that expenditure, whereas other taxes just disappear in the vast generality of public expenditure. The time has surely come to explore sensibly the possibility of introducing such a tax.

I welcome the decision to ensure free entry to museums—a matter that is dear to my heart. It is necessary to retain the enthusiasm shown in the millennium year, which was wonderful for our museums and galleries, and free entry should help to achieve that.

People such as me usually make a number of critical comments, but I believe that this Budget could be the best on which I have had the privilege of speaking in the House and I wish my right hon. Friend the Chancellor well.

5.10 pm

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): The Conservatives have placed throughout the country a series of posters telling people that they have paid for the taxes, but asking where the doctors, nurses and police officers are. The posters are correct in both respects, and an understanding of why they are correct—the way in which the Government have pursued their economic strategy in this Parliament, and so the fundamental weakness in the Conservative party's decision to place the call for tax cuts at the forefront of its campaign—is the key to understanding the Budget,

Taxes have been raised to cover a deficit that the Government inherited from the Conservatives: almost pound for pound, that is where the taxes have gone. It was money that the Conservative Government, including the shadow Chancellor, were spending but not receiving in income. As everybody knows, spending in excess of income means going bust sooner or later. That is precisely what happened over and over again when the Conservative party was in office.

Taxes have risen, but spending has not; indeed, under the current Government, it has been falling as a proportion of national wealth. That is why the Conservative party is in such a dilemma when it tries to offer any coherent explanation of where it will find the money for tax cuts, and why the current Government have been delivering less spending than the previous one.

The Budget illustrates that process well. As the Conservative shadow Chancellor pointed out, it delivers even lower spending than the Government planned only a year ago in their original spending plans. The Chancellor says that growth is rising from 3.4 per cent. to 3.7 per cent., but unfortunately that is typical sleight of hand. It is possible only because he has failed to spend money that

he previously announced. Such an approach is typical of the Government, who announce big spending figures that are not delivered, as we can see when we consider them in detail.

Indeed, our common sense tells us that they are not delivered. If we visit schools, we see that most children suffer from larger class sizes; if we wait for a hospital appointment, we suffer from longer waiting lists even to see a consultant; and when we wonder what has happened to the police, we realise that they are not there because their numbers have fallen. Again and again, the Government say that they are spending more, but although they might have planned to do so, they are not.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Taylor: I shall do so in a moment. By developing my argument a little more, I may help to answer the hon. Lady's question.

It is not just that the Government have failed to spend the money. Often, their claims on spending bear no relation to reality. Immediately after the Chancellor's statement, briefings were given by Government and Labour party representatives who said that the Budget balances the Government's priorities of cutting tax and investing in health and education. They said that it was so balanced that it meant £2 billion for health and education and £2 billion for tax cuts. When we stripped away the figures, we found that that meant £2 billion over three years on health and education, but more than £13 billion on tax cuts. In other words, there is no such balance at all. In a mud-wrestling contest with the Conservative party, the Government are spending six times as much on cutting taxes than on health and education. That is why we do not see the police officers, the teachers, the doctors and the nurses.

Mrs. Mahon: I should like to invite the hon. Gentleman to my constituency, where we have a new hospital, an increase in police numbers and class sizes are going down. Money has been earmarked for a new secondary school and the other schools, which had fallen into disrepair over the previous 18 years, are looking pretty good. Why would my constituency be so different from the hon. Gentleman's?

Mr. Taylor: I do not know the hon. Lady's constituency as well as she does, but I know that the Government's own figures show that there are fewer police, that there are more children in larger classes and that waiting times to see a consultant have increased massively under this Government. The figures also show that Labour will fail to meet most of the pledges that appeared on its general election pledge card.

People know what has been happening. The simple fact is that the Government will deliver lower spending, as a proportion of national wealth, than was delivered in 15 of the Conservatives 18 years in government. People see the results.

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): May I reinforce the hon. Gentleman's arguments by highlighting the fact that, according to parliamentary answers that I have seen, even at the end of the comprehensive spending review, public expenditure in Scotland—despite all the much-vaunted largesse—will still not reach the proportion of national wealth that it had reached when the Conservatives left office? Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me on that point?

Mr. Taylor: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Moreover, that is true across the whole country, not just in Scotland.

The Labour party has come up with a defence. My arguments, although they undermine the Conservative case, also go a long way towards undermining the Labour case. Labour's defence is, "Ah! Strip out the savings we have made on reduced unemployment and reduced national debt, and you will see that we have been able to reduce spending overall, and yet spend more where it matters in those areas of the public services." However, leaving aside social security and debt, the Government have still spent less over this Parliament on important public services such as health, education and pensions than the Conservatives did.

During most of this Parliament, total spending—leaving aside social security and debt payments—will have been lower than in any previous year for which we have comparable records, going back to 1955. People know that that is the case, because they know that, on the ground, they are not getting the doctors and nurses who could help to cut waiting lists, and they are not getting reductions in class sizes. That devastates the Conservative case, but it also shows that the Labour Government exaggerate their record.

We now come to another excuse. The Government say that spending by some Departments has gone down, but that they are making the investment where it matters, on their priorities of health, pensions and education. However, we now know the Government's record. The Budget delivers the definitive position on which Labour will now enter the general election—assuming, as we all do, that it will be called within the next couple of months, if not the next couple of weeks.

During this Parliament, the Government will have cut the share of national wealth going to education, the NHS and pensioners. That share will be lower than in the last year of the previous Conservative Government, even if calculated right to the end of this Parliament. Even after the end of three years of comprehensive spending review investment, Labour will still be spending less, as a proportion of national wealth—even if we believe the figures—than the previous Conservative Government on their No. 1 priority: "education, education, education". Spending has not been committed to that priority, and that is why there has been such a lack of delivery on the ground.

Labour Members know that there is a problem. They hear about it every day from the people who voted them in to deliver improvements in vital public services. The Conservative party, which has nothing to offer but cuts, also knows that there is a problem, because its advertisements all around the country ask, "Where are the doctors?", "Where are the nurses?", and "Where are the police officers?" Quite right too, so why are the Conservatives offering cuts? Indeed, why has the Chancellor prioritised cuts in his Budget?

The figures are appalling, even if we believe Labour's spending plans, which we should not, because year after year after year the Government failed to deliver even the

[Mr. Taylor]

spending plans that they announced. It is unusual for any Government to fail to deliver their spending plans. Perhaps that is understandable on capital investment, which is not always easy to achieve, but to fail to deliver revenue spending is remarkable.

A major reason for that failure is the Government's squeeze on wages. In particular, they have squeezed the salaries and wages of police officers, teachers and health professionals, for whom increases are below private sector levels. The Government have allowed themselves to reach the stage at which they cannot even recruit staff to fill posts that they are funding, so bad is Labour's record.

The Government have a final excuse: it does not matter if the share of national wealth going to the NHS, schools and pensioners is going down because the economy is growing, which allows them, as the Conservative party argues, to cut taxes and deliver the improvements that are needed. Those improvements may not be made in line with growth in the economy as a whole and those sectors may get a lower share, but, they argue, they will get a share of a bigger cake that is therefore bigger in its own right. That, of course, assumes that there is no need for growth in the public sector to reflect growth in the wider economy. That can be delivered only by holding down incomes—most of all, those of pensioners.

There are more pensioners than ever before, but we deliver less money to them. That, of course, can be achieved only by giving them lower pensions. Which pensioners do least well out of the Government? It is the 500,000 who are entitled to the minimum income guarantee, but do not claim it because they cannot or because they will not lose their dignity to do so. They expected the pension to deliver them a decent income, but Labour has entirely neglected them.

The issue goes wider than the basic pension. Income for pensioners as a whole has fallen as a share of national wealth, which is why they have not shared in the benefits of the growth in the wider economy, despite the promise in Labour's election manifesto. That is true in health and education, too. In health, there is more technology and more people need care. We know that, simply to stand still, the health service needs funding growth that exceeds, let alone matches, growth in the wider economy. Under Labour, the share has fallen. If schools are to attract the staff they need, salaries must reflect growth in the wider economy.

Private sector salaries have risen by more than 15 per cent. under the Government, but the salaries of teachers, nurses and doctors have risen by just over 10 per cent. and those of police officers by only just over 6 per cent. They have all fallen steadily behind, but the Government act as though they are surprised that they cannot recruit people to work in those vital public services.

For years, doctors, nurses, teachers and police went into their professions even though they knew that they would be paid less than in the private sector. They believed in what they were doing, but there is a limit to how far people will go. We all meet teachers, doctors and nurses who are leaving their professions—qualified, but not practising; dedicated to the health service or to public education, but unable to afford to continue to work for them. We know that that is true because measure after measure announced today by the Secretary of State for Health admitted the problem. He targeted small sums to try to buy people back when they really need a decent salary increase.

The real growth argument is entirely bogus. Any Government who cut the share that goes to those great services cut the great services themselves, as Labour pointed out over and over again in opposition. We have heard the line before from Baroness Thatcher. Her Government kept stating the figures—more money, more money—but the truth was that those services were falling behind those in the rest of the economy. This Government knew that then and, in their hearts, they know it now. Day by day, they hear about it on the doorsteps and see it in schools and hospitals.

Mr. Rammell: I think that I heard the hon. Gentleman call for an across-the-board increase in teachers' pay. If that is the policy of the Liberal Democrats, why is it not costed in their alternative Budget?

Mr. Taylor: If the hon. Gentleman had bothered to look at our alternative Budget—I have my doubts about whether he did—he would have seen that our health proposals include a specific £600 million pledge of an average of £1,000 extra for every low-paid doctor, nurse and health professional in the NHS. Moreover, under our proposals trainee teachers would be paid for the first time. At present they come into the profession and work as teachers work, but without a proper salary.

So there it is: money for teachers, money for doctors, money for nurses and money for health professionals, funded according to our specific costed proposals.

Mr. Rammell *rose—*

Mr. Taylor: The hon. Gentleman may not like this, but if he has asked a straight question and been given a straight answer it is probably time for him to sit down and stop talking.

Mr. Rammell: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order, when I have asked a specific question about an across-the-board increase in teachers' pay, for the answer—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know a bogus point of order from a real one, and that point of order is bogus.

Mr. Taylor: Labour party loyalists do not find this an easy issue to address, because they know that on the ground spending has gone down, waiting lists have lengthened, class sizes have increased and police numbers have fallen. I realise that it is difficult to reconcile that with the Chancellor's propaganda, but it is easy enough to work out how truthful he has been according to the number of years that he lumps together in his spending plans.

Last year, when the Chancellor was making some real spending increases in the comprehensive spending review, he gave us the figures for one year. This year—the bogus year—when he wanted to pretend to his Back Benchers that he was doing something to meet their concerns while actually trying to deal with Conservative attacks about

taxes by making tax cuts that were much larger than any spending increases that he planned, he lumped three years together.

Back in 1998, when the Government were undershooting Conservative spending plans that the last Chancellor described as eye-wateringly tight and would never have met himself in any case, the Chancellor not only lumped three years together but bunged in inflation, multiplied it several times and hoped that no one would notice. People did notice, of course, because down on the ground things were getting worse.

That is the history of this Parliament. Labour cannot go into the next election simply on the basis of promising jam tomorrow; it has been in office for four years, and it must explain its record. Its record is this: less of our national wealth has gone to pensioners, which is why they received just 75p last year; less of our national wealth has gone to the health service, which is why waiting lists are at record levels; and less of our national wealth has gone to schools, which is why most pupils are in larger classes than ever, and why students are having to pay tuition fees—the tax on learning.

We know that the Government understand that really, whatever the spin and whatever the ability to churn out headlines on Budget day. We know that they know because, when we cut through the nonsense, the real figures are there in the Red Book. The real figures were there when the Chief Secretary was challenged on "Newsnight". There he was, talking about all the extra money for health and boiling it down to

"a small, but welcome, addition to the health budget".

Jeremy Paxman asked,

"what percentage is that of the health budget?"

The Chief Secretary replied:

"It is of course a small but welcome addition".

Jeremy Paxman suggested that it was

"about half of one per cent."

The Chief Secretary responded:

"As I said, a small but welcome addition".

The truth is that it is a tiny amount—less than half of 1 per cent. It is less than 50p for every £100 already spent on the health service.

This was not a Budget for health and education; it was a wrestling match with the Conservatives, in an attempt to outbid them on tax cuts. It contained more than six times as much in tax cuts as would be invested in public spending, at a time when the public are crying out for teachers, doctors, nurses and police officers whom they had thought that Labour would deliver.

Labour seems to believe opinion pollsters and pundits who argue that people who say they will support increased spending secretly want tax cuts. Accordingly, Labour says that it will deliver public spending, and secretly sticks the money in voters' back pockets.

The Government want to ensure that, come April, everyone feels a little better off. They want to salve their conscience on spending, yet to tackle the Tory party by outbidding it in tax cuts. We have two parties that want to deliver stealth cuts in services. They are not seeking to fulfil the electorate's demand for proper funding for the NHS, pensions, police and schools.

At the next general election, only one party, the Liberal Democrats, will be going to the electorate offering genuine and substantial improvement and investment in those public services—to guarantee lower class sizes, shorter waiting lists, more police on the beat, and, at last, a decent deal for pensioners who fought for this country and were told that they would have a state pension in old age on which they could rely, but which has been torn away from them by successive Conservative and Labour Governments.

5.30 pm

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): We have just heard a very eloquent speech from the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor). However, there were two problems with his speech. First, although it is true that there were two tight spending years under this Government—I am on the Treasury Committee and we examine the spending issue every year—Liberal Democrat Members will have to say what they would have done in the same circumstances. They have never answered that question.

Mr. Taylor: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Radice: No, I should like to finish my point.

Secondly, public spending is now increasing faster than growth, as has been pointed out by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and by various other bodies. Specifically, considerable extra resources are being provided for education and health. As I understand it, that spending is having an impact even in Cornwall, where there are more nurses now than there were in 1997—

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): There are 200 more nurses.

Mr. Radice: Yes. I believe that police numbers in Cornwall also are higher now than they were in 1997.

I did not hear any facts in the speech by the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell, but I heard many promises. Although I realise that we are in a pre-election phase, I should like to stand back a little and consider the issues if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. This is the Chancellor's fifth Budget, and it provides us with a good perspective from which to consider his policies and measures. If the general election is in May, as the hon. Gentleman seemed to be suggesting, this may be my last speech—certainly my last economic speech—in the House.

I read history at Oxford, although later I learned some economics at the London school of economics. I think most of my economics has been picked up in my 40 years of Chancellor-watching—28 of them spent as an hon. Member, including 14 on the Treasury Committee, four of them as its Chairman.

A long time ago, when I was young, I believed that the first objective of economic policy was to speed up the rate of economic growth, and that that could be achieved by promoting a higher level of demand. I was an enthusiastic supporter of the Wilson Government's national plan—which perhaps only a few of us remember. I used to think that the plan failed because of the decision not to devalue. Although I still think that that was a mistake, I am now highly sceptical about whether it is possible, other than in the very short term, for Governments to promote growth by boosting demand. The failure of the Maudling and Barber dash for growth was therefore inevitable.

[Mr. Radice]

The Lawson chancellorship had its moments. However, in 1987-88, when he allowed the economy to overheat, the consequences were almost inevitable: the brakes were slammed on and there was what the then Governor of the Bank of England described as a "domestically generated" recession.

It was the Lawson experience, above all, that convinced me that the prime objective of policy should be monetary and fiscal stability. I believe that economic growth can be achieved and that businesses can prosper and grow only against such a background of stability. That is why, in the latter 1980s and in the 1990s, a little before it became fashionable in the Labour party, I supported the idea of disciplined fiscal policy, with monetary policy controlled by the Bank of England.

In my typically non-partisan way, I am prepared to acknowledge that the former Chancellor, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), made a contribution. He began the process of cutting the very large deficits bequeathed by the Chancellors who preceded him. He also published the minutes of the meetings he held with the Governor of the Bank of England to decide on interest rates. That was a movement forward, although the right hon. and learned Gentleman spoiled his record before the 1997 election with a bit of a pre-election spending spree. He also cut interest rates in the run-up to the election, as he should not have done.

Mr. Bradshaw: He should have put them up.

Mr. Radice: He should have done that, yes. In fact, that is exactly what happened immediately after the election.

However, it is the present Chancellor who has had the boldness to carry through the revolution in monetary and fiscal policy needed to achieve stability. He gave operational independence in monetary policy to the Bank of England, and set up the Monetary Policy Committee.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has also introduced fiscal rules. The golden rule states that borrowing should not finance current expenditure but investment only, while the sustainable debt rule holds that public sector debt should be kept at a stable and prudent level. That level was originally thought to be 40 per cent. of gross domestic product, but it is now much lower.

Earlier, I challenged the shadow Chancellor from a sedentary position about his fiscal rules, and he said that he would give them to me later. He has not done so because he does not have any. The shadow Chancellor criticises my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for his golden rule, but he has no rules at all of his own. That is a weakness in his argument.

There is no doubt that the two innovations introduced at the beginning of this Parliament have produced impressive economic results, which my right hon. Friend was able to announce in his Budget—the lowest inflation for 30 years, the lowest long-term interest rates for 35 years, and the lowest unemployment since 1975.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The right hon. Gentleman says that the Opposition have no rules, but has he not noticed that we have a spending rule? We will increase spending in line with what the economy can afford. That rule means something, unlike the Chancellor's borrowing rules which, as my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor said, have no bite at all.

Mr. Radice: I hope that the hon. Gentleman does not mind my saying so, but that was a pretty feeble intervention. All Governments and Chancellors hope to increase spending in line with what the economy can afford. The question is whether the rules governing a Chancellor's actions are sharp enough to enable that to happen. I believe that this Government's rules are sharp enough for that.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Surely there is all the difference in the world between saying that spending will be increased in line with growth in the economy, and increasing spending above the economy's sustainable growth rate. The latter is what the Chancellor proposes to do, and in the long run it will not be sustainable without massively higher taxes.

Mr. Radice: The Government had a two-year period in which they stuck to the Conservative spending targets. Even the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe, said that those targets were merely illustrative and that he would not have implemented them. In that period, public spending was massively below growth in the economy. We are now moving into a period when it is above growth in the economy. The level evens out over a period. I am sure that the Government will want to have public spending in line with the growth in the economy over a period of, say, 10 years. That would be sensible. In any case, the Government's golden rule and sustainable debt rule will ensure that, even if spending does rise above economic growth, the necessary discipline will be in place.

In addition, stability has produced steady economic growth—of 3.5 per cent. in 1997, 2.6 per cent. in 1998, 2.3 per cent. in 1999, and 3 per cent. in 2000. The forecast is for growth of 2.25 to 2.75 per cent. in 2001. In other words, throughout this period, the economy has been growing close to trend. I admit that it was growing under the previous Chancellor as well, so we have had a long period of economic growth which has been extremely good for this country. It has helped to create room for substantial increases in education and health spending—contrary to what the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell implied, without quoting any figures. I would like to have him before the Treasury Committee—we would soon take him apart. We have also made a sustained attack on child poverty. All that has been done without putting the public finances at risk.

The announcements in the Budget and the measures previously announced by the Chancellor amount to a 1 per cent. stimulus. We have to ask: how risky is it and will it stoke up inflation? The Treasury Committee put those questions to expert witnesses this morning. It is true that some of them would have preferred less stimulus, but none thought that this was particularly imprudent. Indeed, there was a sub-text: they thought that it was quite surprising that the Budget was so restrained in the run-up to an election.

The experts are right to say that such a stimulus is not imprudent because the background is one of very low inflation, below the target. We are still running substantial budget surpluses and we face the possibility of a United States downturn. It may be necessary to have some

stimulus to the economy. A 1 per cent. stimulus, which is not very substantial, could well provide that in the coming year.

There is general agreement that there is little point in running budget surpluses indefinitely. It makes sense, therefore, to spend above trend for a period and then run small deficits by the end of the forecast period, provided that those deficits support public investment and not current spending, and that they are affordable in terms of public debt. I note that the public debt is now down to 30 per cent. of gross domestic product.

The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell made the point that the Treasury has consistently underestimated its surpluses. That is partly because its assumptions, particularly of growth, are extremely cautious and conservative. That gives the Treasury a strong position because there is always a margin of error. That is why the Chancellor has been able to announce some of these increases.

To sum up, in the Government's fourth year, the Chancellor is in an enviable position. If any Conservative Members doubt that, they should consider how much they would like to have a Chancellor who is about to face the voters with the lowest inflation for 30 years, steady economic growth—I quoted the figures—and the lowest unemployment figures since 1975, as well as rising investment in health and education. That is not a bad position to be in, and if Conservative Members were honest they would agree.

Of course there are no miracles, and certainly no economic miracles. There is no doubt that despite what the Government are doing with regard to productivity, we have a long way to go before we catch up with the United States, Germany and even France. Under this Government, many extra people have been taken back into work. Such people are, by definition, likely to be less productive in the short term than other workers, so the slowing of productivity growth is not surprising. Most experts expect an increase in the years ahead, and so do I.

There are no economic miracles, and although the Government have created the conditions for stability, I am able to announce this afternoon that the economic cycle has not been abolished: there are still risks on the inflationary side, and especially on the recessionary side.

Critics say, of course, that the Chancellor has been lucky, in that on the whole—excepting the late part of 1998—economic conditions have been relatively benign. It may be true that he has been lucky, but he has also made his own luck. It was his decision to give the Bank of England independence and to stick by his predecessor's spending plans for the first two years. It was also his decision to keep to the fiscal rules that he had devised. His courage has yielded the results that I mentioned.

The Chancellor's boldness of conception and his determination in implementation have put the United Kingdom economy in a strong position to continue on its path of stability and to take advantage of opportunities that may arise—including, if I may say so so late in my speech, entry into the euro. I salute him for his achievement and I wish him and the Government well in the coming months and years.

5.45 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I follow the precedent of other hon. Members by reminding the House of my declaration of business interests in the Register of Members' Interests.

I am delighted to follow—not for the first time in a Budget debate—the right hon. Members for North Durham (Mr. Radice) and for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). I say with some sorrow that it is probably the last time that I shall follow either of them in such a debate as they both propose not to stand for the next Parliament. I propose to throw myself at the mercy of the electors of Rushcliffe once more. If they do me the honour of returning me to this House, I shall miss the contribution of the two right hon. Gentlemen and the chance to debate with them. Neither of them are Blair's babes and they do not use the sillier slogans to describe economic policy to which we have become accustomed in the House. Also, they do not use too many of the extremely dodgy figures that the Chancellor is inclined to produce for the House. Alas, we will no doubt have a touch more orthodoxy in the next Parliament from those who defend the Government's record.

I cannot get very excited about the Chancellor's fifth Budget. In the overall context of macro-economic management, it is not very important. He did not do a great deal and it is not of huge significance for the coming election either. He took his last important decisions in the so-called pre-Budget judgments last autumn, when he set us on the course of a massive proposed increase in public spending in the next three or four years

I suppose that I should be grateful that the Chancellor did not get carried away. I, too, faced the pressures—I had to deal with a pre-election Budget and some people felt that I ought to do something spectacular to win the election. Various previous Chancellors faced the same problem. This Chancellor would have made matters far worse for his successor had he given in to that sort of pressure and made the problem even worse by making serious tax cuts or spending increases on top of those he has already made.

I wish that the Chancellor would not keep on saying that Tory predecessors did not show such restraint. It is 50 years since we had a pre-election Budget that showed the slightest irresponsibility, and I doubt whether we will see one again. Today's electorate are too sophisticated to be bribed with their own money a few weeks before a general election. This electorate know that the present Chancellor has been a tax-increasing Chancellor on a substantial scale. The fact that he will not admit that the burden of tax has risen under his chancellorship is a blemish on his presentation of policy, but he will have to go into the next election as someone who has raised taxes.

On the details of the Budget and the micro-economics of the tax and other changes, the Chancellor has continued, in a not very spectacular way, his overriding policy of mild redistribution of income by stealth without being very clear about it. I am glad to say that he has continued the policy of welfare to work, which he inherited from the previous Government: it was not only a slogan but a policy direction, too. I welcome the family element of the policy, whose effects are beneficial.

The Chancellor has persisted in his attempts to combine the tax and benefits systems, developing ever more tax credits. I admit that I was attracted by the idea of combining those systems. One has to go back to a Government of 30 years ago to discover Conservative Chancellors toying with the idea of a tax credit system.

The difficulty is that the present Chancellor has embarked on that course without solving most of the big

[Mr. Kenneth Clarke]

problems that put us off it. In particular, he is introducing a system of bewildering complexity. That gives rise to two large problems.

First, the system is so complex that the electors do not understand it—that is why the Budget has little electoral appeal. More important, many of the people who should be claiming the benefit of those tax credits will not actually do so.

The second problem is the worst; it is one that most of us foresaw when the Chancellor embarked on the working families tax credit. The system is appallingly complex for the employer. It is one of the worst burdens imposed by the Government on those responsible for small business. That burden gets worse and worse as he further complicates the system. It is a pity that he proceeds with it.

I continue to suspect that the Chancellor likes to plunge further into tax credits because they help him and his Chief Secretary to present the figures in the slightly bewildering way that they use in the Red Book. To keep down the tax burden as presented to the general public, tax credits are still treated as though they were tax reductions when they merely transfer payments that should emerge as benefits. They should be accounted for more clearly. The Chancellor has not solved the problem that, as soon as one uses the Inland Revenue to make such transfer payments, it produces complication, cost and a great propensity for evasion and misuse.

I should have liked to see the proposals on taxation and savings made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) adopted in the Budget. I wondered whether the Chancellor would have had the wit to steal that extremely good pre-election idea from my right hon. Friend; it is a sensible way to encourage saving by people of modest means. We need to get the savings ratio up.

I regret the fact that the Chancellor has not tackled the problem of annuities for those who have made provision for their own retirement. That must be tackled, but he has done nothing. He should also have had the political courage—there are no votes in the matter—to raise the starting threshold for the 40 per cent. higher rate of tax. During the Labour Government's period of office, 700,000 more people have become higher-rate taxpayers, by a process of pure drift. I agree that that was also happening under the Conservative Government, but it is now out of hand. There is nothing wrong with a 40 per cent. tax rate for people on high incomes, but people of above average yet perfectly ordinary incomes now have a 40 per cent. marginal tax rate. That should not be allowed to continue.

I shall not go further into the detailed provisions, but I regret that the Chancellor felt forced to go back to widening the 10p income tax band—to trivial effect for most taxpayers. The 10p band was a mistake; we do not need three bands of income tax. The 10p band was a silly political promise made before the previous general election. It is a pity not only that the Chancellor stuck to it, but that he has started widening it.

The Budget is not of great consequence. It is the least interesting of the five produced by the Chancellor. Perhaps he is running out of steam—who knows? He may be preparing to leave office—perhaps for the Opposition Benches or perhaps for another Cabinet post. However, it looks as though his time at the Treasury may be coming to an end.

I now turn to the consequences of the Budget for economic performance. The background is that the Government say that the country's economic performance has been good, as indeed it has. However, that has nothing to do with the Chancellor; I shall return to that point in a moment. The Chancellor's management of the balance between tax and spending has been positively eccentric. There is no consistency.

The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) rightly pointed out that the first three years of the Parliament were years of rigour beyond anything we expected. At the previous general election, as a Conservative, I tried to alarm the public about the forthcoming risk of a Labour Government by talking about the black hole in their finances. That black hole vanished because they raised taxes at a rate about which they had warned no one. They squeezed spending to an extent that no Government—even those led by Mrs. Thatcher—had ever achieved. That is how they filled the black hole during the first two or three years.

The Government began with a stringent iron Chancellor period; they go out with promises of fat years to come. Were they to win the general election, the next Parliament would, apparently, be handled quite differently, with a hugely expansive approach to public spending during the first two or three years. Perhaps, if the right hon. Member for North Durham is right and the Government find that they cannot afford that, they will have to make cuts before a general election. However, if they are returned and continue to follow this strange pattern and get into difficulty, it is more likely that they will be taxing but trying to deny it.

This rollercoaster is unwise and unnecessary. Too often in the past, the public services have had the painful experience of thin years followed by fat years, although never on the present scale. It is unnecessary, because the Government took over healthy public finances. At the opening of the debate, the Secretary of State for Health was talking nonsense when he referred to public finances and debt spiralling out of control. Debt was on a sharp downward path.

My figures contained a mistake that benefited my successor: we underestimated the revenues that came in. We gave the present Chancellor economic growth, with buoyant revenues. We gave him the particular gift of self-assessment of income tax, which produced tax revenues on a scale that we had underestimated. The public finances were perfectly healthy.

I do not know why the Chancellor felt it necessary to go in for the undesirable taxes that this Budget has not reversed—taxes on pension funds and on business. He continued to add to them, even though he was well on the way to the balanced Budget to which he had committed himself. Sometimes, I think that it was because he wanted to create a good reputation in the City; he thought that there might be alarm in the financial markets that a Labour Government would be soft, so he had to be a tough iron Chancellor.

The Government were somewhat consumed by the record of previous Labour Governments, who had spent like mad during the first half of a Parliament and been in a mess during the second half. Perhaps the Prime Minister

and the Chancellor were over-impressed by the experience of Harold Wilson and Jim Callaghan. Perhaps the Liberals were right and the Government had a war-chest theory—"Let's screw things down now and spend like mad in the run-up to the election."

I suspect, however, that it was all a bit of an accident. The Government found that they had been tighter than they had intended. The Prime Minister panicked and after Lord Winston complained, we found that billions were on offer. There was a sudden splurge of public spending in the run-up to the general election, to avoid upsetting the Labour movement. But that is no way to run the country's finances.

That is what happened; it is irrefutable. However, I object to the constant telling of the myth that the reason the Government were so tight at first was that they stuck to Tory figures. I know that Blair's babes produce such slogans like mad, but they seem to overlook the Government's remarkable decision, which astonished me at the time, to cancel the annual public spending rounds, in which every previous Conservative Government had engaged. Green as the Labour Government were, I cannot understand how the then Secretary of State for Health and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment could have agreed to that. Their Departments must have been in despair. All over Whitehall, people preparing for the spending round were in grief when that decision was inflicted on them. Those were not Tory figures; to hold down spending was a mad gesture.

The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell is right; the results were spectacular. I regret that during my last year in office total managed expenditure was 41.2 per cent. of gross domestic product; I was trying to get it down below 40 per cent. That was the rule that I was aiming for. By 1999-2000, we were down to 37.7 per cent. of GDP. Public spending as a proportion of GDP was taken by this Chancellor and this Government to its lowest level since the 1960s. As the Liberals acknowledge, the Conservative posters are right. That is the history of, "You paid the taxes and you didn't get the services".

We are now faced with promises that goodies are to come. It is said that the good to come can be afforded because the economy is in such a sound state. It is indeed reasonably sound. Starting in 1992, we have experienced nine years of growth, with low inflation and rising employment. That has a cumulative effect—the country feels good and feels wealthier—so we have been able to survive some of the strange vagaries of Labour management during the past four years.

The reason is that the right hon. Gentleman has been an extremely lucky Chancellor. First, he took over a very good inheritance. He has also had the particular luck to be Chancellor, so far, through four years of the most remarkable growth in the western economy since the war. I have been quoted various times about the things that I would give my eye-teeth for. All those who hoped to be Chancellor would have given their eye-teeth to be Chancellor of the Exchequer in the past four years. The right hon. Gentleman has not faced a problem. He took over a good inheritance and, thanks to Uncle Sam going through the boom period of a classic boom-and-bust phase, the world economy has grown and grown and grown.

My right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor is right that the public are complacent about this. I was glad that he pointed out that our economic performance compared with that of the developed world has been rather lacklustre—second rate, actually. The British are pleased with second best again. We have not been doing as well as our competitors.

Of course our growth has been miles behind that of the United States, but everyone in the developed world has been enjoying growth with low inflation and rising employment. Our growth performance is below the eurozone average—below that of Ireland, the Netherlands, and France. They are already wealthier than Britain in GDP per head. The relationship of our productivity to theirs has been worsening over the past three or four years and we have not been performing well.

Before the Labour party took over, we were the fastest-growing major economy in western Europe. Why have we not been performing as well as we were? One reason has been the mistakes made by the Bank of England.

I applaud the giving of independence to the Bank of England, but I feel free to criticise the performance of the Monetary Policy Committee. I have been on the doveish side of that divided Committee throughout, and I believe that the doveish side was right. It is not the case that we have been facing higher inflationary pressures than the rest of Europe. It was a mistake when people judged that we were. No one has had inflationary pressure over the last three or four years, but our Bank gave us the highest short-term interest rates in the developed world for most of the period of the present Government. Obviously, that slowed down our growth.

The other reason is that the Government have damaged our growth—I shall not repeat the arguments of my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor—by adding tax and red tape on business and adding labour market regulation of a kind from which we were previously free. While the western Europeans are lectured by the Chancellor about moving to more liberal labour markets and lower burdens on business, we are narrowing the benefit of our advantage over the rest of western Europe by going in the other direction.

That luck may be coming to an end. It is no good just carrying on with the somewhat happy but chancy approach that the Chancellor has proposed. The global economy cannot carry on growing for ever. We have not solved economic cycles in free-market economics, and the United States economy is at last slowing down—and slowing down remarkably rapidly—as most European commentators have been forecasting for the past three years.

Most people involved in Wall street say that the slowdown is temporary and will soon flatten out; they say that it will be V-shaped and that the trend will go up again. Most people involved in the real economy in America are very worried. They find that consumer demand is dropping like mad, and given that the bottom has dropped out of Wall street in the last two days, once consumer confidence goes in America, there could be a very sharp downturn indeed.

I do not think that the downturn will be a disaster. A slowdown in the American economy was probably overdue. The Americans have in fact gone through boom and bust. Their economy was held up as a model by some people in this country over the last three years, as opposed to that of the lacklustre, over-interventionist socialist Europeans. But the United States has got it slightly wrong now.

[Mr. Kenneth Clarke]

The Chancellor, having entered his days of being more generous to the public services, is counting on continued growth in the British economy. He supposes that the economic cycle does not affect him here. He supposes that it will be rather as before. He forecasts 2¼ per cent. to 2½ per cent. growth for this year. That may be right, but I would not bank on it. We will be affected by any global slowdown.

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Clarke: Just a second.

Such growth as we get from now on will be driven by the public sector—by public consumption. It will be driven by the big increase in Government expenditure. If there is any slowdown, there must be some corresponding cuts in private consumption and private sector activity to make room for it, and that is not a healthy background against which to face the real issue, from which the Government keep running away. Given that their policy now is a massive increase in public spending, what will happen if the growth upon which it is wholly dependent does not materialise over the next three years?

As they do when we discuss so many other things, the Government just dumb down the argument. We raise this fear, and we are told, "Oh, they are talking about cuts, cuts, cuts." Big scissors appear, with fictitious figures for what we are supposedly saying that we would cut, just because we are raising the question. What if the economy cannot afford it between now and 2004? We are told that it means going back to boom and bust. I cannot for the life of me see how our proposals have anything to do with boom and bust.

I have already said that I do not believe that the Chancellor has given us any stability or predictability in his economic performance. A lot of things could go wrong, not only the slowdown in the economy. If the economy slows down at all, the Treasury's estimates of revenue are likely to prove overestimates. History shows that the Treasury tends always to underestimate its revenues when the economy is going up. That is why, every year, the Chancellor comes along with billions more than he expected to have. History also shows that when the economy suddenly goes down, the Treasury always overestimates the revenues that it has coming in.

Labour Members would be wise to recall what happened under Nigel Lawson, in 1988—it is a great pity that they pretend that nothing happened after 1988, and that the only Conservative record that they contrast themselves with is that of 13 years ago. What they discovered then, as we discovered then, is that the big numbers change very rapidly indeed.

On their own plans and estimates of growth, the Government already predict a deficit three years out. That deficit could be very large and unsupportable. I have no time to go into all the other things that are becoming unsupportable, such as the huge current account deficit that they are running as long as the pound remains overvalued.

When we talk about restraining growth in spending, it is no good rejecting our criticisms by saying that it simply means that we intend to cut public spending. It is also no good rejecting criticism from the International Monetary Fund. I introduced openness in respect of producing IMF reports. The IMF points out that the golden rule is a slightly dodgy approach, and the Government dismiss it.

The fact that the European Commission's doubts about all this are rejected may be more popular among Conservative Members, but the Commissioner, Pedro Solbes, was an extremely good Minister of Finance in Spain and he had his head screwed on the right way. Despite that, he is wrong, apparently, when he raises queries about all this. He was a socialist; he was not when he was appointed, but he joined the PSOE just as it was defeated. The other Finance Ministers also have doubts.

The golden rule is not a golden rule at all. The golden rule allows borrowing for investment only, but, as has been pointed out, it all depends what is meant by investment—and as far as I can see, any form of public expenditure known to man can be described as investment by the present Government. Unfortunately, like all other public expenditure, it must be paid for eventually. The criticism is rejected as though that were not true.

The previous Government did have rules. A balanced Budget over the cycle was our rule. We set an inflation target. My predecessor, Norman Lamont, set an inflation target of 2½ per cent. We were aiming to keep spending down below 40 per cent. of gross domestic product. We introduced rule-based economic management; this Chancellor replaced it with dodgy rules, such as the golden rule, which is infinitely flexible, and he altered the definition of half the public expenditure figures that we now have to try to stop people following what was happening. Therefore he should not reduce the queries about his spending to a silly level of argument to prepare for the election. The figures are there before us.

According to the Government, we need not worry, whatever happens between now and 2004, if departmental estimates go up by 8.4 per cent.—6 per cent. in real terms—each year, come what may, to April 2004. They get the total spending down by making some dubious assumptions about cutting social security expenditure, but even so, total spending is anticipated to be 3 per cent. per annum overall above the trend growth of the economy. If the world economy slows down, it will be well above the likely growth of our economy, and it is difficult to see how it can be afforded. That is our valid argument.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea addresses that valid argument, and it is foolish for Labour Members to reject it, not least because if they were to win the election their biggest nightmare would be how to get out of that obligation, having told everyone that anything else involves great cuts. Fortunately, the expenditure is not on health and education—we can match that spending—but the Government will not return to their current position in respect of GDP for some considerable time. The Home Office and transport are the big beneficiaries of this year's largesse. Lots of bus lanes, cycle paths and tramways in cities throughout the country are promised, but expenditure of every kind can be found across Whitehall.

If the Government are re-elected, we warn that they will raise taxes or abandon their plans, which are not supportable if economic growth falls back to trend or below. Theirs is an extraordinary approach, and that is the note on which the Chancellor will go out. I hope that he

goes by handing over to a Conservative successor, but if the Prime Minister has his way, I suspect that he will hand over to a Labour successor—if the Prime Minister can win the election and get himself back in for a second term. The Chancellor had an excellent inheritance when he took office. It is my opinion that he will hand over a much dodgier and poorer inheritance to whoever has the opportunity to take over, which I trust will be my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea.

6.11 pm

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): It seems likely that this will be my last speech in the House of Commons, so I hope that you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and the House will be tolerant.

It is a special pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), partly because many of us are looking forward to campaigning shoulder to shoulder with him for a yes vote for British participation in the single European currency in the not-so-distant future. I am afraid that his declaration of undying support for the shadow Chancellor was not altogether convincing. I suspect that, like the right hon. Members for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) and for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), he is deeply unhappy and worried about the direction that the Conservative party is taking.

As I recall some of the awful Budgets that I have heard proposed by forgettable Chancellors like Nigel Lawson and Norman Lamont, I take great satisfaction in registering my support for a Budget that cuts the burden on taxpayers while increasing provision for families, education, the NHS and other services.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown), is the ultimate canny Scot, and he has demonstrated conclusively that prudence pays. This is not a giveaway Budget for an election; it is a business-like Budget for businesses, a friendly Budget for families and a constructive Budget for communities.

Last weekend, I spent a minute or two looking at my notes for my maiden speech, which I made on 9 November 1978 in the debate on the Queen's Speech. Much has changed in the past 22 years. When I was first elected, my constituency's economy depended largely on the National Coal Board and the farming industry, whereas now the biggest employers in East Lothian are based on science, services and nuclear power. In my maiden speech, I supported Denis Healey's valiant efforts to control inflation in very difficult times. I referred to the fact that the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup was unhappy about what was happening to the Tory party—so some things do not change. However, there is absolutely no risk of inflation with the present Chancellor.

Communities in my constituency suffered cruelly during the Tory years from 1979 to 1997. That might account for the fact that the Labour majority in my constituency increased from 1,673 in 1979 to 14,221 in 1997. Indeed, I find myself worrying about what is happening to the Tory party in Scotland. I never thought that I would have such anxieties, but it is not that long ago since the right hon. Member for Devizes (Mr. Ancram) represented my constituency as a Tory Member. At the Scottish Parliament election in 1999, the Tory candidate came third.

One of the reasons why the Tory party has been rejected is that local unemployment statistics ran into thousands during those years. With this Chancellor, unemployment in the county of East Lothian has fallen by 55 per cent. since 1997, to just 897 people, as more and more opportunities are created and as people build up their skills. Happily, we can take pride in the fact that everyone is protected by the new statutory minimum wage.

We are getting a lot of public investment, too. Thanks to the success of the Chancellor's strategy, our neighbourhood has new hospitals—either under construction, or planned shortly—improvements to schools and, at last, the commitment of £32 million to dual the A1 from Haddington to Dunbar. I sincerely hope that that road project will not have to be delayed by a public inquiry into a small number of outstanding objections.

The Budget will increase the resources provided to the Scottish Executive by £200 million. I must advise the Opposition that there is no evidence of support for the shadow Chancellor's plan to cut public expenditure in each and every constituency by £24 million or so.

I am grateful to my constituents for electing me to the House six times. I have done my best for them through some difficult times, but, happily, unlike some of the hon. Members who are leaving the House, I shall have the privilege of continuing to represent my constituents for some time yet as their Member of the new Scottish Parliament, which has responsibility for Scottish legislation and the functions of the Scottish Executive. After the long struggle to achieve devolution, I want to do my little bit to make it work. We all know that that will take time; we are going through some difficult times, but it is an experiment that can work, and we are determined to ensure that it does so.

I shall miss a lot of good friends in the House, but, with respect, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall not miss some of the Ways and Means and procedures of the Palace of Westminster. We saw some of them in action last night, with three votes after 2 am. There is a lot to be said for the timetabled debates and electronic voting—if it can be made to work reliably—that we have in the Scottish Parliament.

I want to make two quick points about the Scottish Parliament, which is now responsible for Scotland's devolved share of the Budget. First, it is a completely new Parliament, with new procedures, elected by a new electoral system. We should not, therefore, be surprised by what occurs in those circumstances, such as last Thursday's vote on subsidies for the fishing industry. As someone who has been committed to the principle of a Scottish Parliament for a long time, I say with feeling that the Scottish Executive cannot be allowed to sidestep its accountability to the Parliament. However, the Parliament has an obligation to make coherent decisions. I trust that the Parliament will now have a proper opportunity to make a clear choice between a quick fix and long-term sustainability for fisheries with, I hope, all Labour Members of the Scottish Parliament present and with our Liberal Democrat partners focused on the responsibilities of government. That may be a forlorn hope, but we never know.

Secondly, I must emphasise the crucial importance of mutual understanding and confidence between Westminster and Holyrood to the integrity of the United

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Kingdom. The overwhelming majority of Scots and their MSPs—with the possible exception of the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney), who is in his place—are determined to remain part of the British family, because we understand the shared value of the United Kingdom and the strength that we all derive from the historic and successful partnership of the United Kingdom.

For example, my Scottish constituents are proud of Britain's contributions towards overseas aid, debt relief and peacekeeping, and there is more of that in the Budget. We all understand the need to work together on shared problems, such as the current foot and mouth crisis. We will never regard the English as foreigners, with the possible exception of the Leader of the Opposition and one or two of his more alarming acolytes.

Before I conclude, I wish to make two quick points as a rural Member of Parliament, with a farming background.

Mr. Swinney: On the issue of the Scottish Parliament and its development, does the hon. Gentleman have a view on an issue that has reared its head in the opinion polls recently? The majority opinion in Scotland is that the Scottish Parliament should have more powers and, in particular, greater fiscal freedom. Does he support arguments in favour of fiscal autonomy and would he lend his voice to those arguments in the House tonight?

Mr. Home Robertson: I know that the Scottish National party is interested in breaking up the United Kingdom and in establishing Scotland as an independent country, but I do not agree with that. There are immense benefits to be achieved by the partnership of the United Kingdom. Scots should be warned about the obvious costs of separatism, which include the costs of establishing a Scottish army, navy and air force. Moreover, where would our embassies be located if independence were to take place? That is absurd, so the answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is no. I believe that our purpose should be to make the devolution settlement work. I am determined to work with the majority of my colleagues in the Scottish Parliament to ensure that that happens while maintaining the integrity of the United Kingdom.

I was about to make a couple of points about rural issues. First, I wholeheartedly endorse the policy of eradicating foot and mouth disease, which can be achieved only by the rigorous implementation of the slaughter policy. It is a grim process, and I hate to think what it will cost. No doubt Treasury Ministers are turning their minds to that at present, but the alternatives are unthinkable and will certainly be far more expensive. We must persevere with the policy.

In passing, I must say that I am apprehensive about the prospect of a general election at a time when vast tracts of rural Britain are virtually under seige. For example, I do not know how postal votes can be processed when direct postal deliveries are seriously disrupted in many areas. It is a difficult issue, and it is one that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will have to take account of along with other considerations. However, I strongly support the action that has been taken by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the difficult task that he faces.

The second point on a rural issue is slightly more personal, but it is relevant to—although at the periphery of—this debate. I would like to comment on my exclusion from agricultural responsibilities when I was a Scottish Executive Minister in 1999. That happened apparently as the result of collusion between the civil servant then in charge of agriculture in Scotland, Mr. Tony Cameron, and the president of the National Farmers Union of Scotland. A new interpretation of the ministerial code was triggered to prevent me, as the Deputy Minister for Rural Affairs, from even seeing papers about agriculture on the ground that I might be perceived to have a personal—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I must remind him that this is a debate on the Budget resolutions. I am having difficulty in connecting what he is now saying to the main subject before us.

Mr. Home Robertson: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I was hoping for a little leeway, given that this will be my last speech in the House. The point that I want to make is relevant to economic policy.

We now have an interpretation of the ministerial code that prevents people who might be perceived to have interests or even experience in particular industries from holding ministerial office in certain Departments. That trap was sprung on me, and I want to draw it to the attention of the House. If it applied to me as a Minister in the Scottish Executive, it could apply to Ministers in other parts of the United Kingdom. Frankly, that is silly. Members should be aware of the issue, but I shall leave it at that.

The time has clearly come for me to shut up after 22 years in the House. I would like to leave a final message and do so, quite happily, in the presence of the hon. Member for North Tayside. Scottish nationalism is a risk rather than a threat, and the only thing that could aggravate that risk would be to interfere with the formula for distributing the UK Budget between the devolved Administrations. Devolution is all about enabling different parts of the UK to address different priorities in different ways. The House should have the confidence to let that diversity develop, and this mother of Parliaments must always resist any temptation to abuse its power on the distribution of resources in ways that could undermine the vital partnership of the UK.

This is an excellent Budget, which will increase resources for every part of the United Kingdom and for all our vital services, while reducing the burden on taxpayers and businesses. Our economy is going from strength to strength, and we shall be able to take advantage of even better trading opportunities when we are able to join the euro currency zone in the near future. These are historic achievements for a Labour Chancellor. It will be a pleasure to cast my last vote in the House in support of this Budget. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and I wonder whether he may yet be destined for even higher office.

6.25 pm

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): This was a Budget for complexity. We know that the Chancellor is addicted to complexity in the tax and benefits system and he got yet another fix last Wednesday. His new Labour

nanny statism and his interventionism are deeply damaging to the long-term economic performance of this country and the living standards that all of us—whether on high, low or middle incomes—want to see.

The benign economic conditions, which were largely bequeathed to the Chancellor by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), have masked the serious harm that the Chancellor's last five Budgets have done to the country's competitiveness and productivity. All economists of all political persuasions understand that productivity is the key driver of strong economic growth, economic growth that will deliver sustainable rises in public spending and downward pressure on unemployment.

We should all therefore be very concerned by the figures for worsening productivity under the new Labour Government. The documents published by the Treasury itself highlight the worrying state of the UK's productivity performance. I also came across a rather chilling statistic from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research last week, which said that, in 1999, the average working hour in the United States was 38 per cent. more productive than an average working hour in the UK. That figure had worsened from a mere 28 per cent. in 1996, so we have evidence of a widening gap with the United States. That story is reproduced in terms of the gap between ourselves and France and Germany.

Why is that occurring? My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe and others have put their finger on the answer, which is the increasing complexity of the tax and benefits system and the sclerotic state of the British labour market that has resulted from rules and regulations and from the gold plating and the new impositions from Brussels that the Chancellor willingly embraces.

The working families tax credit has been increased in the Budget, but it is turning businesses into outposts of the Department of Social Security. Employers, as well as employees, have to fill in forms. Employees wishing to claim the working families tax credit have to answer interesting questions, such as, "Are you the director of a limited company?". When employers fill in the form, they have to make calculations for each individual employee and pay the credit through the pay roll monthly. At the end of the month, they have to tot up everything that they have paid out and get a rebate from the Inland Revenue. That is all at a cost—we know the cost because the British Chambers of Commerce has told us—of about £300 per employee.

We also know that the working families tax credit, in the labyrinthine form that the Chancellor has introduced it, deters the creation of employment at the margin. We know that because the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux said in a recent report that the credit had

"backfired for those it was meant to help the most."

The confusion endemic in the convoluted system means that, at the last count, more than 400,000 individuals have not claimed the benefit to which they are entitled.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend agree that the administrative burden of the working families tax credit is especially acute for the 99.6 per cent. of British companies that employ fewer than 100 people? Those companies employ about 57 per cent. of the private sector work force and account for two fifths of our national output.

Mr. Ruffley: My hon. Friend is a doughty and well known champion of the interests of small and medium-sized enterprises in his constituency and beyond, and his point is well made.

Mrs. Mahon: I have many small businesses in my constituency. If the working families tax credit is such a terrible burden on employers, can the hon. Gentleman explain why I have not received a single complaint from them? I would have expected a postbag-full.

Mr. Ruffley: I hesitate to venture that individual businesses in the hon. Lady's constituency might not feel that they would get a sympathetic hearing from a Labour Member of Parliament. I have had many complaints from companies in my constituency. The British Chambers of Commerce has received many complaints, and I pay remarks about that are on the record. Even the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux has made the point that the working families tax credit is damaging the interests of the people whom it is most meant to help.

The children's tax credit has risen to £520 a year in the Budget. Some 10 million couples in receipt of married couples allowance temporarily thought that the CTC would be a replacement, but only 5 million of those couples are eligible for it. We discover that only 3 million of them have bothered to claim. Why might that be? First, a family with two earners who each receive a salary just below the top-rate tax threshold—for example, £30,000 a year—will receive the full credit, but if one working partner earns over £41,375 a year, the family will not receive the credit at all. However, if one partner earns less than that, but more than the top-rate tax threshold, the family will, depending on the increase in their income, receive a tapered relief, giving them a fraction of the full amount. That is a complex issue, as well as being unfair.

Secondly, the Inland Revenue will have to check whether couples who are claiming the CTC are cohabiting. Finally, the working families tax credit interacts with the children's tax credit. As a constituent pointed out in my surgery last week, that means that she will be no better off, even assuming that she is able to find her way through the thicket of rules and regulations.

We must fear not, however, because the Chancellor of complexity is here to help. He will abolish child benefit, working families tax credit and children's tax credit and replace them, in 2003, with something called the integrated child credit. We must not forget that that will run in tandem with the new employment credit. That complexity is nothing short of a disgrace, and it is all down to the Chancellor of complexity.

The Chancellor's magical mystery tour of the tax and benefits system has also given us the infamous minimum income guarantee for pensioners, which was increased in the Budget. A pensioner who wants to claim that benefit currently has to fill in an intrusive 43-page form. It contains such gems of questions as, "Are you pregnant?", "Are you on strike?", "Are you on parental leave?" and, intriguingly, "Are you in possession of a credit insurance policy covering your credit card?" It is little wonder that more than 500,000 pensioners who are eligible for the

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benefit have not claimed it, either because they cannot understand it or because of the intrusiveness of the questions asked when they claim.

Disgracefully, the minimum income guarantee has increased the percentage of old-age pensioners who are now subject to a means-tested benefit from 38 per cent. under the previous Government to almost 60 per cent. when the pensioner tax credit is taken into account. Those figures come from Age Concern, which helpfully reminds us in its briefing that the increase is in contravention of what the then shadow Chancellor said in 1993 about ending means-testing for old-age pensioners.

We must also remember that the minimum income guarantee saps personal responsibility and an individual's dependency on their own savings. The savings industry tells us that the stakeholder pension is now a busted flush because it is simply not logical for individuals to save under the stakeholder pension with the MIG set at its existing level.

The Chancellor of complexity's Kafkaesque odyssey extends even further, beyond the MIG, the CTC and the working families tax credit to the corporate sector. The Chancellor's earlier Finance Acts contained two major reorganisations of capital gains tax, and another has been announced in this Budget. It is getting to the point where chartered accountants cannot easily, on their first attempt, calculate accurately the CGT liability of a small business or even an individual. More than 3,000 major new regulations that affect business have been introduced since 1997, which is a post-war record. The Chancellor has done nothing about that and appears not to care or to see the significance of that increased red tape. "Tolley's", the tax bible, which I was privileged enough to use when I was a legal practitioner many years ago, has now almost doubled in size as a result of the last five Brown Budgets.

It is small wonder that Standard Chartered bank said:

"Tax systems in other countries are getting simpler but in Great Britain against the international trend it is becoming more complicated and getting in the way of decision making."

Digby Jones of the CBI agrees with that analysis and has warned the Chancellor publicly to "get serious" about deregulation and tax simplification. Only last week, immediately after the Budget, an Ernst and Young survey of 650 businesses said that, on balance, it would discourage inward investors, who are usually the productivity leaders in the British economy.

Economists understand that the tax and benefits complexities of which I and other hon. Members have spoken are not merely an irritation or an inconvenience; they damage the national economic performance of UK plc and, ultimately, the living standards of all. That catalogue of complexity is all down to one man—the Chancellor. The Labour-dominated Treasury Committee published a report in January on the Chancellor's stewardship of the economy which said that

"it remains difficult to identify anyone in the structure who has the background and the capacity to think about the tax system as a whole"

and that

"policy is more likely to be successfully formulated and implemented if everyone is clear from the start what the objectives are and why".

What a damning condemnation that is. The Committee went on to say that the memorandums that members of the Committee receive from tax professionals and others

"support the conclusions that the tax system is too complex and that serious attempts to reduce complexity have been avoided; that tax reforms are too often undertaken without adequate analysis of the likely effects; and that consultation on detailed tax reforms is not yet regarded as standard practice, despite the introduction of the annual Pre-Budget Report."

We know what a farce that is. The Committee concludes:

"We firmly believe that in the area of tax policy the Treasury could do better. We recommend that the Treasury give more attention to this area in order to ensure the tax system is 'fair and efficient'".

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend will not want to understate his case. Does he agree that the increased complexity of the tax system is not accidental? Rather, it is a calculated—and I hope unsuccessful—attempt by the Chancellor to hide the fact that people who are married, who pay mortgages, who own cars and have the temerity to put petrol in them, who acquire savings, who possess pensions and who run businesses all face a higher tax burden under this Chancellor.

Mr. Ruffley: My hon. Friend anticipates me. Many of us are wise to that fact. I am sure that his comments are informed by what the good burghers of Buckingham tell him, because my constituents have been saying the same thing. They understand the situation.

The report accuses the Chancellor of being, at worst, power mad and bonkers, as one of his new Labour colleagues described him. *[Interruption.]* As my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) correctly observes, that description is on the tepid side. At best, the report shows him to be an obsessive interferer, fixated with the idea that other Departments do not understand anything and cannot be trusted. He appears to think that he can micromanage business and run everything, but he cannot.

I fear that the Chancellor of complexity is not merely misguided: two much darker, more dishonest and sinister purposes lie behind this and his other four Budgets. First, he is deliberately bringing middle-income Britain into the state dependency net. The benefits and breaks of the children's tax credit, the working families tax credit and the baby bonus extend much higher up the income scale than any other comparable measure. He is trying to lure middle-income Britain into the net of dependency while disguising his truly cack-handed attempts to help people lower down the income scale by the ham-fisted redistributionism of old-style socialism. This Budget and previous Brownian Budgets are nothing less than socialism by other means.

The second purpose is even worse. The Chancellor pretends that his complicated tax changes are tax cuts, but they are nothing of the sort. New Labour is deceiving us. It is using this complex system to hide the fact that tax is rising. The complications that he has introduced into the system are a naked political attempt to try to bamboozle the electorate in the hope that he will negate taxation as an electoral issue. In reality, all we are left with is a mess of fiddled figures, amounting to no more than a large dollop of brown fudge.

The Red Book is nothing but a disgrace. The standards that would usually be expected from impartial officials are in danger of being jeopardised. The most impartial

observers in the City of London who have to analyse Budgets for their clients and banking institutions think that the Red Book is an unprecedented disgrace.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): I am following my hon. Friend's brilliant speech with care, especially what he says about the Chancellor's tax rises. Why does he think that the right hon. Gentleman bothers to disguise those? Surely, if my hon. Friend were a socialist—like the Chancellor and his party—he would be proud of a tax-rising Budget and a tax-rising regime, because that produces tax expenditure.

Mr. Ruffley: I have the honour of serving with my hon. Friend on the Treasury Committee and he poses a question that many other Committee members and journalists have asked. I believe that if the Chancellor told the truth to the British people, he would be out on his ear pretty smartly. He is fighting a tough rearguard action to conceal the truth from the British people, but I know that with my hon. Friend's help and that of my colleagues on the Conservative Front Bench, we will expose new Labour's fundamental deceit.

On the meat—the detail—of the tax increases, we know from the Red Book that taxes are £28 billion higher after the Budget than they were at the last election. Of the 45 new stealth taxes, approximately half are levied on business and half on the personal sector. The Chancellor may be in denial about tax rises, but if he looks at tables C23 and C9 in the Red Book, he will discover that the tax burden in 1996-97 was 35.2 per cent. under the excellent stewardship of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe, and that it is 37.7 per cent. in the current financial year. His own figures show an increase of 2.5 per cent. Of that there can be no doubt. It is only a pity that he does not cough to the truth, but I fear that he will not.

Taxes are up on marriage, mortgages, personal pensions and petrol. Households are paying more indirect tax in the form of higher council tax. The Government have starved rural authorities such St. Edmundsbury council in Suffolk, which is in my constituency, of rate support grant. They have deliberately targeted them and forced them to increase council tax to make up the shortfall. The public are not stupid. They know what is going on.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ruffley: With a due sense of dread and regret.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I have a simple question. Does the hon. Gentleman want to comment on whether it is helpful to pay off Government debt?

Mr. Ruffley: It is helpful, but we need to strike a balance. Paying it off saves about £1.5 billion in debt interest, but there is a more imaginative proposal. The hon. Gentleman probably does not keep up with the literature, so I shall give him the details. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) has come up with a radical and innovative plan to use mobile phone receipts to establish a higher education endowment fund, which has been extremely successful at Princeton and Harvard. The balance sheet for higher education spending would be relieved, over time, by that fund. However, on the hon. Gentleman's core point, of course it is intelligent to pay off debt if the money is available.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is another strange feature of the scene? The Chancellor has diminished the prevalence of gilts in the long-dated market without relieving the annuity provisions for people over 75, causing widespread and unnecessary misery.

Mr. Ruffley: My hon. Friend's intervention allows me to showcase some of the excellent policies that have been developed by the Conservative Treasury team. My hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) has addressed the matter of annuity provision. That and the excellent policy on endowing higher education institutions are testimony to the fact that the Conservative party has been doing some serious thinking in opposition. We are raring to implement the policies in office.

We know that higher taxes on marriages, mortgages, petrol and personal pensions and even higher increases in council tax have had an effect on the incomes of real people in real households. As Credit Suisse First Boston has helpfully calculated in the past month, household disposable income, which is arrived at when all direct and indirect tax and inflation has been taken into account, has increased by only 1.6 per cent. under this Government. There was a 2.9 per cent increase under the regime of my noble Friend Baroness Thatcher and a 2.5 per cent. increase between 1990 and 1997. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe observed, the Government are laggardly on economic growth and in delivering increases to ordinary households. When those families look at increases in their disposable income, they see that they are worse off than they were under previous Administrations.

The Conservative party will give people back their own money. After all, they earned it. They can spend money that they have earned and saved better than big government and certainly better than the new Labour Government. Overtaxing is not clever. My auntie could have overtaxed to the extent that the Chancellor has and delivered a huge surplus. There is nothing clever about that. We would give £8 billion back in tax cuts, funded by £8 billion of costed savings from the huge total of more than £400 billion a year that the Chancellor proposes to spend. If Labour Members are in any doubt about how deliverable that is, may I remind them that the state spends a total of £400 billion? Our proposal is practical, modest and will not frighten the horses; we propose that £8 billion, or 2 per cent. of that £400 billion, can be saved. In any business, that percentage would, dare I say it, be seen as a bog standard saving. The saving is not at all difficult to achieve.

We have published details of our proposals and we can give the money back. I shall quickly examine who will be the targeted beneficiaries of Tory economic policy. The abolition of the savings tax for everyone on basic and lower-rate tax will reward those who do the right thing and take personal responsibility for themselves and their families. We will also increase the age-related allowance for pensioners, taking 1 million pensioners out of tax altogether. As my right hon. Friend the Member for

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[Mr. Ruffley]

Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) said, those pensioners who remain taxpayers will be about £8.50 better off a week.

We will introduce a transferable tax allowance, worth up to £1,000 a year, recognising married women who wish and choose to stay at home to look after children under 11 and women in a similar position who decide to look after an aged relative. Those are the common-sense principles in which our party believes. We are backing our beliefs with real money, because those women would be up to £1,000 better off. Finally, we will reduce tax on petrol which, as my constituents in Bury St. Edmunds never tire of reminding me, is still, even after the Budget, the highest in Europe.

Those sensible Conservative reductions in wasteful expenditure and the tax burden will deliver incentives for work, saving and investment to stimulate the growth that will and must deliver higher living standards to all the British people. That is the Conservative way. The Labour way is the way of Conplexity Brown, a man in the clutches of the delusion that interference and lever-pulling deliver the goods. That is a socialist fallacy in a modern setting. It has never worked and, as we shall soon learn, it will not work this time either.

6.54 pm

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I do not know whether to congratulate the generous Chancellor or the socialist Chancellor. Perhaps I should congratulate him on both counts.

Congratulations on the Budget are in order. The Government and the Chancellor should be applauded for a very good Budget, which is based on the competent management of the economy. It is worth repeating just how good the economy is and how it has been turned round. We have the lowest inflation for 30 years, which is really good news for anyone on a fixed low income. We have the lowest long-term interest rates for 35 years; that is very good news for Halifax, which has a high owner-occupier population. On average, mortgages are now £1,200 a year less than they were under the previous Government. More people are in work than ever before and we have the lowest unemployment since 1975. All those things are worth repeating again and again.

In Halifax, 3,463 people were unemployed in April 1997, but now the figure has fallen to just over 2,000—a drop of 36 per cent. Under the new deal, nearly 1,400 young people have found work or gone into training or higher education. The means-testing of pensioners has been criticised. I am not a big fan of means-testing; I support universal benefits, and always have done. However, at least 3,000 pensioners in Halifax—not a small number—have gained from the minimum income guarantee. From this April, a single pensioner will be on £92.15 and a pensioner couple on £140.55. That is not to be sneered at; it is to be welcomed.

All the 18,253 pensioners in Halifax benefit from the winter fuel payment given to households with someone over 60. The benefit is immensely popular—indeed, it is one of the most popular benefits that we have introduced. It is so popular that the Conservatives have said that they will not abolish it. It is not means-tested and it is flexible; people can use it when they need to and spend it on the energy that they want. In Halifax, a large number of pensioners over 75—at least 7,301—have benefited from a free television licence, saving them £104 a year. They have an extra £2 of income a week, which they can spend as they wish. As the Paymaster General is on the Front Bench, I shall repeat my bid for the free licence to be extended to everyone over 65.

From April, all the 18,253 pensioners in Halifax will get a boost in the state retirement pension, which will rise by £5 for a single pensioner and £8 for a couple. We must remind those who have listened to the Tories' promise to match that increase that the Tories had 18 years in which to do something about pensioner poverty. I have been in the House long enough to remember a 37p increase in pensions, so we should have no nonsense from the Tories about 75p—*[Interruption.]* Yes, there certainly was a 37p increase.

The Chancellor has worked on the pension credit, which will be introduced in 2003. He should be commended for looking ahead and examining how we increase pensioner incomes. I should like the link between earnings and pensions to be restored, but I will take whatever is on offer. Over the years, I have had experience of dealing with pensioners on low incomes, so I know that any money is welcome. I can sell the package to my constituents and am proud to do so. This is a good Budget, built on good measures that have been introduced over the years.

I turn to families, and could not disagree more with the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), who criticised the working families tax credit. More than 4,500 working families with children in Halifax are benefiting from the working families tax credit. They are guaranteed an income of nearly £220 a week, which is an enormous boost for low-paid families struggling to bring up children.

Mr. Ruffley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I would not want her to go away with the impression that I was against more money for those families. She is well aware that the working families tax credit is no more than re-badged family credit, which was introduced by my noble Friend Lord Lawson. The issue is not that we do not want to benefit those families but the manner in which that help is delivered. The burden of my argument was that it is much too complex.

Mrs. Mahon: The hon. Gentleman will agree that the present benefit is far more generous than family credit. My hon. Friend the Paymaster General should be congratulated on the hard work that she has done to introduce the working families tax credit, which is an excellent benefit.

I congratulate the Government on child benefit, which is a very good payment. It goes to the mother, and into her purse. In 1997 child benefit was £11.05 for the first child. From April this year, it will be £15.50, which is a significant increase. The mother can rely on receiving the payment every week. I am pleased with the measures that are being introduced. The Budget contains many more measures for the family, on which the Government are to be congratulated.

The shadow Chancellor sneered at the tax cut for the lower paid. I can tell him that 12,745 families in Halifax will receive the benefit of that, on top of all the other

measures. If the shadow Chancellor and some of his hon. Friends who sneer at the size of the tax cut had any experience of living on a low income and managing a budget, they would not have made that criticism. They do not understand poverty, and they do not care.

On education, my constituency was at the heart of a scandal concerning The Ridings school, which was dubbed the worst school in Britain. It certainly was not the worst, but there were problems at the school and the media became interested. The Government have ensured that that school is properly resourced. I am sure that everyone read in the national press about the excellent Ofsted report and about how that school is coming up. The children are learning and want to learn, and congratulations are due to Anna White, the teachers, the governors and the children, and to the Government on putting money into the school.

I was delighted when the Chancellor said that local schools will get more direct cash payments. That is a popular measure: heads and teachers like it. They know the weaknesses and the strengths of their schools, and they can spend the money accordingly. I repeat to the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) what I said in my intervention. I invite him to come to Halifax and see the new buildings.

The hon. Gentleman should come to Sowerby Bridge school, where I took a member of our Front Bench team when we were in opposition, to see a school that still had the same desks that my husband, who is over 60, had used when he was at the school. I invite the hon. Gentleman to come and see the refurbished school now, with its new computer centre and its wonderfully equipped new classrooms. On top of that, we have been promised £36 million for a brand new secondary school. I thank the Government for that very good news. This is the first time in years that we have seen such spending on education.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health made some important announcements today, pursuing the national health service plan and putting in the resources necessary to implement it. The plan is excellent. It is what the NHS needs and it is long overdue. The Government have guaranteed that our health authority allocation will rise in real terms by at least 6 per cent., and by 6 per cent. for the following two years. That substantial increase in our allocation is welcome.

We have been through a difficult time, but this afternoon's announcement and some of the measures in the Budget mean that we will be able to implement the plan. I congratulate the Government on our new hospital, which will open in June. There has been a merger between Calderdale and Kirklees, and we now have a merged trust, the Calderdale and Huddersfield trust. A new chief executive was appointed today. I am disappointed by the appointment, and I intend at a future date to ask for a debate on the subject. There is a flaw in the power of the regional directors and the way in which they appoint all administrators.

The appointment will be bad news for those of us in Calderdale who have spent years trying to get a new hospital. We now have it, but we will have a hostile chief executive, who did not want the new hospital and does not want two accident and emergency services. We are getting the money in through the Budget, and we could have one such service in Huddersfield and one in Halifax. We desperately need two accident and emergency services because of the geography of the area, but the new chief executive is not in favour of that. I believe that she will work hard to take women's and children's services away from Calderdale, which will be a tragedy. We have been commended by all the experts for our neonatal intensive care unit, and we are getting the money now to ensure that we have excellent services in that field.

We have enough money from the Budget allocation to have the headquarters of the merged trust in Calderdale, which would be the only fair thing to do. The health authority headquarters are in Huddersfield, and in the interests of fairness, the trust headquarters should be in Calderdale. I know that that will lead to another fight locally, following the selection of Diane Whittingham.

The extra money in the Budget is needed in Calderdale, and is extremely welcome. Our state-of-the-art hospital would never have been built without a Labour Government. The merger was managed extremely well by the departing chair, Pam Warhurst, and others, who should be congratulated on trying to keep the two communities together. Following the merger, we can attract the best doctors and nurses. It is a pity that that wonderful record has been spoiled by a civil servant, Peter Garland, who put his own empire-building before the best for my constituents, but I make a pledge: I shall fight for those constituents and for Halifax. My hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Ms McCafferty), who cannot be present today, would say exactly the same.

This afternoon we heard the Secretary of State tell us that we are aiming for 20,000 more nurses and 7,000 more consultants. We desperately need them. I was pleased to hear that there has been a 56 per cent. increase in the number of applicants for nursing and midwifery courses. I am ecstatic about the visionary extension of child care help in the NHS, which will attract people back and ensure that their skills will not be wasted and under-used at home. I congratulate the Government on the increase in the student bursary. It is not enough yet, but it is a good start.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health, who is on the Front Bench, will forgive my little moan. It has been a good news story for health today, but I urge him to look at the flaw in the selection of chief executives, which is not democratic or fair. If we are serious about being equal opportunity employers, we should examine the civil service guidance, which gives one civil servant far too much power over everything.

7.9 pm

Mr. John Swinney (North Tayside): The hon. Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) said that his speech today was likely to be his last to the House of Commons, after a career of 23 or 24 years here. This is probably my last speech in the House of Commons as well and, like the hon. Gentleman, I shall concentrate on my work in the Scottish Parliament. I leave the House with perhaps not quite as much nostalgia as him, but I, too, look forward to my continued service in the Scottish Parliament.

The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) made an interesting and lengthy contribution, in which he said that the Labour Government were deceivers on tax and spending. I think that I can agree with him on that point. The Government have successfully created a new

[Mr. John Swinney]

art of spinning to their advantage an incredible quantity of financial information that amounts to little in terms of different news. I should like to concentrate on the Government's position on tax and spending, and on what they have said about the family.

In the pre-Budget report and elsewhere, the Budget has been trumpeted as a great deal for families. However, let us consider what families are experiencing. First, as a result of the Budget, families in Britain are still paying the highest fuel taxes in Europe. The Chancellor has not changed that at all. Obviously, any fuel duty reductions are welcome, but surely the amount that is levied can move in only one direction after the trend that it has followed under this Government and the previous, Conservative Government.

Secondly, some of the poorest families in North Tayside are paying the most extraordinary charge increases for certain local authority services. Under this Government, some of my constituents have seen their charges for water and sewerage services increase by 250 per cent. Indeed, they are rising almost as fast as the salaries of the chief executives of the water quangos over which the Government have presided, which rubs salt into people's wounds.

Thirdly, families in my constituency are paying in back-door taxation the equivalent of an extra 9p in income tax because of the various tax changes made over time by the Chancellor. The Government have kept their commitment not to increase the basic rate of income tax, but have used just about every other possible dodge in the book to get more money out of the ordinary, hard-working families that they were supposed to be supporting and helping. Instead of assisting such families, they have spent most time penalising them.

Fourthly, I suspect that many families voted for the Labour party on the basis that it would take action to relieve their poverty. When the Government took office in 1997, 30 per cent. of families in Scotland were living in poverty. After four years, we have arrived at a miraculous situation in which 30 per cent. of families are still living in poverty. In the light of that statistic, the Government have decided that it would be too embarrassing for words to calculate the level of poverty since 1997, so they are trying instead to deal with it from 1996. That shows a modest decline, but airbrushing 1997 out of the history books is not a short cut to achieving their objectives. A great number of people, whether they are in poverty or not, are left disheartened and dejected at the Government's lack of progress.

Fifthly, families are undoubtedly wrestling with a world that is now much more complex. The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds said a great deal about the complexity of the system. I do not dispute the fact that the Government are introducing beneficial measures regarding the working families tax credit and the children's tax credit, but I question the accessibility of the opportunities that they provide. I was struck by the Inland Revenue's confirmation that almost a million people who are eligible for the children's tax credit have not lodged an expression of interest in it. That comes on top of evidence that half a million pensioners have failed to apply for the minimum income guarantee and to work through the 40-page form that must be completed in order to make such an application.

All those indications show that the Government's approach to redistribution involves obstacles that the Chancellor must surmount to ensure that all families who are in need have a proper opportunity to access the information and credits to which they are entitled. The system's complexity has excluded a number of people who desperately need the support that is available from the Government, not least through the measures recently announced, and it shows no signs of getting any simpler.

The Chancellor has made a great deal of honouring his manifesto commitment not to raise the basic rate of income tax. It would be churlish to dispute that commitment, but I calculate that 28 tax rises have been made under the current Chancellor—an analysis that is supported by the Library. I am sure that the Conservative party can justify its argument that there have been 45 rises, but the 28 rises of which I am aware are equivalent to the application to ordinary people in our society of a 9p increase in income tax. The total UK tax burden has increased from 36 per cent. of GDP in 1996–97 to an estimated 40 per cent. in 2000–01.

Those increases nail the Chancellor's repeated claim that he is a tax-cutting Chancellor. There is no doubt that he is a tax-increasing Chancellor. Any redistribution measure or evidence of a tax-cutting agenda in the Budget is more than outweighed by the fact that he has raised more than £23 billion in additional taxation by imposing the changes to which I have referred. Ironically, there is a direct equivalence between the £23 billion in tax rises and the £23 billion surplus announced in the Budget statement. The Chancellor has imposed the 28 tax rises through the back door, but they have resulted in even more tax increases for ordinary families. As I said, they include greater water charges in Scotland.

It comes as no surprise that a recent poll whose results were published in *The Herald* suggests that almost 60 per cent. of people in Scotland think that Labour has broken its tax promise. The public are now beginning to see through the propaganda, spin and representation of the same arguments. They can see that the tax burden has increased for ordinary people and that Labour cannot be trusted on tax.

Just as Labour cannot be trusted on tax, so it cannot be trusted on spending. I would rather listen to what real doctors say about public expenditure than to what spin doctors say about it. A recent British Medical Association survey showed that 80 per cent. of Scottish GPs believed that there had been a decline in hospital care since Labour took office. I was intrigued by the bullish way in which the Secretary of State for Health presented the Government's health record, as they cut real-terms expenditure on the health service in Scotland during their first year in office. As much as I criticise the Conservative party for its ghastly expenditure and public service record in Scotland, I must accept that even it did not make such a cut in all its 18 years in power.

To compound the matter, the Government starved public services during their first two years in office. Even at the end of the comprehensive spending review period, they will be spending less of the nation's wealth on public expenditure and services in Scotland than the Conservatives were at the end of their period in government. Public expenditure increased by 2.6 per cent. a year in real terms under the Conservatives. On average, it rose by 1.8 per cent. a year from 1979 until 1997. After the current Government came into office, however,

expenditure rose by 1.2 per cent. a year from 1997–98 until 2000–01. I suspect that the current Parliament is unlikely to last for five years, but, if it does, the next such figure will be 1.9 per cent. That puts into context the Government's change in public expenditure.

I was struck by a written parliamentary answer given in the Scottish Parliament, which showed that when the Conservatives left office they were spending 1.8 per cent. of United Kingdom GDP on public expenditure in Scotland. In 2003–04, the figure will reach only 1.84 per cent. at the end of the comprehensive spending review period. That shows that the Government are not investing as much of the nation's wealth in public spending as has been invested in the past.

The Government say that new expenditure will result from the Budget, and that is true. By my calculations, an extra £200 million, spread over three years, will come to the Scottish Parliament in the block formula. However, we must bear in mind the fact that, although that £200 million will be welcome, the Scottish Executive managed to underspend their budget last year by £435 million. We must put the scale of the latest increase into some sort of perspective, in terms of the increases in expenditure that the Chancellor has announced.

The hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) described real life in her constituency to the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) in terms of investment in public services. I am sure that she knows her constituency extremely well, but we all have such a constituency record and we are all aware of the limitations of public expenditure. I am certainly very concerned by what I see and hear, for example when I speak to representatives of the health authority in my constituency.

The health authority is wrestling with a £10 million deficit, which has to be eliminated before it can obtain any long-term investment for health services in the Tayside area. Countless schools in my constituency need refurbishment, and we are a long way down the priority list in terms of investment. We must keep our feet on the ground when we consider the Government's actions on public expenditure, because they are not making the quantum difference that they boasted would be the case.

The condition of the economy has been the subject of many bullish remarks by the Chancellor, and by the Secretary of State for Health when he opened this debate. Since the Government came into office, there have been four quarters of negative economic growth, in which the economy has not increased in size. The economy in Scotland is not doing as well as that of the rest of the United Kingdom, and the latest figures show that the rate of growth in the Scottish economy is 1.6 per cent., compared to 3.4 per cent. for the UK as a whole. For the sake of international comparison with some of our small, European counterparts, I can tell hon. Members that economic growth in Ireland is projected to be 8.7 per cent. in this financial year.

Manufacturing losses in Scotland have been enormous, and the latest statistics show that manufacturing exports are down. In a number of manufacturing sectors—for example, the drinks industry, paper manufacture, food, tobacco, mechanical engineering and textiles—export figures are down. Let us also, therefore, keep our feet on the ground when considering the economic performance about which the Government are so keen to boast.

Obviously, almost everyone welcomes the decrease in unemployment. The International Labour Organisation employment trends, so frequently used by the Government as their favoured mechanism, suggest that 8.7 per cent. of the population of Scotland were unemployed in 1997, and that that figure is now 6.4 per cent. However, a much more dramatic decline has taken place in Ireland, where, according to the ILO, unemployment was 10.3 per cent. in 1997 and is now 4.3 per cent. We must, therefore, be aware of the scale of economic activity and economic progress that can be achieved in comparable circumstances.

The Chancellor has tried to present an image of a low-tax, high-spending Budget. However, he has delivered a high-tax, low-spending record, and that has led to under-performance in our economic base. It is essential for the Chancellor to recognise and accept the public mood on this issue. There is a need for much greater honesty and transparency in the tax system. People are beginning to tumble to the fact that they are paying more tax than they used to, and it is high time that the Chancellor demonstrated some transparency in the way he explains those issues to the public. The public now clearly understand that, although the promise of low direct income tax has been kept, they are paying high indirect taxes. The fuel crisis of last summer represented an explosion of people's anger that should act as a warning to the Chancellor. There is also a necessity for claims about public expenditure to be founded on reality, rather than on the extravagant claims that the Chancellor has set out.

The hon. Member for East Lothian advised the House earlier that, as part of maintaining the United Kingdom, it was essential that no one interfered with the funding formula that underpins the funding of the changes to public expenditure in the Scottish Parliament—the so-called Barnett formula—which the hon. Gentleman presented as a great formula.

The Barnett formula is often misunderstood. It is a converging formula, designed to bring per capita public expenditure in Scotland into line with per capita public expenditure in England. In certain identifiable areas of public expenditure, there is a difference. We must be clear that the formula is designed to reduce public expenditure in Scotland, and it is doing so. The gap between per capita public expenditure in Scotland and England is declining year by year because of the vigorous application of the Barnett formula.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): Will the hon. Gentleman give the House an idea of when that convergence will take place, and when expenditure in Scotland will be the same as that in England?

Mr. Swinney: I think that the Chancellor would be able to give the hon. Gentleman a better projection on that issue than I could. However, the pattern is taking its course and is being vigorously implemented by this Chancellor. People should be aware that that is the pattern of our public expenditure.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): On that point, is the hon. Gentleman aware that we are discovering in Northern Ireland that health expenditure will be cut year by year in the near future because of the implementation of the Barnett formula?

Mr. Swinney: Let us be clear on this point. In the present context, public expenditure on health will increase

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at a slower rate in Scotland—and, I assume, in Northern Ireland and Wales—than it will in England. That is the real impact of the Barnett formula: it is designed to bring about convergence. That is a challenge for those of us representing Scottish constituencies. I hope that the very worthy Scottish National party candidate standing in the North Tayside constituency at the general election will be able to come to the House and inform it of his concerns about the Barnett formula for a limited period in the years to come, before he returns to an independent Scottish Parliament.

Mr. Home Robertson *rose—*

Mr. Swinney: I shall give way to the hon. Gentleman in just a moment.

The purpose of the Barnett formula is to bring about the convergence of public expenditure in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England. The challenge for people interested in promoting and expanding public services in Scotland will be to secure access to the resources that will allow us to do so, and to maintain a high quality in those public services. I have a solution to that challenge, but I shall wait until I have heard the intervention from the hon. Member for East Lothian.

Mr. Home Robertson: I want to pick up the hon. Gentleman on the point about the peregrinations of SNP politicians. Does he believe that the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) is really a true Brit, and that he will stay here, or does he think that he will return to the Scottish Parliament again?

Mr. Swinney: My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) has a distinguished record in the House, and he is a formidable campaigner and champion of Scottish interests. He has fought a valiant campaign on behalf of Scotland's fishing industry over the past few weeks, which the Scottish Executive would do well to listen to. I think that they are probably listening to it in Edinburgh even as we speak.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan will serve in this House for just as long as it takes to secure Scottish independence, and then return to the Scottish Parliament. He might see the hon. Member for East Lothian there, if the hon. Gentleman manages to hold on to his seat long enough to continue to serve in that other place. However, I must return to the Budget debate before I am reprimanded, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

A vigorous debate is emerging about the long-term funding of the Scottish Parliament. The right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis), the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, recently made an interesting speech about fiscal autonomy—I intervened on the hon. Member for East Lothian on that point—whose purpose was to acknowledge that the Scottish Parliament needs the fiscal responsibility to take major decisions on public services, public expenditure, taxation and revenue raising on behalf of people in Scotland. Most important, certainly from my point of view, it should be able to manage and steward the natural resources of Scotland, take decisions about our revenues and our expenditure and pay to the United Kingdom Parliament a sum in respect of services provided to Scotland in the longer term.

That debate about fiscal autonomy is vigorous and within it lie the answers to the limits placed on our public expenditure because of convergence under the Barnett formula. I hope that other political parties in Scotland will engage with the debate because it contains the germs of the next development of the constitutional argument, which will further strengthen the Scottish Parliament. That will be good for Scotland and good for the public services of Scotland.

The Budget is heavily based on the spin that we have become accustomed to from the Chancellor. He suggests that he has cut taxes and increased spending, but he has of course done neither. At the forthcoming election, the public will show whether they have seen through him. As a result of the Budget, being seen through is what he deserves.

7.31 pm

Ms Claire Ward (Watford): It is always interesting to listen to Opposition Members. The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), in response to an intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), suggested that paying off our debt is a good idea if we have the money. I take that as an official response from the Conservative party, which I understand has given a commitment to equal the public services spending announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Yet the Tories also talk about making bigger tax cuts. Their sums do not add up: the funding is not there to achieve all that.

The hon. Gentleman said that the Conservatives would find savings of £8 billion, but the information on the Opposition's alternative Budget, which I have read, suggests that it is based on a number of false premises. One is that £250 million could be saved from money being spent on regional government. Obviously it has escaped Opposition Members' attention that the Government are not spending that money, so it cannot be saved. That point highlights the problems of the Conservative Opposition and their inability to run the economy, which was apparent in the past.

Mr. Letwin: Is the hon. Lady accusing her own Front Benchers of deceiving the nation in their latest annual report, which says that they are on course for regional government?

Ms Ward: That is not the issue, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. He knows from his party's policies that the Conservatives claim that they would save money that is already being spent, but that money is not being spent. That is crucial.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Ms Ward: The hon. Gentleman is very keen, so I shall let him intervene again.

Mr. Letwin: Would it help the hon. Lady to know that the planned savings that we have specified vis-a-vis the Chancellor's plans relate to 2003-04? As far as I am aware, that year has not yet occurred.

Ms Ward: That is true, but the proposals relate to spending that has already been undertaken and cuts in

spending on regional government. The hon. Gentleman shakes his head but, according to the Conservative budget, that spending has already been allocated, even though the money is not being spent by the Government.

That is just one issue on which we heard from Opposition Members. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) suggested that he is not terribly confident about the projected growth of the economy as forecast by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. Indeed, I think he said that he would not bank on it. If he is not prepared to bank on it, perhaps he is prepared to bet on it, because the Chancellor has made betting free. Such a bet would be a good investment. I am not a gambler, but I respect the right of others to gamble and the proposal will encourage companies that took betting offshore to return to this country, which will benefit not only those who bet, but Government revenue. Everybody is a winner on that one.

The Budget is welcomed by my constituents, who will benefit from a range of policies. They will certainly benefit from the announcements on continued investment in the national health service made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health this afternoon. I welcome the opportunities to encourage the recruitment of more general practitioners and more nurses through additional payments. In the area that I represent, it is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain people in the public sector because even though there are so many jobs available in Watford and around London, the cost of living is incredibly high.

When people have a choice about where to work, they do not automatically choose a hospital in the south-east, for example, if they can choose one in London. Costs in the south-east are the same as in London, so I welcome the proposals and hope that my right hon. Friend will recognise the needs not only of Watford, but of other areas close to London that need investment and encouragement for public sector workers to live in the area.

On a point of information, this afternoon I attended the opening of two new key worker houses in my constituency, which were established for police officers. That is an example of how a partnership involving housing associations, local authorities and the public sector can provide the sort of accommodation that is vital to encourage and enable people to live in the constituency and serve in the police force. I hope that such arrangements will be extended to other public sectors, especially health.

We already have a good record on the health service. In the Watford constituency, West Hertfordshire health authority has gained significantly from the Government. In 1996–97, it received a percentage increase of only 3.2 per cent., which was a real-terms increase of only 0.5 per cent. For 2001 and 2001–02, there will be 8.6 per cent. increases—6 per cent. in real terms. That will make a massive difference to the service that the health authority and the hospitals are able to provide to my constituents.

The number of patients being treated has increased and the number of nurses has risen significantly. In September 1997, qualified nurses in West Hertfordshire's area numbered 1,468. In September 2000, there were 1,983. That represents a significant improvement in the health service for my constituents. There is a lot more good news, but I am not complacent and we still have a long way to go to improve our NHS. The steps taken today to encourage more people into public services such as the national health service will, in my view, reap real benefits in the future.

Education has also benefited from significant improvements in the past thanks to the present Government and, thanks to the Budget, can enjoy great hopes for the future. Primary schools will receive between £13,000 and £63,000, and secondary schools will receive between £68,000 and £115,000. That money will go directly to schools, enabling head teachers to decide their priorities along with governors.

That is not to say that I want education authorities to be removed or undermined. I believe, however, that the Government's attempt to convey additional money directly to schools is vital, enabling priorities that can be understood by schools and by head teachers working from day to day to be met.

The flexibility involved in the use of the money is also important. As I said earlier, one of our problems in Watford, in Hertfordshire and in the south-east generally is the high cost of living, which makes it difficult to recruit and retain staff. The extra money will allow head teachers to increase new teachers' pay, over and above the national increases that the Government have announced. This is flexibility determined by local circumstances, and I expect schools in my constituency to welcome the new money.

Overall, the Budget sets out a stable and strong economy for the future. It builds on the successes of the past—of the last four years—and it enables my constituents to plan investments in the knowledge that their mortgage rates will not soar out of control. Businesses will also be able to make important investments, knowing that they can begin to recruit people with the additional skills that are being made available while ensuring that they too will receive investment.

I grew up under Conservative Governments during the 1980s and 1990s. For me, the lasting images of those years were provided by the news bulletins that I watched every night. A map would appear on the screen, with pinpoints denoting the thousands of jobs that were being lost.

Another lasting memory of those times is that of the large increases in interest rates, causing more and more people to face repossession. Young couples or families just starting out invested their money, their hopes and their dreams in their first house, only to find not much later, in the years of Conservative government, that they could not afford to maintain those dreams and hopes—that they had been dashed by Conservative policies. The Chancellor's greatest achievement has been to get rid of the boom-and-bust policies of the last Government, which says a lot about his stability, strength and competence and that of the present Administration.

One important factor is, of course, employment. My constituency has done incredibly well out of a Labour Government. Between 1997 and now, we have seen a 48 per cent. drop in unemployment. There has been a significant increase in the number of jobs: indeed, it is now difficult to fill many of the vacancies that exist in Watford. I am keen to encourage those who have retired early to consider returning to employment, as, given the number of jobs available, not enough younger people who

[Ms Ward]

are currently working are able to take them up. Of course we want better opportunities for training and skills, which would enable us to meet the needs of employers in Watford and the surrounding areas.

A major industry not just in Watford but in Hertfordshire is the film industry. Film-making now accounts for 8 per cent. of Hertfordshire's gross domestic product; millions of pounds are going into the area. My constituency contains Leavesden film studios, where the Harry Potter film is currently being made. It is a great British film based on a book by a good British author. I believe that other Hertfordshire constituencies will also benefit from investment in the film industry. Steven Spielberg has been making "Band of Brothers", and successful films have been made at Elstree and other studios and locations in the county.

For the position to improve, however, we needed an assurance from the Chancellor that he would extend the tax breaks made available just three years ago. Working with the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting, who has just entered the Chamber, I was keen to ensure that we campaigned and lobbied the Chancellor on that issue, given its importance not just to my area but to the whole British film industry.

Those in the film industry, and those responsible for finding finance for British films, are—to say the least—ecstatic about the Government's policy. That is clear to me when I talk to them. This is the first Government to recognise the importance of British films, and the first Government to do something about it by making investment real. More films have come to the United Kingdom, and many more are likely to do so in the future as a result of the extension of tax breaks for the next three years. I congratulate the Chancellor and the Treasury on their introduction of a specific policy that will make a real difference not just to the British film industry, but to my constituency and the county of Hertfordshire.

This is, overall, a very good Budget. It maintains the stability that we have seen over the past four years, while increasing opportunities for investment in the health service and education. I believe that our constituents will gain real benefits from it in the coming years, and will not be conned by a Conservative Opposition who think they can offer tax cuts, investment in the public sector, a reduction in debt and all the other things that they promise when that clearly does not add up. I am sure people in Britain will recognise that when the time comes for them to judge this Government, and their ability to deliver a good, strong and stable economy.

7.49 pm

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Last Thursday, that famous Welsh organ of truth, the *Western Mail*, quoted the Chancellor as saying:

> "Because employment and the economy is growing and we are saving billions of pounds in debt repayments, we can target more help on Wales' priorities."

Having read that, Plaid Cymru Members read through the Budget's detail expecting to see something about a regional economic policy. Unfortunately, we saw nothing about that. I have yet to see anything in the Budget that will cheer Wales's main industries—agriculture and manufacturing. I have no doubt that Britain's economy is doing well, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) said earlier in a very interesting speech. However, that is all the more reason for formulating and implementing a targeted regional economic policy.

The hon. Member for Watford (Ms Ward) described the situation in Hertfordshire, where I am sure various economic levers will have to be operated. None the less, in relation to the United Kingdom economy overall, Wales's economy is undeniably slipping way behind. Since new Labour took office, Wales's gross domestic product has decreased by 3 per cent. relative to that of the UK generally. Although Wales's GDP has recently grown by 0.3 per cent., compared with the overall UK GDP it has been decreasing. As for the Chancellor's huge surplus of some £23 billion, surely some of it could be used to assist the less prosperous parts of the United Kingdom, including Wales.

The Budget was a missed opportunity for Wales, which has yet to receive additional funding and full match funding for objective 1. However, before it sounds like I am whingeing too much, I should say that some of the Budget measures are most welcome, such as simplification of the VAT and tax regime for small businesses. Additionally, some red tape was cut. Although more could have been done, it will help.

Nevertheless, in recent years manufacturing industry in Wales has been hit by a series of crises. Plaid Cymru Members believe that Wales is a strong and vibrant country with plenty of talent and some of the most hard-working communities in Europe. Our nation's strengths should be appreciated and used to their full potential. There is no reason why we in Wales should not share in the type of prosperity that is apparent in the south-east of England. Although I say good luck to that region, the fact is that, despite all the efforts that are being made, Wales is not as prosperous.

I do not think that the tax incentives announced by the Chancellor to regenerate coal-mining and steel areas will help places such as Ebbw Vale and Llanwern. Although he said that he will abolish stamp duty, that will not help places such as Ebbw Vale as they do not have the capital to benefit from it.

The Chancellor also announced tax relief for cleaning up contaminated land. Such measures make me think of Corus, which has been totally oblivious to Wales's cries to reconsider ending the steel industry in Wales. A package should have been offered to Corus early in the proceedings. It is still not clear whether such a package was offered. Nevertheless, the alarm bells should have gone off 18 months ago, when it was first learned that Corus was losing £1 billion annually.

Plaid Cymru Members call on the Government to find a way of regenerating steel communities, not only in Wales but across the border. We estimate that the measures necessary to regenerate those communities would cost about £200 million. That sum is not wildly extravagant or imprudent when one considers the damage that would be done to those communities by the loss of their steel jobs. It also accords with the objective 1 benchmark of about £55,000 per new job in deprived areas.

New Labour is always keen to cite figures showing how many new jobs have been created, and—new deal or not—there are some good success stories. New jobs have

been created, and it would be boorish of me to say that that is not a good thing. Of course it is good. However, although job creation is essential, job retention needs to be emphasised equally. In the past three years, 20,000 manufacturing jobs have been lost in Wales. Measures such as cutting employers' national insurance contributions in order to make more capital available to employers to secure jobs could act as an incentive for employers to recruit more employees.

Plaid Cymru Members have also said that incentives such as corporation tax cuts should be considered as a means of increasing investment. Although we have long been making such proposals, hitherto, the Chancellor has not accepted them.

Other hon. Members have mentioned the rural economy, which is struggling under new Labour. The agriculture sector is vital to Wales's economic development and to the sustainability of many of our rural communities. Agriculture is in the grip of the worst crisis for generations. It has been hit by disasters such as BSE—which clearly is nothing to do with the Government—and, more recently, by foot and mouth, which is also nothing to do with the Government. Nevertheless, agriculture is on its knees. It has had to battle against an unfavourable exchange rate, and it has been unable to export stock. It has also not been receiving the full value of its subsidies because of the pound-euro exchange rate.

We should not lose sight of the fact that, even before the foot and mouth crisis, 73 Welsh farming jobs were being lost each week. That is the equivalent of a major factory closing each year. Average income from farming activity in the UK was recently assessed at £4,500. The average for upland farmers—80 per cent. of whom are in Wales—was even worse, at £3,800. I dread to see the figures once the full impact of the foot and mouth outbreak is felt.

Let me make it clear that the Chancellor's announcement on agrimonetary compensation has nothing to do with the foot and mouth crisis, but is an attempt to bail out the industry after last year's losses. I call on Ministers to rethink compensation, as there must be a properly funded package. The other day, I read with some pleasure that the Agriculture Minister has said that there will be proper compensation and that the Government will consider consequential losses, outside the immediate boundaries of agriculture.

We have to realise that agriculture is not an isolated industry but encompasses the whole rural economy. Its problems affect other rural businesses and can trigger a drastic downturn in the whole rural economy. I therefore hope that Ministers will consider proper and consequential compensation both for farmers and for others who operate rural businesses.

The tourist industry, which is substantial across the United Kingdom, has probably become Wales's largest industry. It, too, has been hit by the crisis. I ask the Chancellor and his colleagues to consider and deal with that aspect of the crisis. Various hotels and villages in my constituency depend on tourism. A renowned Plas y Brenin Outward Bound centre at Capel Curig has just laid off 26 workers. That is a pretty bitter blow in a rural area. I am not blaming the Government for that; I am simply saying, "This is a crisis. Can you please act accordingly?" I hope that Ministers will consider the matter, and act urgently and in the short term to put it right.

The failure to guarantee the objective 1 match funding to which Wales is entitled is a glaring omission in the Budget. The Government say that obtaining objective 1 funding was their success, but the credit belongs to all parties. However, for the sake of argument, let us say that Labour obtained the funding. Why are the Government being so stubborn in agreeing to provide the additional funding and match funding?

The Government's delay means that the £600 million needed for match funding must now be taken out of the block grant, which is the money already set aside for running ordinary public services in Wales. For example, robbing Peter to pay Paul means that health spending in Wales will have to be reduced. The health problem in Wales is already much more serious, across the board, than it is in England. I shall not bore the House with statistics, but it is an established fact that people in Wales, by and large, are less healthy than our friends in England. That is a matter of great concern, and it derives from bad housing, socio-economic problems, the types of industry that exist in Wales, and so on.

Health spending in Wales recently received an 8.6 per cent. increase, but our colleagues in England are getting a rise of 9.3 per cent. The proportions should be the other way around, given the greater needs in Wales. Robbing the health budget to make up match funding for objective 1 funds will make the situation even worse. Had Wales received the same percentage health spending increase as England, the health service in Wales would have an additional £22.2 million.

The shortfall in education is even worse. Spending per head in England in 2000–01 is 2.3 per cent. higher than in Wales, but the gap is set to widen rapidly and will be at 9.7 per cent. by 2003–04. Over the four years of this Parliament, total education spending in Wales is £600 million less than it would have been had the same amount of money been spent per head as in England.

The hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) spoke of the Barnett formula, which has served Wales and Scotland for some time, although it was meant to be a temporary solution. Surely the time has come to be thinking carefully about rescheduling Barnett? We should start with a new, needs-based formula that acknowledges that there are different needs in different parts of the United Kingdom. That is long overdue. The disparities will continue unless the formula is reconsidered. There is no reason why less should be spent on education or health in Wales than in England.

The Budget gives Wales £100 million extra for education and health over three years. That is a help, but we must get matters in perspective: the £33 million a year that is being given amounts to £10 per person. I do not know how that can be expected to make great inroads into the health problems in Wales.

The Government have made the welcome promise to reduce hospital waiting lists. That was a Labour pledge in 1997, when 6 per cent. of patients in Wales had to wait longer than six months for their first outpatient appointment. The equivalent figure for this month is 714 per cent. higher. That is some increase. It will not wash for the Government to say that it has something to do with the Welsh Assembly. I have given the bare facts about a great problem which concerns us all.

The Chancellor announced a package of £200 million to aid teacher recruitment. That is welcome, but a considerable amount of money was spent on paying off

[Mr. Elfyn Llwyd]

early retirees. The Government are now talking about bringing the same people back into the profession. That does not make a great deal of sense.

It would be wrong of me to deny that there were some good measures in the Budget. I differ from Conservative Members in regard to the working families tax credit, which I think has a lot going for it. The Government have given some firm indications about child care and other matters, and money has been targeted at those most in need. Only a fool would deny that, but the Budget lacks a proper, overall examination of the macro-economic problems facing Wales. Those problems are affecting agriculture, tourism and manufacturing, but the Budget contains nothing that will give any cheer to those sectors. That is a great disappointment.

Another disappointment is the lack of movement on student tuition fees. In Scotland, applications for further and higher education have risen by about 14.5 per cent., but in Wales over the same period they have fallen by 4.5 per cent. One of the reasons for that 20 per cent. difference is the fact that students are burdened with debt as they try to secure their education.

I read law as a student. I would not have qualified as a lawyer if my father had not been a retired police officer, which meant that I had a full grant and did not pay tuition fees. It is appalling that today's young people of student age must choose whether to pursue further and higher education based on whether they have the money to do so. That is a step back to Victorian days, and I am appalled that this of all Governments should be sitting on their hands and doing nothing about the problem. I believe that the Government will find that their inaction has made them grossly unpopular with people when they go to the polls in the next few months—and rightly so.

I said earlier that the Government have been following previous spending plans. Public expenditure at 38 per cent. of GDP has led to lower health and education budgets. Some bribes are now in prospect, but I want to make one final plea, on behalf of the miners fighting for compensation following the High Court case brought by the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers.

Even at this late stage, I hope that the Government will reconsider the immoral and unfair clawback of compensation that has already been paid to miners. The need for a rethink is underlined by the surplus of £23 billion—or whatever the true amount is—on which the Government are sitting.

All in all, although the Budget contained some good measures, it offers no cheer at all for Wales. The main structural problems remain and objective 1 funding has not been matched. Moreover, the Government are not delivering what the people of Wales are looking for. They are turning their back on Wales. Their main objective is to look after the economy of the south-east and of middle England. For them, Wales does not really count.

8.7 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, and I broadly welcome the Budget. Like its predecessor delivered under my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Budget demonstrates more clearly than ever that the Government have shot the Tory fox on the economy.

I apologise for the metaphor, but I use it deliberately. Since I first became politically conscious, I and everyone else in the country have been told—by the Conservative party and conservative newspapers—that Labour could not be trusted to run the economy. We were told repeatedly in the 18 years of Conservative rule that a Labour Government would lose control of the economy, that there would be a run on the pound, and that unfinanced public spending would cause interest rates to go out of control. In short, we were told that Britain would dissolve into economic chaos.

Four years have passed since the last election, and things look a little different. We have the lowest inflation for 30 years, and the lowest unemployment rate for 26 years. Real incomes are rising and the public services are receiving more investment than has been the case in my adult lifetime. In short, the Government have achieved a degree of economic stability and success that has not been achieved before.

We should not underestimate the political significance of that. It means that people who had previously shared the Labour party's values and beliefs, but who did not trust us on the economy, are now able to support us. Like many of my colleagues, I am canvassing regularly at the moment. I am finding that people who voted Conservative in 1997 because they could not trust Labour on the economy are now coming across and saying that they will vote Labour at the next general election. I believe that the Conservative party has yet to face up to the significance of that change. Perhaps it will in May or October, or whenever the election is held.

The manner in which we have managed the economy has enabled us to invest much more money in key public services. In the face of that, the Conservative party must do much better in answering the difficult questions on public spending. Whether they are talking about cuts of £8 billion or £16 billion—and there are plausible reasons for saying that, in government, they would require cuts of £16 billion—the Tories must do better in telling us where the cuts would fall.

The shadow Chancellor's earlier exchange on industrial injuries compensation was very instructive. I understood him to say that that would be an additional burden on business but that the Tories would compensate business elsewhere. The net effect of that would be zero. They could not then claim that the abolition of industrial injuries compensation would be part of their proposed £8 billion savings.

Mr. Letwin: Has the hon. Gentleman ever heard about the distinction between public expenditure and taxation? If we reduce public expenditure in one dimension and reduce taxation on business to compensate, do we not achieve a diminution of both?

Mr. Rammell: We still have to make the sums add up. Including that cut within the Conservatives' overall plans to reduce spending by £8 billion clearly demonstrates that it is not sustainable or justifiable. That would lead to having to cut the core public spending plans for schools, hospitals and the police service.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rammell: No, I will not.

There is another more fundamental objection to the Conservatives' claim that they will match our spending on schools and hospitals. Why should we believe them? Even if their tax and spending plans were to add up, which I do not believe is the case, they had 18 years in power—the longest period of uninterrupted rule enjoyed by one party in this country in the past century—yet they never once attempted to deliver the increases for our schools and hospitals that this Government are delivering. I think that the public judge politicians not by what they say but by what they do, and by its record, the Conservative party is condemned.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rammell: I will give way a little later.

The Budget confirms[1] that we are prudently and cautiously giving the greatest help through the tax and benefits system to those people who need it most. Some people might call that redistribution. The hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) was clearly harking in that direction in his impassioned speech. I prefer to call it fairness. I think that the British public waned in their support for the principle of fairness for a time during the 1980s, but that they now support it again. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has recently confirmed this by saying that the reforms since 1997 have been strongly progressive and that the proportional post-tax income gain is highest for the bottom decile households. That refutes the shadow Chancellor's claim that the poorest households are hit by tax increases under this Government. The evidence shows that those households are gaining most overall, which I welcome.

I contend that because of our successful management of the economy and because we have delivered fair taxation, we are now able to deliver a significant increase in expenditure, particularly in the spending on our schools and hospitals. I was astonished to hear the shadow Chancellor talking about cuts in schools. He quoted from a letter written to him by someone who was clearly a member of the Conservative party, decrying what was happening in our schools. The Liberal Democrats expressed a similar view. My experience of talking to head teachers in primary schools in my constituency is completely the reverse. I was talking to a head teacher of a school in Harlow a couple of weeks ago, who told me that in 25 years of teaching, she had never known so much money to go to schools. That is the experience of teachers and head teachers across the primary and secondary sectors.

Let us look at the figures for capital spending. Some £686 million was spent on capital repairs of schools in 1997. Today, the expenditure figure is £2 billion and is heading towards £3 billion. That is the most substantial boost to spending on capital infrastructure in schools for more than a generation.

The same is happening in the national health service, with a third real-terms increase in spending in the coming five years. It is the biggest sustained increase in health service spending since 1948. I say that deliberately; I recently asked the House of Commons Library to produce a table on health service spending year on year since 1948 and to identify the percentage change over the previous years at 1999–2000 prices.

The table clearly shows that the projected level of sustained increase between 1999 and 2004 has not been achieved in any five-year period since the establishment of the national health service. That is a real contrast with what went before. Under the previous Government, there were years in which they delivered significant spending increases, but that normally happened in the run-up to an election. In 1987–88 there was an increase of 4.3 per cent; in 1991–92 there was an increase of 7 per cent. However, those increases were never sustained or carried through. Two years after those increases were delivered, the increases were only 0.6 per cent. and 0.8 per cent. respectively—effectively that spending was at a standstill. Under the previous Government, there were large increases in spending in the run-up to elections, but the tap was turned off as soon as they were safely back in power.

That practice is a real contrast with what is happening under this Government. We are sustaining increased spending year on year in a way that no previous Government have done. That gives me grounds for optimism. We are beginning to get things right in the national health service unlike what happened in the past. I see that in the health service in my constituency, where there is a walk-in health centre, faster cardiac care and cancer care and shorter waiting lists. Real increases are benefiting real people.

It is worth labouring the point that the improvements are genuine. I detect a developing political and press agenda in which it is claimed that those increases are not real. The Government are accused of over-spinning the increases. In fairness, I think that in the first comprehensive spending review, we over-egged the pudding slightly. We have learned from that experience and now our claims are genuine. The polar opposite is apparent from the comments of some newspapers and political parties, which argue that an increase in spending is not real even when it is manifestly genuine.

At the weekend, *The Sunday Times* said that the national health service was a net loser in the Chancellor's Budget, contradicting my right hon. Friend's claims that he had given it more cash.

Mr. Letwin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Rammell: No, I will conclude this part of my argument before I do.

When I read that article, I referred to the Budget Red Book for last year and this year. The Red Book shows that in 2000–01, £46.6 billion was spent on the national health service. For this year, the figure is £46.7 billion. The figure is £50.5 billion for 2002–03 and £54.5 billion for the following year. Given those figures, how any newspaper can claim that that is equivalent to a net loss for the national health service is beyond me. It does no credit to any newspaper or political party to make such a claim.

Mr. Letwin: Has the hon. Gentleman had a chance to look at the parallel figures on education and measured the actual change since the last Budget Red Book to this Red Book for education spending, as opposed to the figures presented in the relevant table in this Red Book?

Mr. Rammell: The spending figures on schools and the education budget show that over the five-year period from 1999 to 2004 we are sustaining one of the biggest increases for many years. My experience of talking to head teachers in my constituency bears that out.

[Mr. Rammell]

A former Liberal leader, Sir David Steel, described Margaret Thatcher as knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing. The Liberal Democrat party has effectively turned that phrase on its head. It is the party that knows the electoral value of every spending pledge, but has not got the first clue of the cost of any of those pledges and is certainly not straight with people about that cost and who would have to pay.

The starting point for the Liberal Democrats is similar to that of *The Sunday Times:* it is to claim falsely that the increased funding for the national health service is not happening. In their alternative Budget for 2000, they claimed that NHS spending was increasing by only 3.7 per cent., which was only the average rise for the past 45 years and that there was not therefore a significant improvement. Again, the Library table that I mentioned shows that that is not the case. Over this Parliament, we are looking at a 5.4 per cent. real-terms increase, which compares very favourably with the average and is the biggest sustained increase in the 48-year history of the NHS.

My greatest concern with the Liberal Democrats is the way in which they recycle a limited and insubstantial number of tax increases and then claim that they would fund an ever-burgeoning list of spending pledges. We have seen that today. A detailed reading of the Liberal Democrats' alternative Budget is instructive. Last year, they said that they would introduce a top rate of tax for those with incomes of more than £100,000 of 50p in the pound, which would pay for reducing the 10p rate to zero, which would be a significant boost to people on low incomes. In this year's alternative Budget, we find that the 50p tax rate is to fund extra improvements in the NHS. One would imagine that, given that change had taken place, the commitment on changing the 10p rate to zero would have been removed, but no, the only difference is that we are not told where the money will come from to fund that proposal.

We see that sort of practice time and again. A limited tax increase to fund something in one year funds something else the following year, but the spending commitment of the previous year is still trumpeted as official Liberal Democrat policy. That is dishonest politics of the worst kind. It is not being straight with people about the cost of spending pledges.

One sees it again if one looks at the detail of the Liberal Democrat alternative Budget on long-term care. We are explicitly told that, were the Liberal Democrats to come to power, they would pay for all long-term personal care costs. There are no qualifications and no time scale is given. The problem is that the cost of that commitment is £1 billion but the ready reckoner table at the back of the alternative Budget contains only a commitment to increase funding by £400 million in the first year, which is meant to pay not only for long-term care but for a host of other commitments on the NHS.

There is a word to describe that sort of politics, but I know that I am not allowed to use it in this Chamber. However, if the Liberal Democrats' alternative Budget were a pension policy, they would be on the point of having to pay massive compensation to people because what one paid for is certainly not what one would get under a Liberal Democrat Government.

I have warmly welcomed the significant measures that will make a difference to my constituents and to people elsewhere, but I have one area of concern. I have made it clear that the increases in spending on hospitals are significant and of an order that we have not seen before. However, in Harlow and elsewhere in the south-east, the huge challenge that we face is that of recruitment to the key public services.

My constituency is typical of the south-east. We have effective full employment—unemployment is only about 2 per cent.—and a typical two-up, two-down, house costs £80,000 or £90,000. Those two factors are causing us real problems in recruiting teachers, nurses and the police. I welcome the fact that the Government have given us significant help with recruitment to teaching and the police, but when they introduced the cost of living allowance for nurses of £1,000 a year, it was granted to London, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire—it missed out Essex, which is a genuine concern.

I recently heard a story about someone who met 10 general nurses in my constituency who were in their third year of training, only four of whom planned to work locally at the end of their studies. The others will either go north because of the lower housing costs or will move to London because of the enticement of inner London weighting and the additional £1,000 a year. I end with a plea to the Secretary of State for Health, who has said that he is reconsidering the allowance. A mistake was made by missing out Essex and I hope that that can be rectified.

This is a significant Budget that will benefit my constituents as never before.

8.26 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): First, I must explain that I had to leave the Chamber for a little more than an hour in the middle of the debate to attend the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and deal with a matter that produced a vote, which illustrates the pressure under which some of us are placed when we have to be in two places at once, as many Ministers will no doubt understand.

The date of 8 October 1959 is not one that is in memory of most of my colleagues here, but it was the day that I fulfilled an ambition by becoming a Member of Parliament, after fighting a general election in Poplar in 1951 and fighting Geoffrey de Freitas in Lincoln in 1955. It seems unbelievable that my first general election fight was 50 years ago. It seems like only yesterday, but I do not think that many people will believe me.

I will not try to produce a great analysis of the Budget—my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) did so most excellently. I think that, in time, history will designate the Budget to a back burner, or even to the waste paper basket. It was marvellous spin but, on analysis, little has been given away to the benefit of my constituents. Therefore, I do not want to make a broad-brush speech—there are too many of those and they do not get far. In my last speech on the Budget, I pass on to the House the advice that I was always given: take three subjects, deal only with them and nothing more and they might be remembered. That is what I shall try to do.

First, it amazes me that during the whole of the Chancellor's speech of just under an hour, with the countryside reeling and farming in a desperate plight

because of the foot and mouth epidemic, the only words that we heard from the right hon. Gentleman on that tragic situation were about agrimonetary compensation, which was in the pipeline long before the outbreak of the disease. Even in this Budget debate, I stress that the Government must take the situation much more seriously than they do at present. Since yesterday's report, a further 24 cases have been confirmed, bringing the total—at 3 o'clock this afternoon—to 180 cases. More than 985 movement restrictions have been imposed throughout the country, covering 25 counties in England and Wales.

The Government must look at consequential compensation. It is imperative that they consider the consequential damage of the epidemic across the board. Farmers who have had to slaughter their cattle, sheep or pigs are rightly compensated—we all understand that—but other people in the countryside equally face financial ruin. A haulier in my constituency told me that during the past three weeks his takings were only 10 per cent. of what they had been during the same three-week period a year ago.

Farmers who cannot move their beasts to market do not have to have them destroyed, but are unable to obtain the proper value for them. They face desperate financial problems—as do hoteliers and tourism. A person who runs a tourist park in my constituency told me that he dreads answering the telephone because it will be yet another cancellation. He said that the park was full about a month ago, but that almost no one will be going there at Easter.

The Government must take that into account when they consider the overall effect of the epidemic. It affects not only those people whose animals have to be destroyed, but those for whom the consequential effect is disastrous.

Can the financial action for which I ask be taken? Let us study the Red Book. Under income, the total figure is £399 billion: £61 billion from VAT; £38 billion from corporation tax; £37 billion from excise duty; £63 billion from national insurance; £104 billion from income tax; £15 billion from council tax; £94 billion from all other income; and £17 billion from the business rate. I have listed the figures so that hon. Members can see how the £399 billion is made up.

On spending, the amounts are £109 billion on social services; £18 billion on housing and the environment; £23 billion on law and order; £16 billion on industry and agriculture; £23 billion on debt repayment interest; £24 billion on defence; £50 billion on education; £10 billion on transport; £59 billion on the national health service; and about £52 billion on other matters. The total is £394 billion.

There is a difference of £5 billion between income and spending. I have the right to stand here tonight and demand that the Government use some of that money to help constituents—not only mine in Devon, but those in the north of the country where matters are just as bad. Throughout 25 counties, there are people who deserve some assistance from the Government.

Such compensation may never have been paid before, but the Government can no longer use that defence. They claim to be a Government who rethink everything. The tragedy that we face in the countryside demands a rethink from the Government; they must take positive action to provide compensation for people who face the bitter prospect of bankruptcy.

Secondly, I want to consider the help that should be given to elderly people who go into homes or hospitals during the latter years of their life. In my constituency—in Budleigh Salterton, Sidmouth and Exmouth—a vast number of retired people who are coming to the end of their lives are entering care homes and being looked after well. The difficulty is that the costs of those homes are constantly rising, and many people who enter them, believing that they can meet the costs, find themselves only a short time later in the frightening position of being in real hardship and beset by great worry about the ever-growing cost of sustaining themselves.

If those people were thrown out and had to be looked after by the state, the costs would be much greater than they would be if the Government gave them some help in meeting their costs. As a matter of humanity, any Government must take the matter seriously and adopt a modern approach. Unfortunately, such an approach is not being taken at present.

Thirdly, I want to ask why there was no mention of the euro—one of the major sources of worry and contention—in the Budget. By this time next year, there will be no French francs, German deutschmarks or Italian lire. Thirteen European currencies will have disappeared and will have been replaced by a single currency: the euro. Tourists will increasingly want to bring that currency into this country and use it, and in this country there will be increasing demand for commercial and industrial aspects of trade to be settled in the euro.

How do the Government envisage those changes affecting their budgetary position? What consideration are they giving to the matter? A number of us believe that it is essential that if, taking into account the economic position, it is seen to be to the great benefit of Britain to enter the euro, no political party should desist from taking that action. What is that great benefit? That factor must be analysed, and I believe that the Government have to start to bring that analysis before the country as a whole. I believe that it is necessary for us to have a clear understanding—which I do not believe exists now—of what the advantages can be and what some of the disadvantages might be of the euro in operation.

People have been speaking about the euro theoretically until now, but by this time next year it will be not theory but a practicality, and it is a practicality that cannot be swept under the carpet. It is a practicality that the Government and the Opposition will have to face in different circumstances from those that exist now, in 12 and 15 months' time. The Government must start to explain exactly what their view will be when they begin to notice that effect, and what effect that will have on their budgetary position, because I would bet my bottom dollar that the euro will have a considerable effect on that position, which no one is considering now.

I could continue for some time, but I believe that a number of hon. Members wish to speak and that if I sat down it would be welcomed more than if I continued. Thank you very much for calling me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

8.39 pm

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): We have heard much from Conservative Members about the inadequacy of spending on the national health service, among other services, but the words that have stuck with me are those

[Ms Margaret Moran]

on the no-nonsense NHS plans that we heard from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health this afternoon. They are no-nonsense plans because the Government recognise the need to recruit and retain nurses and essential health staff in areas such as mine in Luton.

Last week, I visited Luton and Dunstable hospital in my constituency and saw for myself the effects of the Government's investment in the health service. During the next few years, more than £3 million will be invested in our hospital's infrastructure, providing a new accident and emergency department; and new wards and other facilities, including those for cancer care, are opening. We certainly did not see that under the previous Government. I commend the health staff, who work so hard and whom we need to retain in our hospitals so as to continue to improve on the achievements so far.

On Thursday, I will be work shadowing a GP in my constituency. I shall do so because I am aware of the intense pressures that GPs are under in parts of our country. In my constituency, there are often far too few GPs in the areas of greatest deprivation, and they are under intense pressure. In an area that I shall visit on Thursday, the GPs tackle the ill health that is a consequence of the multiple deprivation in Bury Park, where housing is poor. There are overcrowding and health problems, such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer, and the unemployment rate for many Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people is four times the national average.

All those problems are linked and must be tackled if we are truly to give opportunities to all. That is why I welcome not only today's announcements on recruiting and retaining health staff and providing bonuses to retain our GPs, but the other measures in the Budget that address the opportunities for employment, good housing and regeneration. They are part of the bigger picture that makes up the problem of poor health, which must be addressed if we are to tackle the health and other inequalities that we experience in our constituencies.

I particularly welcome the health action zone, which the Government have given to my constituency. It will spend more than £3 million in the next few years to tackle those health inequalities. We are looking at the big picture—what we call the joined-up approach—and spending not only on health, but on regeneration and on opportunities and employment prospects for our communities. The Government are doing the right thing for constituencies such as mine.

I am absolutely astonished about the shadow Chancellor's announcement that the Conservative party intend to match the Government's health spending, by means which simply do not add up, so where would the cuts fall? They would fall on those measures that contribute to creating better health and reducing health inequalities. The Conservative party would slash our regeneration and housing investment funds. In other words, that is another example of the short-termism that we experienced during the 18 years of the previous Tory Government.

The previous Government slashed and burned their way through housing investment, which has been responsible for unprecedented housing need and homelessness. All the research shows that their policies have been responsible for creating greater health inequalities because health, housing and job opportunities go together. That is why I find the shadow Chancellor's words incomprehensible.

The Conservative party says that it intends to maintain health spending, while cutting the essential services that contribute to the maintenance of good health. That is why I particularly welcome the Chancellor's comments, which were less discussed, that he intends to ensure that, under the Budget, we regenerate areas of least opportunity and tackle the causes of unemployment and low economic activity.

Those measures are particularly important in my constituency, which is still reeling from the announcement of the Vauxhall closure. I am pleased that there will not now be any compulsory redundancies and that there is a greater prospect that a replacement vehicle will ensure future employment in vehicle manufacturing in my constituency. Government support and their promise of cash has enabled us to make that move. That is in stark contrast to the approach of the member of the Conservative party who said that 3 million unemployed was a price worth paying.

This Government put their money where their mouth is. They have already put money into ensuring that those who lose their jobs as a result of supply chain job losses receive the support, the job opportunities and the reskilling to which the Government believe they are entitled. I pay tribute to the shop stewards at Vauxhall who have worked so hard in partnership with Members of Parliament, Members of the European Parliament and the council to get the best deal for the workers at the plant.

The shock announcement of the Vauxhall closure did not reflect what has been happening in Luton. In fact, Luton has been looking up, although it is difficult to see that through some of the recent announcements. More jobs are coming into the constituency through our business park at Capability Green where Astra Zeneca is about to move in. The airport is expanding, and 5,000 extra jobs could be created in a new business park if we obtain from the Treasury, as we hope we will, funding for the widening of the east Luton corridor. I hope that the Treasury recognises the employment and regeneration opportunities that that development might bring at a time when we need it in Luton.

Let us examine how far Luton has come. In the late 1980s, we had the ignominious reputation of being the negative equity capital of the country. Boom and bust and the Tory years hit Luton hard. Millions of families across the country lost their homes, and repossessions were rife. Interest rates hit 15 per cent., causing havoc for hard-working Luton families. However, I am pleased that, as a result of this and previous Budgets, things are looking up for Luton. That is because the Government have taken tough decisions and not chosen the easy way out, such as the everlasting 1p of the Liberals or the boom-and-bust economics to which the Tories would return. Lutonians now benefit from the fact that they have low interest rates and a stable economy. Mortgage misery is, by and large, a thing of the past for Lutonians.

Under the 18 years of the previous Government, my constituents were struggling against record unemployment, they were struggling to keep their homes and they were struggling against 22 Tory tax rises and worsening public services. They literally paid the price

of Tory failure. For every £1 that was spent under Tory economic mismanagement of the economy, 42p was spent on the cost of despair—the cost of dole, debt and borrowing. Now things have been turned around: the economy is stable, debt is being repaid at unprecedented levels, and youth unemployment is down in my constituency by an amazing 83 per cent. We now have the equivalent of 84p in the pound to invest in our schools and health service.

I go around my constituency frequently and I have visited all its schools twice in the past year. Everywhere I go, I see new classrooms, new information technology suites and new libraries. My constituency is benefiting from reduced class sizes, and mums tell me that they make a real difference to standards.

Mr. Hayes: When the hon. Lady visits schools, will she point out that spending on education as a percentage of gross domestic product has fallen under this Government, that secondary school class sizes are rising according to Government figures and that, according to House of Commons Library statistics, in early years education, more children are now being taught in classes of more than 30 pupils than was the case under the previous Conservative Government?

Ms Moran: My mums tell me that there are more nursery and early years places in my constituency than there ever have been before. An extra £120 extra is now spent in the classroom per pupil in my constituency.

More money is being made available than ever before for regeneration in deprived parts of my constituency, such as Ramridge and Ashcroft in the centre of Luton. We tried to calculate the amount, and worked out that we are spending at least £21 million on regeneration this year alone, through the single regeneration budget, sports action zones and health action zones. On top of that, the Government have successfully argued for objective 2 and assisted area status, so there are more job and training opportunities than ever before. As I said, the Government put their money where their mouth is.

We recognise that there is much more to do, particularly if we are to create job opportunities for everyone who needs them. One of the problems in my constituency is that business start-up rates are among the lowest in the country, while business failure rates are among the highest. Despite the fact that Luton council's venture fund lends money to start-ups that have difficulty getting traditional funding, we still have a major problem in ensuring that small business start-ups are sustainable and can grow in the long term.

Given the legacy of the 1980s—the Tory dark days—when people lost their homes and the future was uncertain, many traditional lenders are wary of lending money to some of my constituents. That is why I particularly welcome the Budget's proposed tax incentive for community investment. The Chancellor has rightly identified the fact that business creation is often lowest in our most disadvantaged communities, and Luton is a case in point. We need to tackle the causes of low economic activity and unemployment, so we need new financial incentives. Instead of community enterprises being totally reliant on filling in forms to apply for grants—in other words, handouts—we must ensure that we have hand-ups for start-ups and small and growing businesses. That is where the tax incentive comes in.

By opening up economic and business opportunities to our most disadvantaged communities, we can unlock their potential, as well as flows of private finance which would not ordinarily find their way into such areas. I think of Bury Park, one of the most deprived areas in Luton, as I said earlier, which suffers from low employment and poor housing and has an urgent need for regeneration. I hope that the tax incentive will encourage more social and ethical investment opportunities because some investors have been very slow indeed to recognise the potential of some of our deprived communities.

Community organisations in my area, such as the Bangladeshi youth league, traditionally develop the next generation of community leaders. They could venture forth and develop the next generation of job and wealth creators in the community, ploughing the investment back into the community and helping to regenerate their own areas to a much larger extent than they have the opportunity to do now. Small local enterprises could establish themselves in areas where unemployment and dereliction would otherwise be the norm. The case for the tax credit is powerful—it could fill the gap in the market between finance for regeneration and community development through grants and private finance.

The tax credit also has the potential to deal with the effects of the years of Tory disinvestment in housing. The same areas that need business start-ups need investment in housing. We inherited a £19 billion backlog of disrepair from the previous Government. There is also an acute housing crisis, which is reflected in the fact that 9.3 per cent. of my constituents are in housing need, yet for every homeless person there are seven empty private properties. Investment is needed to bring them back into use. If we extended the tax credit to property, ensuring that debt and equity are taken into account, it could usefully regenerate the physical infrastructure as well as providing job opportunities.

In my former life, I was chief executive of a housing association. The tax credit would have been extraordinarily useful in producing the comprehensive regeneration that we wanted. We did not want to tackle just problems of bricks and mortar, but problems within the community and of employment as well. I commend the Budget and that initiative in particular to the House. They will bring real benefits, especially to mortgage holders in Luton, who will no longer have to wear the label of living in the mortgage misery capital of the country. To my right hon. Friend, whose policies have created mortgage stability, my constituents say, "Cheers."

8.55 pm

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): As several other hon. Members want to speak, I shall confine my remarks to one subject and be brief.

I am concerned about the impact that the Government's fiscal and monetary policies have had on pensions and their provision. However, I applaud the Chancellor for accepting most of the recommendations that Sir Paul Myners recently made in his excellent review of institutional investment, many of which relate to the provisions of the Pensions Act 1995. I was a critic of many aspects of that legislation, although it tried manfully to deal with the problems that arose out of the Maxwell pension scandal. It imposed a great deal of useful regulations on the pensions industry, but it also created

[Mr. John Butterfill]

problems. Most notably, it did not deal with custody, which Myners specifically addresses. Will the recommendations on custody be fully implemented, because only independent custody can prevent another Maxwell scandal from taking place?

The Budget does not deal with the costs that the 1995 Act imposed on providers of company pension schemes. The regulatory burden has driven many people away from the provision of defined benefit schemes and into defined contribution schemes, to the detriment of the public. It will be interesting to know whether the Treasury has proposals to deal with the problem of the regulatory burden, which acts against the national interest.

I applaud the abolition of the minimum funding requirement. I always opposed it. I said in 1995 that it would distort investment decisions and diminish the value of funds because it would lead to more cautious investment. It also has the perverse effect of increasing the purchase of gilts, thereby depressing the yield on annuities. There was a double whammy for pensioners. First, the value of their funds was diminished and, secondly, the fund would buy less of an annuity on maturity than would otherwise have been the case. To the extent that the Chancellor has accepted that problem, I welcome what he has done to address it.

However, other policies have made pension funds and people with private pensions considerably worse off. Despite the fact that the value of pension funds was diminishing, because of the factors that I have outlined, the Chancellor introduced in a previous Budget the £5 billion a year tax on pensions. In response to questions about this Budget, he said that the total value of pension funds has increased. It has, but their liabilities have increased even more, so that what will be bought in terms of pension has less value. There has been a significant net reduction in the value to pensioners as a result of that policy.

The fact that the Chancellor, highly commendably, has made substantial repayments of the national debt has also affected pensions dramatically. Those repayments, amounting to £34 billion, do not all result from his prudence; they result largely from the sale of telecoms licences, which accounts for £23 billion alone, and other privatisation receipts. I applaud the repayment of debt, but we must look at its effect on pensions that will become in-payment. It will reduce dramatically the volume of gilts available on the market at a time when Government policies are encouraging their greater purchase. That will drive gilt deals down even further and annuities will yield less and less.

We are creating a black hole for annuities; more of them have to be purchased to produce less and less income. Because they produce less income, even more of them have to purchased. Until the Government tackle the annuities problem, we will not get over the difficulties that will face all pensioners who save for their retirement.

That is a very severe problem indeed. I have introduced a private Member's Bill, the Pension Annuities (Amendment) Bill, which we tried to debate last Friday. Sadly, it was blocked by the Government Whip, but I hope to have further discussion with the Economic Secretary on the subject. It is interesting that her officials are telling her that the cost of an annuity equal to the minimum income guarantee, if one disregards the tax-free lump sum, is about £72,000. The Government do not realise that that £72,000 is related entirely to the yield on gilts. They are constantly increasing that cost through their action. If the policy on annuities were reversed and another form of investment, not based on gilts, were accepted, the cost of replacing the minimum income guarantee would be reduced dramatically.

The Government have double standards on the minimum income guarantee. Although they say that it will cost £72,000 to replace it for someone with a private pension, a pensioner wanting to claim it is excluded from doing so if he has a mere £12,000 of savings. One cannot equate easily equate £12,000 and £72,000. We are faced with a Government who discourage people from becoming independent by saving for their retirement and ceasing to be a burden on the state. At the same time, they rely on means-tested benefits, which are ever more complex and difficult to claim and which create a dependency society. The minimum income guarantee encourages people not to save because, as the Government's own figures demonstrate, under the present rules, it is difficult for most pensioners to save enough money to avoid it. People who buy stakeholder pensions, as urged by the Government, will therefore be led into a colossal mis-selling of pensions, because nearly all of them would be better off not buying them and relying on the minimum income guarantee.

The remedy is in the hands of the Treasury. If it gets rid of its obsession with annuities, which are an outdated investment—no one was advised to buy them—it could solve the problem. Annuities are such a bad investment that the actuarial profession is saying that most people would be better off buying the underlying gilts that are being bought by insurance companies. They would have a better income and their capital would not be lost on their death, as they would avoid the position of having nothing left to pass on to future generations. The Treasury and Inland Revenue would do better because they would pick up additional inheritance tax on the way.

9.4 pm

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill), who speaks with clarity about a difficult subject. Every time I hear him, I learn a little more, and some day perhaps I will understand the complexity of pensions. I sense that some day those on the Treasury Bench will be receptive to the issue that he rightly persists in raising.

I, too, shall be brief. Like the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), I tender my apologies to right hon. and hon. Members for my absence during the bulk of the debate. I was in Standing Committee B, where we were considering the International Development Bill under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West.

Replying to the Budget statement of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, the Leader of the Opposition spoke for 34 minutes. During the whole of that time, he never mentioned the word "poverty" once, and he made no reference to the eradication of it. Perhaps that is hardly surprising, as the subject does not lend itself to stand-up comedy or pre-scripted jokes. However, the subject is important to many of my constituents.

On 12 July 1999 the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs published its report entitled "Poverty in Scotland". To measure the extent of poverty in Scotland, the Committee drew on a statistical base for the period to the end of 1996, and concluded in paragraph 22:

"Broadly speaking 25 per cent. of Scottish households are in poverty—that is, living on incomes below half of the average, which is a slightly higher figure than the UK as a whole. This represents a significant increase since 1979."

That was some understatement.

The Committee went on to report:

"One third of children are in or at risk of poverty. Whilst lone parents form a small percentage of the total numbers in poverty, both they and their children are highly likely to live in poverty. Two thirds of lone parents are in poverty. Twenty-nine per cent. of Scottish pensioners survive on incomes of half the UK average. Overall, women are the biggest group in poverty. Elderly women are particularly vulnerable."

The seriousness of the problem of child poverty in the UK at that time was best illustrated by comparing its position to that of other countries in the European Union. Although by no means the poorest country, we had the highest level of child poverty in Europe.

I understand that the factors that cause and sustain poverty are complex, but in my constituency, Kilmarnock and Loudoun, over the period from 1979 to 1997, we had them all. We witnessed a decline in our industrial and manufacturing base and a trend towards part-time, flexible and short-term working. Industrial and economic change brought high unemployment, low pay and poverty in work. Conservative Government priorities between 1979 and 1997 increased that poverty and inequality.

It is with great relief that my constituents see that they now have a Government who not only talk about poverty, but set targets for tackling it. Not only are they committed to the eradication of poverty, but they have set indicators of progress towards that target and policies designed to improve the incomes of the poorest pensioners, the poorest families and the poorest children.

I have the regard for the right hon. Member for East Devon that his seniority and position in the House demand, and I listened carefully to his remarks. Like him, because I represent a constituency that is substantially rural and has many farmers in it, I, too, hope that the Government will rethink the previous policy on consequential losses arising from foot and mouth disease. However, the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if it sticks in my throat a little to hear a call based on morality, allegedly, coming from those on the Conservative Benches, when throughout the period during which they were in charge of the country's economy, the Conservatives did nothing, while consequences much worse than those now faced by the farming community in my constituency were faced by the industrial and town communities of my constituency.

I should like to speak briefly about some of the micro-economic announcements contained in the Budget statement. I believe that they will build on the steps that the Government have already taken to deal with the consequences of Tory policy. The omission of any measure from my comments should not be taken as a lack of support for it. Like my hon. Friends, I welcome the Budget, which will greatly improve the lot of almost 10,000 working families in my constituency. I represent a community that is among those with the highest unemployment in the UK. On any measure, whether claimant count, the labour force survey or International Labour Organisation figures, the community in the East Ayrshire local authority area is one of the top 20 in the country in terms of unemployment.

Opposition Members groan and jeer in unison when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor or other Labour Members describe the macro-economic objective of trying to avoid a return to boom and bust. Every time I hear them do so, I wonder whether they still fail to understand the need for a stable economic platform to establish policies that deal with the concerns and problems of communities such as that which I represent, or whether they still do not care. Whichever is the case, it is none the less an indictment of them.

It is to the Government's credit that they established that platform of stability. Despite the difficult decisions that had to be made, unemployment in my constituency has dropped significantly—by about 26 per cent. overall—and long-term youth unemployment has fallen by more than 60 per cent. The most interesting thing is that it never dropped at all—never mind significantly—in any of the boom periods that occurred under the previous Government. Of course, there was no new deal when they were in power. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) guffaws, but those who have been among the long-term unemployed in my constituency, perhaps as youths, have lived through booms before. Governments of whom he was a member were responsible for managing those booms, but they never delivered jobs. In the current growth period, with the help of the new deal, 60 per cent. of unemployed youths in my constituency have found work. He can guffaw if he likes, but those who have benefited from the new deal will recognise his attitude.

Despite the success of the new deal, there is still persistent unemployment in East Ayrshire. If that unemployment, including the continuing redundancies in manufacturing, are not dealt with, my community will be left behind while others move on towards the goal of full employment. I share that goal, which was last achieved in this country the 1950s. The news on the jobs front is not, however, entirely bleak. Since I was elected to Parliament, more than 1,200 new jobs have been attracted into my constituency. About 80 per cent. of those jobs are in call centres, while the rest has been produced by attracting further inward investment. All of them are a tribute to the partnership between local and national Government agencies. The new M77, which is due to be completed in 2005, will link Ayrshire with the national motorway network and enhance the work that has already begun. The Budget contains specific provisions that could have been framed for constituencies such as mine. Indeed, I hope that they were.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran), I welcome the provisions that are designed for regeneration. In particular, I welcome those that aim to cut the cost of small business borrowing. I welcome the new community investment tax credit, the community development venture capital fund and the accelerated tax credits that are designed to encourage brownfield development. Developers in my constituency have already contacted me about those credits, as they are interested in developing sites that were previously unattractive. I welcome also the abolition of stamp duties on all property transactions in the most deprived and disadvantaged urban areas. God knows, enough wards in my constituency

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

should qualify. Those measures, which all seek to regenerate our poorest communities, could all have been designed with towns such as those in my constituency in mind.

In recognition that East Ayrshire is a localised pocket of high unemployment and deprivation, it was chosen as an area for the job action team pilot. I pay tribute to Jim Burns, the manager of the employment services pilot scheme, his staff and their partners for embracing so enthusiastically and imaginatively the opportunity provided by the pilot. In the first six months of their work, they have managed to identify job opportunities and to match them with long-term unemployed people so successfully that they have found work for 20 per cent. of those registered for jobseeker's allowance in the pilot area. In addition, they have helped a number of other jobseekers into work. They have shown that targeting resources works, and they welcome the extension of the action team funding for the whole of the spending review period.

A serious problem exists in my constituency in terms of opportunities for work. Throughout Scotland thousands of unemployed people are unable to cope with the demands of training or to hold down jobs because of drug problems. The announcement of a £40 million, three-year project to address that problem will bring welcome additional help. However, in our poorest communities a longer-standing, and just as devastating, problem has blighted the job prospects of countless thousands for generations. That is the problem associated with alcohol abuse. I make a simple appeal to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to consider the extension of the rightly lauded drugs initiative to those with alcohol misuse problems.

I welcome the Budget. It contains welcome provisions to support families, women and children, and strikes a proper balance between economic stability and social justice. It has been warmly welcomed by the thousands of families in my constituency who will benefit from its provisions, and by many others. It also contains great promise that policies have at last been marshalled that will begin to address the persistent problems that have kept many of my constituents in poverty for far too long.

9.16 pm

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): Like the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), I represent many small businesses. Any help for small businesses is to be welcomed at the moment.

In the midst of all the benefits that have been announced for pensioners, I must make a plea for a group that has consistently been overlooked. I received a telephone call recently from someone who is not a constituent of mine—his elected representative stood for Parliament but will not sit in Parliament on the same terms as the rest of us. His name is Jim Steele and he is 83. He phoned me to say that, when he became 80, he received an increase of 25p a week in his pension. Despite all the other increases that have been announced, nothing has happened to that 25p a week. It is an insult to continue to pay only 25p a week to a person over 80, so many years after that increase was made to help those in old age.

I welcome the proposals concerning climate change that will allow the expansion of the gas industry in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, I believe that that will help the nation as a whole to reach the Kyoto targets. I welcome, on behalf of my colleagues, the news on the additional spending on health, staffing, equipment and renovation. We also approve of the increased long-termism in many of the spending announcements. However, like others in the House and throughout the nation, we do not take it for granted that those announcements are intended only to help us now. The Government might also have another aim in view: that of winning an election in five years' time, as well as in the immediate future.

When one reads the seemingly impressive figures published in the Budget—such as the total of £1 billion for the NHS over three years, including a cash handout of up to £1 million for each of the 200 or so acute care hospitals, and £135 million for the new recruiting drive—one must be cautious. We ask for consideration to be given to the impact of such increases. What impact will the additional funding, coupled with the other spending increases due to take place next month, have on the day-to-day problems experienced by the health service?

There is a staff shortage in the health service. Last year, the Secretary of State announced plans to recruit 20,000 nurses and 2,000 general practitioners by 2005. Naturally, they were roundly welcomed. That is true of the Chancellor's plans for a new £135 million fund to recruit front-line staff, but it must be ensured that additional resources effectively target and eliminate the sources of staff shortage, which I touched on in Question Time.

Retaining staff is just as important, if not more so, than attracting young people to the health service. The value of work experience must never be underestimated, nor must it be forgotten that we do not have enough training places for prospective nurses or GPs. There is a restriction in place and we must re-examine it.

To retain nurses, fairer salaries must be paid. In Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom, people are asking why police officers start on £17,000 a year whereas nurses get much less. Many do not earn the overtime that some police officers receive, which is why they take on agency employment outside normal working hours. Nurses must be paid fair wages commensurate with those paid to workers of equivalent skill.

I reserve judgment on the establishment of the capital renewal fund, which will be paid directly to GPs, although I welcome any plans to address the shortage of family doctors. Additional funding for acute care hospitals over the next three years must be welcome, although I have residual concerns about how effectively hospital trusts will transfer such funding to improved equipment and improved hospital buildings.

Departing from the domestic health service for a moment, let me put on record my pleasure that the Government have introduced a new tax credit to encourage British companies to play a fuller role in global disease relief. The measure will promote the development of new drugs and facilitate their widespread distribution. We should enhance both in acknowledgement of the damaging effect of disease on the third world.

I want to mention health funding in regions in which responsibility is devolved. I was not altogether amused to discover last week that the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales would be making announcements in the next few weeks. Northern Ireland seems to have been put into semi-orbit and, as the regionalisation of the nation increases, we must be careful not to allow any part

to become semi-detached. I hope that the Northern Ireland Assembly puts health at the top of its agenda by allocating a large proportion of the additional resources resulting from the Budget to hospitals to ensure that the standard of health care in Northern Ireland matches, if not betters, that in the rest of the United Kingdom.

When funds were reallocated recently, £10 million that had not been used was discovered in the health pot, even though people throughout Northern Ireland were crying out for better surgery and better equipment and operations were not being carried out. What is going on with the management of our health resources? I believe that sometimes we waste them.

We need not just greater funding, but more prudent funding and more prudent spending of financial resources. Health service morale is at an all-time low. The additional funding may halt the fall in morale, if it has not already hit rock bottom, but it will take further funding to rebuild both morale and public confidence in the health service.

In that context, the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) kept referring to percentages, but they are not a good guide. If I understand my maths, 10 per cent. of 1 million is 100,000 and 50 per cent. of 100,000 is 50,000. We need hard figures so that we can make comparisons and draw valid conclusions.

9.25 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Today's debate takes place against the sombre background of foot and mouth disease, as was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery). As he and others pointed out, however, there is nothing in the Budget about it. I am especially surprised—given that the Budget will have been prepared somewhat in advance—that we have heard nothing from Ministers about the reallocation of some of the £1 billion underspend that they pushed into the subsequent year to fund compensation payments.

Mr. Gordon Brown: More public spending.

Mr. Letwin: Not more public spending; reallocated public spending. The Chancellor could not spend that money last year: try as he might, he could not get Whitehall to spend it. Now he is pushing it into the next year, and not looking at the emergency that faces the country.

Mr. Brown: More spending.

Mr. Letwin: No, it does not mean more spending this year. It means the same amount of spending this year, reallocated. It would be good if the Chancellor were able to do what I believe he is fond of accusing us of not being able to do, and could do his sums.

As usual, we are confronted by a Budget which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo) pointed out, contains a good deal more spin than substance. The hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell)—who, alas, has had to leave the Chamber, but was courteous enough to let us know in advance—made an interesting speech, but fell into a huge heffalump trap. I am in the fortunate position of being able to reveal the results of a little further investigation. After all, such discoveries are made 24 hours by 24 hours as we disinter the astonishing palimpsest of the Red Book.

We now find that the extra money for education, which we already knew had been reduced from £1 billion to £400 million, is a conjuring trick in itself, as it is based on a comparison with the pre-Budget report. If we refer to the Red Book relating to the last Budget, we find that the amount turns out to be £200 million. I agree that the Chancellor is a magician, but making £200 million into £1 billion is certainly a magic trick even by his standards.

Then there are the dogs that did not bark. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) rightly made another impassioned plea for a change in the annuity rule. There was nothing about that in the Budget, although the Chancellor prided himself hugely on having vastly worsened the annuities situation by repaying a huge amount of the national debt.

Although the Chancellor made no announcement of a rise in corporation tax, it will rise by £5.7 billion next year after four years of failure to index the various thresholds. I could go on, referring to the national insurance changes, the company car tax changes and all sorts of other things that we never heard about—as is, I think, widely acknowledged now.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea and, in a brilliant analysis, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) made clear just how much what is claimed in the Budget—and, indeed, in his previous Budgets, and in all his preenings about his great success—depends on the inheritance that he received. It goes back to 1992 and 1993; it was not suddenly invented in new Labour Downing street. That was the burden of another brilliant analysis yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). In fact, this Budget debate has been more distinguished by ex-Chancellors making clear what is going on in the present Chancellor's Budget than any other such debate in the current Parliament. I admit that that is only a minor compensation for the deficiencies of the Budget itself.

Much more seriously, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea and, again, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe made clear just how far the Budget continues the process of undermining British competitiveness by increasing taxes and regulation. My right hon. and learned Friend described—accurately, I believe—the Chancellor's programme of deceleration and acceleration of public spending as an eccentricity. I shall explain in a moment why I think he slightly understated the case.

Mr. Bercow: Does my hon. Friend recall that in April 1997, in his foreword to Labour's business manifesto entitled "Equipping Britain for the Future", the right hon. Member for Dunfermline, East (Mr. Brown) specifically stated in terms—*[Interruption.]* The Chancellor can chunter from a sedentary position, but he cannot deny the facts. He stated in terms: "We will not impose burdensome regulations upon business, because we understand that successful businesses must keep costs down."

Does that not contrast radically with the verdict of the director general of the British Chambers of Commerce, Mr. Chris Humphries, who says, also in terms, "Whatever

[Mr. Bercow]

its rhetoric, the reality is that the Government have dramatically increased the regulatory burdens that threaten small business competitiveness"?

Mr. Letwin: My hon. Friend is right to bring that up. There is only one difference on that issue between Mr. Chris Humphries and the Chancellor: the one is right, the other wrong.

This Budget does much worse things than any of those, such as hugely increase the spread of means-testing. As my hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) and for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) made clear, it is also a Budget for complexity, but complexity for a purpose. What is the purpose? The purpose is huge redistribution. What is the effect? The effect is huge disincentive—a disincentive to save and to be thrifty. In fact, it is a disincentive to do the very things that the Chancellor wants everyone to do.

There is, however, a worse problem, and it is on that that I wish to dwell as we conclude this debate. The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice)—who, alas, is not in the Chamber—made an interesting speech in which he made an admission which I suspect will earn him discredit in the eyes the Chancellor. He made the astonishing admission that the Government had not wholly abolished the economic cycle.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe speculated that, at some time in the future, there might possibly be a somewhat slowing economy. We do not speculate or predict, but let us imagine that there is a faint possibility that even the magic of this Chancellor has failed to produce Elysium. It might just be that even this Chancellor has failed to produce a permanent solution to the economic cycle.

If there were an economic slowdown, what would the Chancellor do? He has vastly accentuated the cyclicality of tax receipts and pushed the emphasis of tax ever further on to those components that are most affected by the cycle. He has vastly aggrandised his corporation tax receipts, to which I have already referred, precisely because he has taken steps to ensure that he can. His climate change levy is highly cyclical in its effect. IR35 is about the most cyclical tax that there has ever been. His aggregates levy is cyclical. Every time that he transfers the burden on to business, he makes his tax receipts more cyclical.

Currently, of course, that has the most marvellous result for the Chancellor. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe pointed out, that has the effect that his taxes increase faster than he himself can predict, because the output gap is positive. What a wonderful scenario for a Chancellor—more tax revenue than even he could have dreamed of a year before.

The flipside of that coin is that, as soon as there is a slight slowdown, those tax receipts will diminish, not just as they always do—my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe was absolutely right that every Treasury has been bad at predicting how fast they will decline—but faster, because the cyclicality has increased. However, that is not the half of it.

This Chancellor, in his extension of means-tested benefits, has also made the social security system, which is the cyclical part of the expenditure side of the equation, vastly more cyclical. The Chancellor shakes his head because he is proud that he has managed to cure the unemployment trap, as he sees it, by having extended the working families tax credit and other in-work benefits. He has done something to cure the unemployment trap but, in so doing, has also vastly accentuated the poverty trap.

The consequence for spending in a slowdown is that it will increase much faster than it has hitherto. It is obviously true that if there is a vast extension of means-tested benefits—such as the working families tax credit, the pensioner credit, the minimum income guarantee, the children's tax credit and the new children's credit—and there is a slowdown, as incomes decline, public spending in the Department of Social Security will accelerate more quickly than it has previously.

We have a Chancellor who has introduced arrangements that will increase the effect of a slowdown on decreasing taxes and increase the effect of a slowdown on increasing expenditure. That means that the deficit that he would be generating if there were a slowdown would be greater than it had previously been.

All of that comes against a background of a huge, locked-in ramping of those parts of public expenditure that are less cyclical in character. If a slowdown gets under way, the Chancellor will find it extraordinarily difficult to constrain the growth that he has set for the other elements of expenditure. He knows that, and we know it. It has always been the fate of Chancellors in the past.

The Chancellor has built the basis not for the Elysium of permanent stability, but for turning the economy into something that gives people the wrong incentives. It gives people a disincentive to save, to work more, or to behave responsibly towards their young and their old. Beyond that, the Chancellor has created circumstances that will mean that his much-trumpeted fiscal stability will give way more quickly than was the case in the past to the slightest downturn.

That is not what a responsible Budget, or sequence of responsible Budgets, would produce. The set of Budgets announced by this Chancellor looks good today, but may not look so good tomorrow. It is important that the House recognises that, and puts it on the record. If there is a slowdown and if the Chancellor's policies are fulfilled because he is lucky enough to be re-elected—which we hope will not happen—there will come a time when he will claim that something very strange has happened. However, nothing very strange will have happened. The Chancellor himself will have brought about the circumstances that I have described.

The answer to those problems is clear. It is to moderate the growth rate of public spending, so as to be able to reduce rather than increase the tax burden. It is to find means to do that so that people will not rely on means-tested benefits because they will have more of their own money. The answer to the problems that I have outlined also involves an honest taxation policy that does not shift the burden on to cyclical business taxes but acknowledges where tax lies.

In short, the answer to our economic problems is a programme that tries to bring back to the nation's finances some long-term stability. The Chancellor believes that he has achieved that, but he has not done so at all. Such a programme would continue the process bequeathed to the nation in the final four or five years of the previous

Conservative Administration. They were the first four or five years of the very process on which the Chancellor now congratulates himself.

If the nation does not follow that path, there will come a time when it will rue that decision. There will come a time when the Chancellor's wonderful smile will be wiped off his face. Our duty is to ensure that that smile is gone before the nation has to wipe it off at a time of economic slowdown. We can do that by making sure that we win the next general election and follow the right policies, rather than the wrong ones.

9.38 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Andrew Smith): That was an extraordinary speech. Clearly, it meant nothing to half the people in the Public Gallery, who left after five minutes. It certainly will not mean anything to any member of the general public unfortunate enough to chance upon it. The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) went on about my right hon. Friend the Chancellor somehow creating disincentives to work. People will ask why there are a million more people in jobs under this Government.

My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has delivered a Budget that makes a clear choice about Britain's future. It sets out a platform on which to build opportunity and prosperity for all. It is a Budget that takes a balanced approach, and stability is the foundation. It proposes more investment in our public services, not less. It puts schools and hospitals first, and offers affordable tax cuts for hard-working families. It is a Budget that locks in stability and rejects the short-termism of the past. It rejects underinvestment and cuts in public services, and unaffordable tax cuts that would put investment at risk.

In this debate, the House has heard possible valedictory speeches from distinguished hon. Members. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who has made a distinguished contribution to fiscal matters in this House, praised the Chancellor's long-term approach to stability, investment and welfare-to-work policies. He said that it was the best Budget that he had been privileged to take part in.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr. Radice), whose chairmanship of the Select Committee has drawn admiration from both sides of the House and respect from those of us who have appeared in front of him, praised the Chancellor for carrying through the radical reforms necessary for monetary and fiscal stability. As my right hon. Friends and others pointed out, that commitment to stability has meant that Britain has the lowest long-term interest rates for 35 years, the lowest inflation for 30 years and the lowest unemployment since 1975. It will remain the bedrock for all that we do.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) spoke as though my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was somehow the lucky Chancellor and had a golden inheritance from the previous Administration. Who took debt as a share of GDP up to 44 per cent.? Who borrowed an extra £28 billion before we came into office? In contrast, who, within days of coming into office, made the Bank of England operationally independent? Who put the fiscal rules in place? Who sorted out the public finances so that we have a platform for stability and lower interest rates?

Mr. Bercow: The Chief Secretary likes to pose as the high priest of prudence. Perhaps I can put to him the question that I put unavailingly to the Paymaster General the other day. What assessment has the right hon. Gentleman made of the impact of the change in the rules for the use of capital receipts from the sale of council houses on the size of interest repayments on local authority debt?

Mr. Smith: A prudent assessment. [*Laughter.*] It is because we have been prudent that the Chancellor was able to announce that he can pay off £34 billion of debt this year. That will cut the cost of debt interest which, when we came to power, cost more than the entire schools budget, and we are now putting more than £10 billion extra into the schools budget.

We remain on track to meet our fiscal rules. The Chancellor announced that we will retain our 2.5 per cent. inflation target. He has rejected calls by Conservative Members to set a lower target, a policy that would lead to upward pressure on interest rates.

With stability as the foundation, our ambitions for Britain can be met—more investment, not less, and targeted tax cuts on the nation's priorities. For example, as my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran) said, the community investment tax credit can bring great benefit to disadvantaged communities.

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: The right hon. Gentleman takes great credit for this extraordinary repayment of national debt, which was plainly unintended, and resulted from the Government failing to spend the money proposed in the Chancellor's previous spending plans. Does the right hon. Gentleman appreciate that over the past four years, the average European country has achieved faster growth than this country? Many have created employment at a faster rate than us, and all of them have enjoyed that with low inflation. Does he accept that his basking in the glory of the past four years is due to the lucky event of having had a good inheritance followed by four boom years for the world economy?

Mr. Smith: I can understand the right hon. and learned Gentleman's regrets about the way in which things turned out, but it is not a question of luck. Who put the fiscal discipline in place? Who paid off the debt? It was not "plainly unintended". We set out the fiscal rules. Unlike the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Portillo), we set out the rules when we were in opposition—the golden rule that we will keep debt at prudent and sustainable levels and below 40 per cent. of GDP and keep the current account balanced over the economic cycle, borrowing only for investment. We are benefiting from prudence in cutting the national debt, saving £4.5 billion in interest payments a year. We are also benefiting from the cut in unemployment. That is not a matter of chance; it was a deliberate act of policy that was assisted by the new deal, which was greatly maligned and attacked by Conservative Members. They would abolish the new deal.

Mr. Letwin: Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us how long the economy has been growing?

Mr. Smith: It has been growing for more than a decade, but the last economic cycle ran from 1997 to 1999. The question is who is putting in place a foundation for sustainable and continuing growth in the economy, based on sound public finances, on more people in jobs and enabling us to act—

Mr. Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Smith: I cannot give way. I have to reply to other matters raised in the debate.

As my hon. Friends the Members for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson), for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon), for Watford (Ms Ward) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) said, this was a Budget for families and a Budget to tackle poverty.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. He is vehement about the fact that the spectacular repayment of national debt was intended—it was a deliberate act of policy. It is extraordinary, a once-socialist Government are cheering that fantastic repayment of national debt. However, all the forecasts for taxation and expenditure were wrong. When did the Government predict that they would repay £35 billion of public debt as a policy target?

Mr. Smith: I found it revealing when the right hon. and learned Gentleman said in his speech that he saw merit in the way in which we acted to make the Bank of England operationally independent. The question that he must answer is why he did not do that when he had the chance, if that is what he believed.

This is a Budget for families and a Budget to tackle poverty. As a matter of choice, we increased child benefit to £15.50, which is a rise of 30 per cent. in real terms. We did it as a matter of choice, not chance or good fortune. We are introducing the children's tax credit at £10 a week—from next year it will be £20 a week for those with a child under the age of one. As a matter of choice, we are increasing maternity pay to £100 by 2003 and we will increase the payment period from 18 to 26 weeks, as well as introducing two weeks' paternity leave for new fathers.

The Budget also takes further steps to make work pay for hard-working families—25 million families will gain from the widening of the lower 10p tax rate. Now, more of their income will be taxed at that lower rate rather than at 22p. We have increased the working families tax credit by £5 and increased the minimum wage. That means that full-time work brings with it a guaranteed income of £225 a week. As my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax pointed out, together with the minimum wage, that makes an enormous difference to families on modest incomes.

Conservative Members, such as the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), who attacked working families tax credit, would deny that money to hard-working families. They would deny it to those who need it most. Families are receiving on average £30 a week more than they were getting under the old family credit and many more of them are getting it.

Labour's Budgets mean that households will, on average, be £240 a year better off because of the measures we are introducing this year alone. Families with children will, on average, be £420 a year better off and 2 million of the poorest pensioners at least £800 a year better off. That is the measure of our commitment to building not only a strong economy but a strong society—one that is making everyone better off, with living standards having risen 10 per cent. since the general election, but giving particular help to the poorest and those who need it most. Of course, if we had not rejected unaffordable tax cuts, we should not have been able to offer a balanced approach in the Budget, nor could we have met the investment priorities of the people of Britain.

The hon. Member for Meirionnydd Nant Conwy (Mr. Llwyd) was good enough to acknowledge both that people had been helped into work through the new deal and the merits of the working families tax credit. However, on public expenditure, he should recall that the same balanced approach will enable Wales to gain £100 million from the Budget over three years. That is on top of the £2 billion uplift provided for Wales in the spending review, and the objective 1 funding of £270 million to help those areas about which he expressed concern and about which we, too, care deeply.

It is nonsense to claim that our policies are geared only towards the south-east of England. The Budget and the Government act for all the people of this country—giving extra help to those communities which need it most. There will be a strong partnership for action in Wales between the National Assembly, local authorities and Departments to ensure that those communities facing difficult times of transition and job losses receive the help that they need.

Mr. Letwin *rose—*

Mr. Smith: I am sorry I cannot give way.

That balanced approach, which puts stability first and makes targeted tax cuts that we can afford, is also one that allows us to invest for the long term in Britain's schools and hospitals. For decades, those services suffered from the wrong choices. We choose not to return to those days of short-termism; instead, we choose a path of sustainable growth, with investment in key front-line services and staff.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) and for Watford pointed out, we are seeing the benefits in our constituencies—in the classrooms and in the hospitals—as we improve services and are able to recruit more staff. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health spoke today of how he will spend the additional £1 billion over three years on the national health service. Money will go directly to primary care services. Between £500,000 and £1 million a year will go to each acute hospital trust in communities throughout our country.

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment set out his plans to spend £1 billion over the next three years on extra resources for our schools. He confirmed that direct payments will go to schools, with as much as £63,000 for the largest primary schools and as much as £115,000 for the largest secondary schools. Because we want more teachers and more nurses, we have set up special recruitment funds of £135 million for key health service staff and £200 million for education staff.

The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) made some extraordinary claims about how much less he thought was going into health and education under the Labour Government. I checked the figures for NHS spending as a proportion of gross domestic product. The amount was 5.7 per cent. in 1996-97; by the current year, it had risen to 6.2 per cent. of a larger GDP. It will, of course, rise further. The extra spending in the Budget will come on top of the additional funding we have made available in the spending review. Spending as a whole will grow not at 3.4 per cent. but at 3.7 per cent.

Our choice is more investment—not less. Those who suggest a spending increase of 2.25 per cent. would see a shortfall over the next three years of more than £16 billion—resources taken away from schools and hospitals in every part of the country. As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South pointed out, Opposition Members must answer the question: on which schools and hospitals would their £16 billion axe fall?

In the brief time left for my speech, I will consider the remarks of Opposition Members. I am pleased to see the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) in his place. He followed admirably his three-point rule, speaking with understandable feeling about the severity of the problems affecting agriculture, and the rural communities in particular, in his constituency as a consequence of foot and mouth disease. Of course that is a very sombre backdrop to our debate. It is a very serious situation indeed, and I believe that we are all agreed that every effort must be made, and no effort spared, to eradicate this terrible disease, which is inflicting such damage.

The right hon. Gentleman made the case for compensation for consequential loss, while acknowledging that no Government had provided such compensation. I believe that he can appreciate the difficulties of deciding who would benefit and by what amount, and where to draw the line. My hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun reminded us of the communities that have been devastated by pit closures and other industrial restructuring. I can tell the right hon. Member for East Devon that the Government do act to help communities that are facing critical challenges such as this disease, which is why we will be acting not only to eradicate it but, as soon as we have been able to do so, to consider what measures can be taken to regenerate the rural economies, including the tourism sector, which in turn is being so badly affected. As we draw up those plans, we shall be pleased to listen to the right hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members whose constituents are affected.

I shall comment all too briefly on the remarks of the Opposition Front-Bench team. This evening we received further confirmation in the debate that their sums do not add up, that they have no fiscal rules and that they have no basis for stability or sustainability in their approach. They say that public spending could only grow within their definition of trend growth of 2.25 per cent. If that is the claim that they make, even if we allow for what they say about honouring our spending commitments for their first year, it still leaves them with a spending gap not of the £8 billion that they claim, and which they cannot cover with spending savings because they have not been able to identify any that stand up, but of £11 billion. That gap shows that no one could believe what they say on tax, spending, the economy or anything else. That spending gap wields an axe over the investment that the present Government are making in schools, in hospitals and in combating crime.

The Budget debates in the past few days have made clear the choices that the Government have made. We have rejected short-termism and underinvestment. We have rejected unaffordable tax cuts that would put at risk investment in our public services, and we have decided to invest for the long term. Our choice is to seize the opportunity that Britain has, not through some golden inheritance, not through chance, but through the choices that we have made and through the action that we have carried forward, in partnership with the British people. The choice is to invest in our schools, hospitals and disadvantaged communities, and the choice is to build on the new deal, which has got over a quarter of a million young people into work and cut youth unemployment by over three quarters, instead of cutting the new deal as the official Opposition would.

Our choice is to reward hard-working families with affordable tax cuts and measures to make work pay. Our choice is to make stability our foundation, rejecting the boom and bust of the past and the damage that that inflicted on our country in the past. A return to that policy is held as the threat from a Conservative party, a shadow Chancellor and a Leader of the Opposition who cannot be trusted by the people of this country, because their sums do not add up. We have made the right choices for the people of Britain: choices that will build a Britain of opportunity and prosperity for all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

(1) That it is expedient to amend the law with respect to the National Debt and the public revenue and to make further provision in connection with finance.

(2) Subject to paragraphs (3) to (6) below, this Resolution does not extend to the making of any amendment with respect to value added tax so as to provide—

(a) for zero-rating or exempting a supply, acquisition or importation;

(b) for refunding an amount of tax;

(c) for varying any rate at which that tax is at any time chargeable;

(d) for any relief, other than a relief which—

(i) so far as it is applicable to goods, applies to goods of every description, and

(ii) so far as it is applicable to services, applies to services of every description.

(3) Paragraph (2) above does not exclude the making of amendments with respect to value added tax—

(a) providing for refunds of the kind specified in paragraph (4) below;

(b) providing for that tax to be charged at a reduced rate of 5 per cent. on supplies of the descriptions specified in paragraph (5) below (and on equivalent acquisitions and importations); or

(c) making provision of the kind authorised by paragraph (6) below.

(4) The refunds mentioned in paragraph (3)(a) above are refunds of value added tax where—

(a) that tax is chargeable on a supply to, or an acquisition or importation by, a museum or gallery, and

(b) the supply, acquisition or importation is attributable to supplies of free rights of admission to the museum or gallery.

(5) The supplies mentioned in paragraph (3)(b) above are—

(a) supplies, in the course of a conversion of a building (or part of a building), of services related to the conversion if after the conversion the building (or part) contains living accommodation;

(b) supplies, in the course of the renovation or alteration (including the extension) of a dwelling that has been unoccupied for at least three years, of services related to the renovation or alteration;

(c) supplies of goods by a person making a supply of services within sub-paragraph (a) or (b) above if—

(i) those services include the incorporation of the goods into the building concerned (or its site), and

(ii) the goods are building materials within the meaning of Group 5 of Schedule 8 to the Value Added Tax Act 1994;

(d) supplies of children's car seats.

(6) The provision authorised by this paragraph is provision re-enacting, without altering any person's liability to value added tax or the amount of any such liability, provisions providing for that tax to be charged at a reduced rate of 5 per cent. on certain supplies, acquisitions and importations.

MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *then, pursuant to Standing Order No. 51(3) (Ways and Means Motions), put forthwith the Questions necessary to dispose of the further motions.*

2 HYDROCARBON OIL (RATES OF DUTY)

Resolved,

That—

(1) In section 6(1A) of the Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979—

(a) in paragraph (a), for "£0.4782" there shall be substituted "£0.4582"; and

(b) in paragraph (c), for "£0.4882" there shall be substituted "£0.4582".

(2) That subsection shall have effect until midnight on 14th June 2001 as if for paragraph

(b) there were substituted—

"(ba) £0.5268 in the case of unleaded petrol other than ultra low sulphur petrol;

(bb) £0.5468 in the case of light oil not within paragraph (a) or (ba) above;".

After that, paragraph (b) shall have effect as it did before.

(3) In section 8(3) of the Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979 for "£0.1500" there shall be substituted "£0.0900".

(4) This Resolution shall have effect as from 6 o'clock in the evening of 7th March 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

3 HYDROCARBON OIL (REBATE ON UNLEADED PETROL)

Resolved,

That—

(1) For section 13A of the Hydrocarbon Oil Duties Act 1979 there shall be substituted—

"Rebate on unleaded petrol

13A.—(1) On unleaded petrol, other than ultra low sulphur petrol, charged with the excise duty on hydrocarbon oil and delivered for home use there shall be allowed at the time of delivery a rebate of duty at the rate of £0.0586 a litre.

(2) Rebate is not allowed under this section in a case where a rebate is allowed under section 14 below.".

(2) In paragraph 1(1) of Schedule 2A to that Act—

(a) for paragraphs (a) and (b) there shall be substituted—

"(ab) adding lead to unleaded petrol in respect of which a rebate has been allowed under section 13A;"; and

(b) in paragraph (c)—

(i) for "paragraph (a)" there shall be substituted "paragraph (aa)", and

(ii) for "paragraph (b)" there shall be substituted "paragraph (ab)".

(3) For paragraph 2A of that Schedule there shall be substituted—

"2A.—(1) A mixture which is unleaded petrol is produced in contravention of this paragraph if the mixture is produced by mixing—

(a) petrol on which duty has been paid at the rate specified in section 6(1A)(a), and

(b) petrol in respect of which a rebate has been allowed under section 13A,

and the mixture produced is unleaded petrol that is not ultra low sulphur petrol.

(2) This paragraph is subject to any direction given under paragraph 3.".

(4) In paragraph 8 of that Schedule, for sub-paragraph (3A) there shall be substituted—

"(3A) In the case of a mixture produced in contravention of paragraph 2A above, the rate is that produced by deducting from the rate in force under section 6(1A)(b) at the time the mixture is produced the rebate which at that time is in force under section 13A.".

(5) This Resolution shall have effect as from 6 o'clock in the evening of 7th March 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

4 TOBACCO PRODUCTS (RATES OF DUTY)

Resolved,

That—

(1) For the Table of rates of duty in Schedule 1 to the Tobacco Products Duty Act 1979 there shall be substituted—

"TABLE

1. Cigarettes	An amount equal to 22 per cent. of the retail price plus £92.25 per thousand cigarettes.
2. Cigars	£134.69 per kilogram.
3. Hand-rolling tobacco	£96.81 per kilogram.
4. Other smoking tobacco and chewing tobacco	£59.21 per kilogram.".

(2) This Resolution shall have effect as from 6 o'clock in the evening of 7th March 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

5 DILUTION ETC. OF CIDER

Resolved,

That provision may be made authorising regulations under section 62(5) of the Alcoholic Liquor Duties Act 1979 to make provision about adding substances to, mixing, or carrying out other operations on or in relation to, cider.

6 GENERAL BETTING DUTY

Resolved,

That provision may be made about general betting duty.

7 Vehicle excise duty (general rate)

Resolved,

That—

(1) In paragraph 1 of Schedule 1 to the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994, in sub-paragraphs (2) and (2A) for "1,200 cubic centimetres" there shall be substituted "1,549 cubic centimetres".

This amendment shall apply to licences issued on or after 1st July 2001.

(2) Refunds shall be made by the Secretary of State, in accordance with the following provisions of this Resolution, in respect of licences—

(a) issued in the period beginning with 1st November 2000 and ending with 30th June 2001, and

(b) not surrendered before the end of that period,

where the amount of vehicle excise duty chargeable on the licence would have been less if the amendment in paragraph (1) of this Resolution had applied.

(3) The amount of the refund shall be—

(a) £55 for a 12 month licence, and

(b) £27.50 for a 6 month licence.

(4) The person entitled to the refund shall be—

(a) in the case of a licence in force on 30th June 2001, the keeper of the vehicle on that date;

(b) in the case of a licence that has ceased to be in force before that date, the keeper of the vehicle when the licence expired.

(5) For the purposes of paragraph (4) of this Resolution the keeper of the vehicle shall be taken to be—

(a) the person registered as keeper of the vehicle on the date in question, or

(b) if the Secretary of State has received notification of a change of ownership of the vehicle as a result of which another person is on that date entitled to be registered as the new keeper of the vehicle, that person.

(6) A refund shall only be made if an application is made for it in such form, and containing such particulars and supported by such documents, as the Secretary of State may require.

(7) The Secretary of State shall give notice in writing to any person appearing to him to be entitled to a refund—

(a) informing him that he appears to be entitled to a refund,

(b) enclosing an application form, and

(c) specifying the particulars and supporting documents to be provided.

(8) An application for, or the making of, a refund under this Resolution in respect of a licence shall not affect the validity of the licence.

(9) For the purposes of section 19 of the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 as it applies to the surrender on or after 1st July 2001 of a licence in respect of which a refund under this Resolution has been made, or applied for, the annual rate of duty chargeable on the licence shall be taken to be that which would have been chargeable if the amendment in paragraph (1) of this Resolution had applied.

(10) Section 45 of that Act shall apply to a declaration in connection with an application for a refund under this Resolution as it applies to a declaration in connection with an application for a vehicle licence.

(11) In the application of this Resolution to Northern Ireland, references to registration as the keeper of a vehicle shall be read as references to registration as the owner of the vehicle.

(12) This Resolution comes into force on 1st July 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

8 Vehicle excise duty (goods vehicles)

Resolved,

That provision may be made increasing rates of duty set out in Part VIII of Schedule 1 to the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994.

9 Vehicle excise duty (mobile pumping vehicles)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for mobile pumping vehicles to be special vehicles to which Part IV of Schedule 1 to the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 applies and for old mobile pumping vehicles not to be exempt vehicles for the purposes of that Act.

10 Vehicle excise duty (exemption of agricultural vehicles etc.)

Resolved,

That—

(1) The vehicles that are exempt vehicles for the purposes of the Vehicle Excise and Registration Act 1994 ("the 1994 Act") shall include—

(a) the vehicles that would, apart from this Resolution, be special concessionary vehicles for the purposes of Part IVA of Schedule 1 to the 1994 Act, and

(b) motorcycles (within the meaning given by paragraph 2 of that Schedule) that are electrically propelled vehicles for the purposes of the 1994 Act.

(2) Part IVA of that Schedule shall cease to have effect.

(3) In Part II of that Schedule, paragraph 2 shall be amended as follows—

(a) in sub-paragraph (1)(a), omit "or the motorcycle is an electrically propelled vehicle", and

(b) in sub-paragraph (3), in the definition of "motorcycle", after "motortricycle" insert "but does not include an electrically propelled vehicle".

(4) The provisions of paragraphs (1) to (3) above apply to licences issued on or after 1st April 2001.

(5) Paragraph (6) below applies where a licence—

(a) is issued before 1st April 2001 for a relevant vehicle, and

(b) is in force on 1st April 2001 or comes into force after 1st April 2001.

(6) The licence shall, during the period—

(a) beginning with the later of 1st April 2001 and the day when it comes into force, and

(b) ending with the expiry of the period for which it is issued,

be deemed to be a nil licence for the purposes of the 1994 Act.

(7) A refund shall be made by the Secretary of State, in accordance with the following provisions of this Resolution, in respect of a licence for a relevant vehicle that—

(a) is issued before 1st March 2001, in force on 1st March 2001 and not surrendered before 1st April 2001,

(b) is issued before 1st March 2001, comes into force after 1st March 2001 and is not surrendered before 1st April 2001, or

(c) is issued in March 2001 and not surrendered before 1st April 2001.

(8) The amount of the refund is one-twelfth of the annual rate of duty chargeable on the licence for—

(a) in the case of a licence issued before 1st March 2001, each whole month after February 2001 that forms part of the period for which the licence was issued, and

(b) in the case of a licence issued on or after 1st March 2001, each whole month of the period for which the licence is issued.

(9) The person entitled to the refund is the person registered as the keeper of the relevant vehicle on 30th April 2001.

(10) The provisions of sections 10(2) and 19 of the 1994 Act do not apply to a licence in respect of which a person is entitled to a refund under this Resolution.

(11) In the application of this Resolution to Northern Ireland, references to registration as the keeper of a vehicle shall be read as references to registration as the owner of the vehicle.

(12) In paragraphs (5) to (9) above "relevant vehicle" means a vehicle of the description mentioned in sub-paragraph (a) or (b) of paragraph (1) above.

(13) This Resolution comes into force on 1st April 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

11 Aggregates levy

Motion made, and Question put,

That provision may be made for charging a levy, to be known as aggregates levy, on aggregate subjected to commercial exploitation in the United Kingdom.

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): I ask the Serjeant at Arms to investigate the delay in the No Lobby.

The House having divided: Ayes 353, Noes 160.

Division No. 147] **[10.1 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun

Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Rt Hon Tom
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Liley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCrea, Dr William
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Swinney, John
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. James Gray and
Mr. Keith Simpson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

12 Income tax (charge and rates for 2001–02)

Motion made, and Question put,

That income tax shall be charged for the year 2001–02, and for that year—

(a) the starting rate shall be 10 per cent.;

(b) the basic rate shall be 22 per cent.; and

(c) the higher rate shall be 40 per cent.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

The House divided: Ayes 326, Noes 41.

Division No. 148] **[10.18 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCrea, Dr William
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Rt Hon Tom
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris

Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and
Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Allan, Richard
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chidgey, David
Cotter, Brian
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gidley, Sandra
Gorrie, Donald
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Keetch, Paul
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'rns)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Webb, Steve
Willis, Phil

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Andrew Stunell and
Mr. Adrian Sanders.

Question accordingly agreed to.

13 INCOME TAX (STARTING RATE LIMIT FOR 2001-02)

Resolved,

That—

(1) For the year 2001-02 the amount specified in section 1(2)(aa) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 shall be £1,880.

(2) Accordingly, section 1(4) of that Act, so far as it relates to the amount so specified, shall not apply for that year.

(3) Nothing in this Resolution shall require any change to be made in the amounts deductible or repayable under section 203 of that Act before 18th May 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

14 CHILDREN'S TAX CREDIT

Resolved,

That—

(1) In section 257AA(2) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 for "£4,420" there shall be substituted "£5,200".

(2) This Resolution has effect for the year 2001–02.

(3) Nothing in this Resolution shall require any change to be made in the amounts deductible or repayable under section 203 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 before 18th May 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

15 CORPORATION TAX (CHARGE AND RATE FOR 2002)

Resolved,

That, for the financial year 2002, corporation tax shall be charged at the rate of 30 per cent.

16 CORPORATION TAX (SMALL COMPANIES' RATE FOR 2001)

Resolved,

That, for the financial year 2001—

(a) the small companies' rate shall be 20 per cent., and

(b) the fraction mentioned in section 13(2) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 shall be one fortieth.

17 CORPORATION TAX (STARTING RATE FOR 2001)

Resolved,

That, for the financial year 2001—

(a) the corporation tax starting rate shall be 10 per cent., and

(b) the fraction mentioned in section 13AA(3) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 shall be one fortieth.

18 EMPLOYEE SHARE OWNERSHIP PLANS

Resolved,

That provision (including retrospective provision) may be made about employee share ownership plans.

19 ENTERPRISE INVESTMENT SCHEME

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending Chapter III of Part VII of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

20 LOSS RELIEF ON SHARES IN TRADING COMPANIES

Resolved,

That provision may be made about the circumstances in which companies that are wound up are to be treated as qualifying trading companies for the purposes of sections 573 to 576 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

21 CORPORATE VENTURING SCHEME

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending Schedule 15 to the Finance Act 2000.

22 CAPITAL ALLOWANCES

Resolved,

That provision (including retrospective provision) may be made about capital allowances.

23 Repeal of certain reliefs

Resolved,

That provision may be made for the repeal of sections 534, 535, 537A and 538 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

24 Payments to employers out of pension funds

Resolved,

That provision may be made as to the amount recoverable under section 601(2) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

25 Deductions for deemed manufactured payments

Resolved,

That—

(1) Section 736B of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 shall be amended as follows.

(2) In subsection (2), after "shall apply" there shall be inserted ", subject to subsection (2A) below,".

(3) After that subsection there shall be inserted—

"(2A) The borrower is not entitled, by virtue of anything in Schedule 23A or any provision of regulations under that Schedule, or otherwise—

(a) to any deduction in computing profits or gains for the purposes of income tax or corporation tax, or

(b) to any deduction against total income or, as the case may be, total profits,

in respect of any such deemed requirement or payment as is provided for by subsection (2) above.

Where the borrower is a company, an amount may not be surrendered by way of group relief if a deduction in respect of it is prohibited by this subsection.".

(4) This Resolution shall apply to payments treated under section 736B as made on or after 3rd October 2000.

26 Double taxation relief

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending Part XVIII of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

27 Controlled foreign companies

Resolved,

That provision may be made amending Part I of Schedule 25 to the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

28 Life policies etc.

Resolved,

That provision may be made about gains arising in connection with policies of life assurance, contracts for life annuities and capital redemption policies.

29 Deduction of tax (payments between companies etc.)

Resolved,

That—

(1) After section 349 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 there shall be inserted—

"Exceptions to section 349 for payments between companies etc

349A.—(1) The provisions specified in subsection (3) below (which require tax to be deducted on making certain payments) do not apply to a payment made by a company if, at the time the payment is made, the company reasonably believes that one of the conditions specified in section 349B is satisfied.

(2) Subsection (1) above has effect subject to any directions under section 349C.

(3) The provisions are—

section 349(1) (certain annuities and other annual payments, and royalties and other sums paid for use of UK patents),

section 349(2)(a) and (b) (UK interest),

section 349(3A) (dividend or interest on securities issued by building societies), and

section 524(3)(b) (which provides for section 349(1) to apply to proceeds of sale of UK patent rights).

(4) References in subsection (3) above to any provision of section 349 do not include that provision as applied—

(a) under section 777(9) (directions applying section 349(1) to certain payments to non-residents), or

(b) by paragraph 4(2) of Schedule 23A (manufactured overseas dividends to be treated as annual payments within section 349).

(5) References in this section to the company by which a payment is made do not include a company acting as trustee or agent for another person.

(6) For the purposes of this section, a payment by a partnership is treated as made by a company if any member of the partnership is a company.

The conditions mentioned in section 349A(1)

349B.—(1) The first of the conditions mentioned in section 349A(1) is that the person beneficially entitled to the income in respect of which the payment is made is—

(a) a company resident in the United Kingdom, or

(b) a partnership each member of which is a company resident in the United Kingdom.

(2) The second of those conditions is that—

(a) the person beneficially entitled to the income in respect of which the payment is made is a company not resident in the United Kingdom ("the non-resident company"),

(b) the non-resident company carries on a trade in the United Kingdom through a branch or agency, and

(c) the payment falls to be brought into account in computing the chargeable profits (within the meaning given by section 11(2)) of the non-resident company.

Directions disapplying section 349A(1)

349C.—(1) The Board may give a direction to a company directing that section 349A(1) is not to apply in relation to any payment that—

(a) is made by the company after the giving of the direction, and

(b) is specified in the direction or is of a description so specified.

(2) A direction under this section may be varied or revoked by a subsequent such direction.

(3) In this section "company" includes a partnership of which any member is a company.

Section 349A(1): consequences of reasonable but incorrect belief

349D.—(1) Where—

(a) a payment is made by a company without an amount representing the income tax on the payment being deducted from the payment,

(b) at the time the payment is made, the company reasonably believes that one of the conditions specified in section 349B is satisfied,

(c) if the company did not so believe, tax would be deductible from the payment under section 349, and

(d) neither of the conditions specified in section 349B is satisfied at the time the payment is made,

section 350 applies as if the payment were within section 349 (and Schedule 16 applies as if tax were deductible from the payment under section 349).

(2) In this section "company" includes a partnership of which any member is a company.".

(2) In section 98 of the Taxes Management Act 1970, after subsection (4) there shall be inserted—

"(4A) If—

(a) a failure to comply with section 350(1) of, or Schedule 16 to, the principal Act arises from a person's failure to deliver an account, or show the amount, of a payment, and

(b) the payment is within subsection (4B) below,

subsection (1) above shall have effect as if for "£300" there were substituted "£3,000" and as if for "£60" there were substituted "£600".

(4B) A payment is within this subsection if—

(a) the payment is made by a company without an amount representing the income tax on the payment being deducted from the payment,

(b) at the time the payment is made, the company—

(i) does not believe that either of the conditions specified in section 349B of the principal Act is satisfied, or

(ii) where it believes that either of those conditions is satisfied, could not reasonably so believe,

(c) the payment is one from which tax is deductible under section 349 of the principal Act unless the company reasonably believes that one of those conditions is satisfied, and

(d) neither of those conditions is satisfied at the time the payment is made.

(4C) In subsection (4B) above "company" includes a partnership of which any member is a company.".

(3) In section 338(4) of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988, after paragraph (a) there shall be inserted—

"(aa) the person beneficially entitled to the income in respect of which the payment is made is a company not resident in the United Kingdom ("the non-resident company"), the non-resident company carries on a trade in the United Kingdom through a branch or agency and the payment falls to be brought into account in computing the chargeable profits (within the meaning given by section 11(2)) of the non-resident company, or".

(4) This Resolution applies to payments made on or after 1st April 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

30 Deduction of tax (payments between group members)

Resolved,

That provision may be made for repealing sections 247 and 248 of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988.

31 Provisional repayments

Resolved,

That provision may be made for section 438A of, and Schedule 19AB to, the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 to cease to apply in relation to income tax borne by deduction.

32 Payments where return amended

Resolved,

That provision may be made about payments due as a result of the amendment of a return.

33 Stamp duty reserve tax (unit trust schemes)

Resolved,

That—

(1) Schedule 19 to the Finance Act 1999 shall be amended as follows.

(2) In paragraph 2(4), after "6" there shall be inserted ", 6A".

(3) In paragraph 4, at the end there shall be inserted—

"(6) If a certificate is given in accordance with paragraph 6A(1)(c) in respect of a period which includes the relevant two-week period in the case of the unit in question in sub-paragraph (1), there shall be left out of account in applying this paragraph in relation to that unit—

(a) any issue of a unit which is to be held within an individual pension account, and

(b) any surrender of a unit which, immediately before the surrender, was held within an individual pension account.

(7) "Individual pension account" has the same meaning in sub-paragraph (6) as it has in paragraph 6A.".

(4) After paragraph 6 there shall be inserted—

"Exclusion of charge in case of individual pension accounts

6A.—(1) There is no charge to tax under this Part of this Schedule on the surrender of the unit if—

(a) immediately before the surrender, the unit is held within an individual pension account,

(b) not all the units under the unit trust scheme are so held at that time, and

(c) a certificate pursuant to sub-paragraph (2) is contained in, or provided with, the relevant monthly tax return.

(2) The certificate must be given by the persons making the relevant monthly tax return and must state—

(a) that at all times in the period to which the return relates the trustees or managers were able to identify which of the units under the scheme were held within individual pension accounts, and

(b) that at no time in that period have the trustees or managers imposed any charge on, or recovered any amount from, an IPA unit holder which included an amount directly or indirectly attributable to tax payable by the trustees under this Part of this Schedule.

(3) In sub-paragraph (2), "IPA unit holder" means—

(a) a person acquiring, or who has acquired, a unit under the unit trust scheme, where the unit is to be held within an individual pension account,

(b) a person holding a unit under the scheme, where the unit is held within an individual pension account, or

(c) a person surrendering, or who has surrendered, a unit under the scheme, where immediately before the surrender the unit is or was held within an individual pension account.

(4) In this paragraph—

"individual pension account" has the same meaning as in regulations under section 638A of the Taxes Act 1988 (as at 6th April 2001, see regulation 4 of the Personal Pension Schemes (Restriction on Discretion to Approve) (Permitted Investments) Regulations 2001);

"the relevant monthly tax return", in the case of any surrender, means the notice required by regulations under section 98 of the Finance Act 1986 to be given by the managers (or, failing that, the trustees) under the unit trust scheme to the Commissioners of Inland Revenue containing among other things details of all surrenders in the relevant two-week period;

"the relevant two-week period" has the meaning given by paragraph 4(2).".

(5) The amendment made by paragraph (3) of this Resolution shall have effect where the relevant two-week period mentioned in paragraph 4(1) of Schedule 19 to the Finance Act 1999 ends after 6th April 2001.

(6) The other amendments made by this Resolution shall have effect in relation to surrenders made or effected on or after 6th April 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

34 Stamp duty reserve tax (open-ended investment companies)

Resolved,

That—

(1) Where there are two or more classes of shares in an open-ended investment company and the company's instrument of incorporation—

(a) provides that shares of one or more of those classes ("the IPA classes") may only be held within an individual pension account, and

(b) does not make such provision in relation to shares of at least one other class,

there is no charge to stamp duty reserve tax under Part II of Schedule 19 to the Finance Act 1999 on the surrender of a share of any of the IPA classes.

(2) References in this Resolution to provisions of Schedule 19 to the Finance Act 1999 are references to those provisions as they have effect in relation to open-ended investment companies by virtue of regulations from time to time in force under section 152 of the Finance Act 1995.

(3) In this Resolution—

"individual pension account" has the same meaning as it has in regulations from time to time in force under section 638A of the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988;

"open-ended investment company" has the meaning given by paragraph 14(2) of Schedule 19 to the Finance Act 1999;

"surrender", in relation to a share in an open-ended investment company, has the same meaning as it has in Part II of Schedule 19 to the Finance Act 1999.

(4) This Resolution shall have effect in relation to surrenders made or effected on or after 6th April 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

35 Petroleum revenue tax

Resolved,

That provision may be made for the purposes of petroleum revenue tax about—

(a) the expenditure allowable under section 3 of the Oil Taxation Act 1975; and

(b) the amounts allowable as unrelievable field losses.

36 Landfill tax (rate)

Motion made, and Question put,

That—

(1) In section 42(1)(a) and (2) of the Finance Act 1996, for "£11" there shall be substituted "£12".

(2) This Resolution has effect in relation to taxable disposals made, or treated as made, on or after 1st April 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

The House divided: Ayes 359, Noes 146.

Division No. 149] **[10.30 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick

Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Rt Hon Tom
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winnick, David
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Mr. Clive Betts.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, Rt Hon Sir Edward
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert

Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCrea, Dr William
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
Mcintosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. John Randall and
Mr. James Gray.

Question accordingly agreed to.

37 Climate change levy

Resolved,

That—

(1) In Schedule 6 to the Finance Act 2000, after paragraph 11 there shall be inserted—

"Exemption: supplies by Northern Ireland gas utilities

11A. A supply of any gas is exempt from the levy if—

(a) the supply is made by a gas utility, and

(b) the person to whom the supply is made intends to cause the gas to be burned in Northern Ireland.".

(2) In paragraph 14(2) of that Schedule, at the end there shall be inserted ", and

(c) uses the electricity produced otherwise than in exemption-retaining ways.".

(3) For paragraph 14(3)(c) of that Schedule, there shall be substituted—

"(c) uses the electricity produced otherwise than in exemption-retaining ways.".

(4) In paragraph 14 of that Schedule, after sub-paragraph (3) there shall be inserted—

"(3A) For the purposes of this paragraph, electricity is used in an "exemption-retaining" way if it is used—

(a) in making supplies that are excluded under paragraphs 8 to 10 or exempt under any of paragraphs 11, 12 and 18, or

(b) in any of the ways mentioned in sub-paragraphs (i) to (iv) of paragraph 13(b).".

(5) In paragraph 15 of that Schedule—

(a) in sub-paragraph (1)(a), for "the commodity is to be used by that person" there shall be substituted "that person intends to cause the commodity to be used"; and

(b) in sub-paragraph (2)(b), the words "by that person" shall be omitted.

(6) This Resolution shall have effect in relation to supplies made on or after 1st April 2001.

And it is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

38 Relief from tax (incidental and consequential charges)

Resolved,

That it is expedient to authorise any incidental or consequential charges to any duty or tax (including charges having retrospective effect) which may arise from provisions designed in general to afford relief from taxation.

PROCEDURE (REMEDIATION OF CONTAMINATED LAND)

Resolved,

That, notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills, any Finance Bill of the present Session may contain provision for allowing the making of payments in respect of the surrender of losses the amounts of which are determined by reference to expenditure incurred in connection with the remediation of contaminated land.

PROCEDURE (TRADING FUNDS: LIMITS ON BORROWING AND PUBLIC DIVIDEND CAPITAL)

Resolved,

That, notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills, any Finance Bill of the present Session may contain provision amending section 2C(3) and (4) of the Government Trading Funds Act 1973.

PROCEDURE (FUTURE TAXATION)

Resolved,

That, notwithstanding anything to the contrary in the practice of the House relating to the matters that may be included in Finance Bills, any Finance Bill of the present Session may contain the following provisions taking effect in a future year—

(a) provision about children's tax credit;

(b) provision for corporation tax to be charged for the financial year 2002;

(c) provision about mileage allowances;

(d) provision withdrawing capital allowances in respect of vehicles provided by employees and office-holders;

(e) provision about works bus services;

(f) provision amending section 48(2)(a) of the Finance (No.2) Act 1997;

(g) provision as to the obligations of insurers to provide information in connection with policies of life assurance, contracts for life annuities and capital redemption policies; and

(h) provision relating to Schedule 19AB to the Income and Corporation Taxes Act 1988 as applied in relation to provisional repayments to insurance companies and friendly societies in respect of tax credits.

FINANCE [*Money*]

Queen's Recommendation having been signified—

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Finance Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(a) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of sums payable by the Secretary of State by virtue of provisions of that Act relating to vehicle excise and registration;

(b) the deduction of sums from the gross revenues of the department of the Commissioners of Inland Revenue for the purpose of making payments in respect of the surrender of losses the amounts of which are determined by reference to expenditure incurred in connection with the remediation of contaminated land; and

(c) any increase in the sums—

(i) payable out of the National Loans Fund or out of money provided by Parliament, or

(ii) payable into the National Loans Fund or the Consolidated Fund,

that is attributable to any provisions of that Act relating to limits on the borrowing and public dividend capital of trading funds.

Bill ordered to be brought in upon the foregoing resolutions: And that the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Prescott, Mr. Secretary Straw, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Mr. Secretary Darling, Mr. Secretary Byers, Mr. Secretary Milburn, Mr. Andrew Smith, Dawn Primarolo, Miss Melanie Johnson and Mr. Stephen Timms do prepare and bring it in.

FINANCE BILL

Mr. Stephen Timms accordingly presented a Bill to grant certain duties, to alter other duties, and to amend the law relating to the National Debt and the Public Revenue, and to make further provision in connection with Finance: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 63].

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

That, at this day's sitting, the Business of the House Motion in the name of Margaret Beckett, and the Motions on Sittings in Westminster Hall and Delegated Legislation may be proceeded with, though opposed, until any hour.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Question agreed to.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 163 (House to sit in private):—

The House divided: Ayes 0, Noes 364.

Division No. 150] **[10.46 pm**

AYES

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Andrew Dismore and
Mr. Keith Darvill.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cook, Rt Hon Robin *(Livingston)*
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy

Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCrea, Dr William
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Rt Hon Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Rt Hon Tom
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shepherd, Richard
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Snape, Peter
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swinney, John
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Wilson, Brian
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Lawrie Quinn and
Mr. John McWilliam.

Question accordingly negatived.

Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism

10.59 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): I beg to move,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 28th February, be approved.

The Terrorism Act 2000 was passed by this House and the other place with very wide support, and came into force on 19 February. It provides new permanent and United Kingdom-wide legislation that is proportionate to the threat that the UK faces, and may face, from all forms of terrorism.

The Terrorism Act 2000 brings our provisions into line with the European convention on human rights and ensures that we are better able to deal with the serious threat that terrorism poses.

My right hon. and hon. Friends will recall that during the many debates on the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Acts in previous Parliaments, particular concern was expressed about the fact that the Executive had power to extend detentions and also about exclusion orders. Changes were made to both those provisions under the Terrorism Act 2000. Under the 2000 Act, extensions of detention are now handled and have to be decided by members of the judiciary, and the provisions for exclusion orders were not included in the new Act. As a result, the derogations that the Government had to extend to the European convention on human rights and the international covenant on civil and political rights because our provisions were not in line with our international obligations were lifted on 26 February 2001.

At the same time, when the 2000 Act came into force, we were able to ratify the remaining two of the 12 extant United Nations conventions relating to terrorism—the convention for the suppression of terrorist bombings and the convention for the suppression of the financing of terrorism. Our obligations, therefore, are in respect of human rights and the liberty of the subject—even where those subjects have been involved in terrorism—which is entirely proper. They are also in respect of significant United Nations conventions obliging all signatories to take better steps against terrorism.

An important part of the Act that came into force on 19 February makes available, for the first time, the power to enable the Secretary of State to proscribe terrorist organisations concerned in international or domestic terrorism, and not just those concerned only in terrorism connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland. Organisations that had previously been proscribed under the earlier legislation in respect of Northern Ireland were proscribed by schedule 2 to the Act, and they remain so proscribed. In passing the Terrorism Bill into law, Parliament gave its support to extending the proscription regime in this way.

We discussed at some length why it was necessary to extend proscription. The view that this House and the other place accepted—it is the view of the Government—was that such powers were necessary to ensure that the United Kingdom did not become, or continue to be, a base for international terrorists or their supporters.

The draft order that we are debating—the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2001—was laid before Parliament on 28 February. It lists 21 international terrorist organisations which, in my considered judgment, should be subject to proscription in the United Kingdom.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Gentleman has made it plain that there are 21 organisations which he thinks should be proscribed. I thought that there were 23, but we will not argue about that. I have read, as no doubt have many other right hon. and hon. Members, the letter dated 28 February which explains the process. Will the right hon. Gentleman say, in relation to each organisation that is identified as "to be proscribed", whether he has satisfied himself that there is sufficient evidence from the intelligence agencies or elsewhere to justify the assertions of fact set out in the list with which we have been provided? Otherwise, we do not know the basis on which we are being asked to make a proscription.

Mr. Straw: The answer to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's question is yes. I went through the documentation and submissions at considerable length. I devoted a lot of time to them, as it was necessary and proper to do. We were under no obligation to provide any details about why I had reached that judgment, but the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke) and I believed that it would be convenient for the House if we provided a synopsis of such information as we could make public concerning my reasons for coming to those conclusions.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife) *rose—*

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) *rose—*

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I should like to make some progress and then I will happily give way to right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House.

I will explain the basis for coming to those decisions. Under section 3 of the 2000 Act, I—or in the case of organisations concerned only in terrorism connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—have the power to proscribe any organisation that I come to believe is concerned in terrorism. Under section 3,

"an organisation is concerned in terrorism if it . . . commits or participates in acts of terrorism . . . prepares for terrorism . . . promotes or encourages terrorism, or . . . is otherwise concerned in terrorism."

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr. Straw: I will make a little progress first.

An organisation is defined in section 121 of the Act as including

"any association or combination of persons."

Having satisfied the statutory criteria in any particular case, I then have discretion as to which organisations should be recommended to Parliament for proscription.

In considering which such organisations should be so proscribed, I took into account a number of factors, including those indicated to Parliament by Ministers

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during proceedings on the Terrorism Bill, which included the nature and scale of the organisation's activities; the specific threat that it poses to the United Kingdom; the specific threat that it poses to British nationals overseas; the extent of the organisation's presence in the UK; and the need to support other members of the international community in the global fight against terrorism.

Mr. Wilshire: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I will continue for a moment and then I will do so.

Depending on the organisation concerned and its sphere of operation, certain factors will have carried more weight than others. As far as possible, however, I considered each organisation on a similar basis to ensure a consistency of approach.

As I mentioned, to assist consideration by both Houses all hon. Members and noble Lords were sent a brief summary in respect of each organisation named in the draft order. As right hon. and hon. Members will appreciate, in reaching my decisions, in addition to that information which is in the public domain, I have had access to related intelligence-based material on the various organisations and taken account of police, security and legal advice. I am entirely satisfied that the organisations that I am recommending to Parliament for proscription are "concerned in terrorism" and thus fully meet the criteria laid down in the 2000 Act.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I will give way to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell).

Mr. Menzies Campbell: Does the Secretary of State understand the discomfort that some of us feel at the notion that 21 organisations should appear in the motion that we are debating, and that there has not been an opportunity to deal with each on an individual and separate basis? In particular, does he understand the discomfort that I feel, as someone who consistently supported the terrorism legislation so far as it affected Northern Ireland that, on the subject of the 17 November Revolutionary Organisation—the last on the list—under the heading "Representation and activities in the United Kingdom", we read from the letter that

"There is no indication that N17 has any representation in the UK."

In those circumstances, can the Home Secretary explain why he considers it necessary that that organisation should be proscribed?

Mr. Straw: On the first question, I understand the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point, but I suggest that, had the House and the other place wished there to be separate orders for each organisation, they would have so agreed and so proposed. As it happens, the current procedure was agreed and I suggest that it is a practical way forward. I will also draw attention to the opportunities for organisations or their representatives to make representations to me for de-proscription and, if I refuse to accept the case for that, to appeal to an independent judicial—

Mr. Hogg: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I will not. I am dealing with the second matter raised by the right hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife. He raised the fact that it states in the last sentence of the note on page 14:

"There is no indication that N17 has any representation in the UK."

However, the list that I read out of the factors that I take into account, which build on the criteria in section 3 of the Act, included the specific threat that the organisation poses to British nationals overseas. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman will be aware, the previous paragraph on page 14 refers to the fact that in June 2000 N17 murdered Brigadier Stephen Saunders, the British defence attaché in Athens. The group has also carried out numerous small-scale attacks in Greece on the interests of EU and NATO members, including a rocket attack on HMS Ark Royal while it was docked at Piraeus in 1994.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the possibility that mistakes could have occurred in the list? Only today, we were lobbied by one or two organisations. Does he agree that the list undoubtedly includes some of the most notorious terrorist groups? I see no reason at all why they should not be on the list. If we did not introduce such measures, it would be difficult for us to lecture other countries about terrorism—we would be allowing the United Kingdom to be a base for terrorist action.

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those comments. He has constantly supported the Act and has always understood that the defence of freedom requires us also to be vigilant against terrorism. I do not believe that mistakes have been made—in the end, that is, of course, a matter of judgment. Certainly, no organisation was included in the list by error or inadvertence, given the care taken by my officials and—may I say—by me. However, if an organisation feels that it has been unfairly included in the list, there is every opportunity to make representations about that—as I shall explain in more detail.

Mr. Jim Marshall (Leicester, South): I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell); it is unfortunate that we cannot debate each organisation on the list. By not doing so, we cannot differentiate between those mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and other organisations. I remind my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary that there is grave disquiet in the Sikh community about the inclusion of the International Sikh Youth Federation. That organisation is active in my constituency and I have been involved with it.

I have two questions. First, if an organisation applies to my right hon. Friend to be de-proscribed, will all the information available to him also be available to the organisation, so that it can make a point-by-point refutation? Secondly, will my right hon. Friend tell the House how much pressure has been put on him and the Government by the Government of India to include organisations in the prevention of terrorism list?

Mr. Straw: I shall deal with my hon. Friend's second point first. It is well known and a matter of public record

that, over the years, a large number of Governments—including the Government of India—have made representation to the British Government concerning the need for such powers. As to whether that resulted in pressure being brought to bear on me to exercise my discretion unfairly, the answer is no.

I applied myself to the evidence before me. That leads to my hon. Friend's first question. He asks whether the information on which I based my judgments—which are before the House—could be made available to organisations that make representations. The answer is no—for a very good reason. A great deal of such information cannot be placed in the public domain because it is sensitive intelligence. It may be sensible for me to explain how the process will operate both for representations for de-proscription and for appeals to the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission.

Any organisation seeking de-proscription can, at any time while it is subject to inclusion on the list, make representation to me, as Secretary of State. The representations do not have to be made by individuals who have a direct association with the organisation, but can be made on behalf of the organisation. That is an important protection.

Representations can be made to me. We have provided a basic summary, as fairly as we can, of the facts taken into account in making the initial decision—I accept that the summary only goes into brief detail. I shall consider such representations carefully. I shall of course take into account representations made in the House today, as well as any others that are made by right. hon. and hon. Members. I shall then come to a decision on de-proscription. If I decide to de-proscribe, that is the end of the matter. The organisation is de-proscribed by order. The matter is not burdensome for any individual; it is subject only to the negative resolution procedure. That is straightforward. If, however, I decide to maintain the proscription, the organisation has a right of appeal to the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission.

Mr. Hogg: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: If the right hon. and learned Gentleman will allow me,I shall continue to explain how that organisation—

Mr. Hogg: After that, will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: It depends whether I have time to give way to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, given that I have already given way to him. I am normally very indulgent of his wishes, but others also want to get in.

The Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission is a new independent judicial tribunal to consider these appeals. The commission will consider any refusals to de-proscribe in the light of judicial review principles. The substantive basis for appeals is different from that in a parallel organisation called the Special Immigration Appeals Commission, but procedurally it has been modelled on that latter commission. That latter commission, which operates in a very similar way, although the basis for appeal is different, has clearly demonstrated its independence from Government in the cases that it has had to consider.

Mr. Wilshire: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: No. If I may, I shall explain this point to the House and then give way to the hon. Gentleman.

The Special Immigration Appeals Commission exists to deal with decisions by the Home Secretary of the day to exclude individuals from this country on national security grounds, where those individuals have a right to remain in this country. After a decision is made to exclude, the individual makes an appeal. Because the decision has been made on the basis of intelligence that cannot be disclosed, the individual concerned cannot see that intelligence, but all the information must be disclosed to the independent appeal commission and a special advocate is appointed to the appeal commission, to scrutinise in very close detail—

Mr. Hogg: Not on the merits.

Mr. Straw: I am sorry, but as far as the Special Immigration Appeals Commission is concerned, it is on the merits. I have already drawn the distinction in terms—

Mr. Hogg: But not on this commission.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The right hon. and learned Gentleman must not intervene from a sedentary position.

Mr. Hogg *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Hogg: I am rising to—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr. Hogg: I am rising to apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but of course I would not have had to intervene from a sedentary position if the Home Secretary had given way.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The occupant of the Chair does not appreciate that kind of intervention, even when it is addressed as an apology.

Mr. Straw: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) knows very well that I do my best to give way to as many hon. Members as possible, but I have to give way to other people before I give way to him two or three times. I have already dealt with his point.

Mr. Wilshire *rose—*

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I want to finish the point, and then I shall give way to the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) and my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn); I promise.

[Mr. Straw]

A special advocate appears on behalf of the individual before the SIAC or the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission to scrutinise all the evidence before those special commissions, and to cross-examine the witnesses who go before it. The SIAC has worked entirely independently of Government, and in at least three cases decisions that I have made to exclude people on national security grounds have been overturned, including two cases in respect of two individuals who, although they were accepted as Sikh terrorists, were not deported because the commission was not satisfied about their safety were they to be returned to India, and therefore decided not to accept my decision that they should be deported.

Mr. Wilshire: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for keeping his promise; it is exactly what I would expect of him and I do not wish to quarrel with the list that he brings here. May I take him back to his list and to the Terrorism Act 2000, because that is when I started to try to let him give me a chance to ask him this question?

I had expected to see the Real IRA on the list in the order because I knew that it was not in the Act, so I went back to the original list, where I saw the Irish Republican Army listed. I am confused and I should be most grateful if the right hon. Gentleman would help us with this matter, because I doubt whether there is anyone in the Chamber who would disagree with the assertion that the Real IRA should be a proscribed organisation. The Terrorism Act 2000 simply refers to the Irish Republican Army. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell the House what that means? Does it mean the Official IRA, the Provisional IRA, the Real IRA or the Continuity IRA? Which of them is included, or are they all? The House needs to know whether any body that may have been invented this afternoon is included, because, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, those organisations dress themselves up in any sort of name to try to show that they are not the same.

Mr. Straw: I am advised by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that the Real IRA is covered, as is the Provisional IRA, by the description, "the Irish Republican Army", which appears at the beginning of schedule 2 on page 64 of the Act.

Mr. Corbyn: I thank the Home Secretary for giving way. As I understand the process, he proposes to ban 21 organisations on the basis of information that he has received from the security services and, possibly, other sources, and those decisions could go to the appeal organisations that he describes. In the event that any one of those organisations attempted to take his decision, or that of the appeal commission that he has set up, to judicial review, would the security information on which he has based his initial decision be available in open court so that it could be contested, or would it be privy to himself and the judge so that the appellant organisation would not even know what the case was against it?

Mr. Straw: First, given that the criteria on which the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission considers whether to de-proscribe an organisation can themselves come under judicial review, it is not for me to decide—I merely speculate—but it is unlikely that there would be grounds to seek a judicial review of the process before the administrative court. It would be hard to envisage circumstances in which the merits of a decision could be challenged, unless there were some major defect of process.

In the event that such a circumstance occurred, it would not be the case that, simply by virtue of an application or permission—as it is now called—before the administrative court being granted for judicial review, that the intelligence on which I have to some extent, but not entirely, based my decisions could be disclosed. Where such matters have arisen in the past—they do so quite frequently—the appropriate Secretary of State signs a public interest immunity certificate.

By that process, all the information that the applicant Secretary of State seeks to withhold from open court is put before the judge. The judge then decides whether to accept the PII. If the judge decides, as occasionally happens, to reject the PII application and to order that the information be disclosed, the Secretary of State must decide whether to proceed with the substance of the application. That is how the process works.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion) *rose—*

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Straw: I shall finish this point before giving way to the hon. Gentleman.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) will appreciate, as I am sure he does, that, by definition, intelligence information cannot be disclosed publicly, because doing so would render its collection impossible and put the sources of that intelligence at very serious risk. However, I understand the implication of what he says. One of the inherent problems in such a process, which we have tried to square with the SIAC and POAC processes, is that if the intelligence cannot be challenged, its veracity is more difficult to ascertain. That is why, although the information will be withheld from the applicant organisation, it will be challenged rigorously before the SIAC by the special advocate.

Mr. Hughes: The Home Secretary has confirmed, first, that even if he forms a view that an organisation is a terrorist organisation, he has discretion about whether to proscribe it. Secondly, he could have, but has not, sought the formal view of the Security and Intelligence Committee or that of any independent judicial authority, so he comes here with the proposals with no authority, other than that of his office and his Ministers. Lastly, on the question of how many of the 21 organisations, have there been formal representations from foreign Governments? In how many cases have the organisations or their representatives been asked for information before the Secretary of State made his decision?

Mr. Straw: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I have not consulted the Security and Intelligence Committee. It knows about the process and was informed in advance of the decisions, but it has not been involved in reaching judgments. That is not its role. It would be quite

inappropriate if it were to be embroiled in Executive decisions. The process that has been established by this House and the other place—with my full endorsement and recommendation—is that it should be an Executive decision subject to proper scrutiny and the kind of appeal on judicial review backgrounds that I have already described. I should have added in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North that there can be an appeal on a point of law to the appeal courts in any event against a ruling by the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey asked me if I could list all the Governments who have made representations seeking to proscribe the organisations. The answer is no, but it is in the public domain that a large number of Governments in the originating territories have made public statements seeking the proscription of the equivalent of these organisations by Governments across the world.

On the hon. Gentleman's question about whether I will disclose the degree of liaison that exists with security and intelligence services overseas, for reasons that I think he will understand, the answer to that is no.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) and then I want to close my remarks, so that other hon. Members have the opportunity to speak.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): May I pursue my right hon. Friend about the point on the verification of intelligence specifically in relation to the example of the International Sikh Youth Federation that was cited? Sikhs in my constituency have made representations to me—I suspect that many other hon. Members have received similar representations—and have pointed out that Mukhtiar and Paramjit Singh, who were accused of acts of terrorism, are not members of the International Sikh Youth Federation. The organisation itself has made it clear that they are not, and have not been, members of the organisation.

The other charges that have been cited against the organisation do not make sense if the connections do not exist. Sikhs raise money in the United Kingdom, but they do so for entirely social purposes. That is consistent with other observations that there is no evidence of a threat to the west from the organisation's activities. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House how intelligence sources or representations from other Governments are checked against other sources that might provide a different picture about the credibility and integrity of that organisation?

Mr. Dennis Turner (Wolverhampton, South-East) *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not possible to intervene on an intervention. The Home Secretary must be allowed to reply to the first intervention.

Mr. Straw: I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-East (Mr. Turner) if he first allows me to answer the other point.

The paragraphs in the document are based on the best information available. Is every effort made to check intelligence sources and the information derived from those sources? Yes, and to a degree that I did not anticipate before I took on this job. Very great care is taken on the assessment of intelligence. Intelligence that is wrong is worse than worthless; it can be extremely dangerous. In human organisations errors can sometimes be made, which is why we have the process that I have described beyond the decisions that I recommend to the House.

Although the criteria for appeals to the POAC are different from and narrower than the criteria for appeals to the SIAC, the process is very similar indeed. The presiding retired judges and special advocates have already shown, through the SIAC process, that they are rigorous and entirely independent of Government, and I expect the same to be true in this process.

Mr. Turner: I appreciate the opportunity to intervene. We all realise that these are weighty matters, and that my right hon. Friend finds himself in a difficult position in his very responsible job. I appreciate that the appeals mechanism will give organisations the right to make representations, but I would be failing in my duty as a constituency Member for Wolverhampton, which has a large Sikh population and an active membership of the International Sikh Youth Federation, if I did not ask my right hon. Friend to recognise that the people whom I represent—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman and to those who intervened earlier that interventions are getting longer and longer. The hon. Gentleman has made his point. I remind all hon. Members that this is a debate and they will have the chance to make their contributions, if there is time.

Mr. Turner *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman ought to stop there.

Mr. Straw: Of course I understand my hon. Friend's concerns, and throughout this process I have sought to balance such concerns against the evidence before me.

Mr. Simon Thomas: At least one of the 21 organisations on the list has been on a ceasefire for 18 months. How will the Secretary of State review the list? Will he seek to de-proscribe organisations if ceasefires hold? How can individuals who support those organisations take part in the appeals process? If the organisations are proscribed, they may be seen as supporting terrorism, so how can they raise funds for an appeal?

Mr. Straw: The criteria for proscription are laid down in section 3 of the Act. I have also given information about the tests that I have adopted in addition to those criteria. The fact that a terrorist organisation is on a ceasefire for the time being does not, in itself, mean that it is no longer a terrorist organisation. Although the Irish Republican Army, including the Provisional IRA, has been on a ceasefire for some time, it is still on the list of proscribed organisations. If the organisation concerned

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wishes to make representations to the effect that its ceasefire is so permanent and durable that it has ceased to be a terrorist organisation, that is another matter.

I turn now to the hon. Gentleman's second point, about the humanitarian and fund-raising activities of some of the organisations or bodies associated with them, which has been implicit in many interventions. I cannot stress too strongly to the House that the provisions of the Act are not aimed at any specific community or at those protesting in a peaceful, non-violent way against alleged injustices or for political change. Nor are they aimed at those raising funds for legitimate social or humanitarian purposes. I recognise that some terrorists and their supporters might seek to operate under the cover of legitimate organisations that are, perhaps, promoting political change by non-violent means and that some well-meaning people associated with those organisations have nothing whatever to do with terrorism. Those people have nothing to fear from the new legislation.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: Yes, but I should be grateful if my hon. Friend's intervention were brief.

Dr. Starkey: Will my right hon. Friend clarify the status of information on each organisation in his letter to Members of Parliament? He will know that I am concerned about the section on Hezbollah attacks, which includes an attack by Lebanese nationals against armed forces illegally in occupation of Lebanon. Is he suggesting that that should count as a terrorist activity? Does that imply that we support the illegal occupation of Lebanon?

Mr. Straw: I have discussed this formally with my hon. Friend and yesterday she saw the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South, about it. The information on organisations is nothing more than that. It is a synopsis of what can be made public to explain why I reached the decisions that I did.

We are not seeking to proscribe Hezbollah and Hamas generally. Both organisations are political movements and, just as Sinn Fein is not proscribed, neither are they. We have tried to proscribe—according to one's point of view—their military or terrorist wings, in this case, the Lebanese Hizballah External Security Organisation and the Hamas-Izz al-Din al-Qassem Brigades.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) *rose—*

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: No, I will not give way.

We have tried to be careful and to apply ourselves only to section 3.

Fiona Mactaggart: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Straw: No, I am sorry, but I must finish.

I appreciate hon. Members' concerns. I hope that the House will accept that I have tried to deal with the issue with great care, as is appropriate. In our view, the draft order is compatible with the rights set out in the European convention on human rights. It represents a fair, just and proportionate response to the threats from international terrorism. I commend the order to the House, but I shall listen carefully to representations and try to respond.

11.37 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): The House only has one and a half hours for such an important debate and, as many hon. Members want to contribute, I intend to be brief. I am grateful to the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for making their Ministers available to the Opposition during discussions on what is a difficult subject. I associate the Opposition with the Home Secretary's remarks about terrorism. We do not intend to oppose the order.

We fully support the Government's measures to deal with the destabilising menace of international terrorism. The increasing globalisation of recent years has made it much easier for international terrorist groups to move their operations from country to country. The revolution in communications technology and the internationalisation of financial markets have also made it much easier for such organisations to operate across the globe. We agree with the right hon. Gentleman that the United Kingdom should not offer sanctuary to those who use unacceptable violence to achieve their ends. We also agree that the measures are necessary and timely. We support his actions.

I am also grateful to the Home Secretary for setting out the background. Will he expand on the opportunity that the organisations that are named in the order have had to object? Have any objected and, if so, in what terms?

Mr. Hogg: Does my right hon. Friend understand the anxiety of some Conservative Members? The appeal process in section 5 of the Terrorism Act 2000 is not based on merits. As the Home Secretary rightly said, there is only a power to have a judicial review, which can ask whether he has acted reasonably. That is different from a review on the merits of whether an organisation should be proscribed.

Miss Widdecombe: Yes, I accept that entirely, which is why I was starting to probe the Government on the opportunities that named organisations might have had to object and make representations, either directly or through others on their behalf. If so, have there been representations on the merits of the decisions taken?

The Home Secretary gave a rather cursory answer—that is not meant critically, but relates to the time available—in response to one intervention. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) may wish to return to the subject in any remarks that he may make. I should be grateful if the Home Secretary would respond because it is clearly right in the interests of justice that that those who are named and proscribed should have the opportunity to make representations to the opposite effect.

Mr. Winnick: Mention has been made of the International Sikh Youth Federation, which may well

have a case. Hence my intervention on the Home Secretary in which I said that mistakes could have been made. Nevertheless, does the right hon. Lady accept, as I pointed out earlier, that some of the organisations named in the order are notorious terrorist organisations? Surely, it would be farcical to ask organisations such as the 17 November Revolutionary Organisation and other terrorist organisations for their views, especially bearing in mind the latest murder carried out by N17.

Miss Widdecombe: I was not trying to make that case at all. I was trying to probe the Secretary of State on the issue. Reasons for proscribing are properly set out in an annexe that describes the various organisations. However, bearing in mind the fact that one or two objections have been made and that there is slight concern about some organisations, I wanted to probe the Home Secretary on the opportunity for representations—even for hon. Members to make representations on behalf of groups or in response to representations that they had received.

I was not seeking to take the matter much further than that, and I would be amazed if the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) objected to people having the right to make representations.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): We would all welcome the military wing of, respectively, Hezbollah, Hammas and the Abu Nidal Organisation being proscribed, but a few hon. Members would have doubts about Mujaheddin e Khalq, which is attempting to impose—if that is the word—a democratic regime in Iran. I would welcome responses from my right hon. Friend and the Home Secretary, in his winding-up speech, on whether the MEK has had discussions with the Home Office about whether or not it should be proscribed.

Miss Widdecombe: I am sure that my hon. Friend understands that the Home Secretary must answer that question, not me. I cannot possibly know what representations the Home Office has received, although in a few weeks' time I expect to receive that information on a regular basis.

Does the Home Secretary have any plans at present to include—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry, I am endeavouring to ask the right hon. Gentleman a question. Does he have any plans at present to include any further terrorist organisations, either international or domestic, in the list of proscribed organisations? I should also be grateful to know what action he envisages taking against the funding arrangements of proscribed organisations.

In addition to the destabilising effect of the international terrorism groups mentioned in the order, recent events have highlighted the constant danger of terrorism in the United Kingdom. The Opposition feel as strongly as anyone else that tough measures are essential to deal with that danger. Will the Home Secretary therefore enlarge on his earlier answer about the Real IRA and Continuity IRA?

The list of proscribed organisations in schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act 2000 includes the Irish Republican Army, but does not make a distinction between the Provisional IRA and the so-called Real IRA. I think that the Home Secretary said that that did not matter, as both organisations were covered. However, I should like that to be spelled out.

The IRA is proscribed under the terms of the Act, as I said, but that Act incorporates pre-existing legislation which enables the Secretary of State to use emergency powers to enact special provisions, introduced after the Omagh bombing, against specified organisations. In order for special provisions to be enacted against specified terrorist organisations, the organisation has to be both proscribed by schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act 2000 and specified in the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998.

Organisations such as the Real IRA or the Continuity IRA are listed under the terms of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act, but they are not specifically proscribed under schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act. In the debate on the Terrorism Bill in the other place on 6 June last year, the Minister of State, Cabinet Office assured the other place that the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA would be covered by the generic prohibition of the IRA in schedule 2 to the 2000 Act. I should be grateful not only if that assurance could be repeated—we have heard that tonight—but if some explanation could be given as to why there is no specific prohibition. There seems to be room for confusion in that arrangement.

The Real IRA and Continuity IRA, along with the Red Hand Defenders and the Orange Volunteers, are specified under the terms of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act as organisations that are not observing a complete and unequivocal ceasefire, but those organisations are not specifically proscribed again under schedule 2 to the Terrorism Act.

Given all that complication, would it not be more appropriate if there were one list of proscribed organisations? Should not all terrorist organisations be fully subject to all available anti-terrorist legislation? Is there not a lack of clarity in the present arrangements? Should not the force of law be applied to all proscribed organisations, whether they are currently on ceasefire or not?

Having said that I think that there may be a case—I put it no more highly than that, pending the Secretary of State's reply—for one list, may I probe him on some rather odd omissions? There are hon. Members who have been threatened by the Animal Liberation Front. That group has been connected with activities that most of us would consider extreme and unlawful. I am sure that all hon. Members would condemn such actions in the strongest terms, yet the ALF is not proscribed. Nor is Combat 18 proscribed. That organisation also uses and espouses violence.

I have discussed the matter with the Secretary of State, but I should be grateful if he would put on the record his reasons for not proscribing those two organisations. Aside from those remarks, I repeat the Opposition's willingness to give all possible support to the measure. I shall be interested to hear the contributions of other hon. Members.

11.48 pm

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): I should make it clear that I chair the British Committee on Iran Freedom, and share the dismay and disbelief of most of the UK's Iranian community at the mujaheddin being labelled a terrorist organisation. A range of Iranian organisations in this country have been in touch with me, but I shall not weary the House by listing them.

The reason there are so many Iranians living in the UK and why the number of asylum applications from Iranian citizens has almost trebled in the past year or so is because

[Mr. Robin Corbett]

those are people who cannot live at home. They are in this country and elsewhere in Europe not as terrorists and not because they support terrorism. They are, in every sense of the word, the victims of terrorism. They are among the relatives of an estimated 30,000—yes, 30,000—political prisoners butchered by the regime in Iran in the single year of 1988, and of the estimated 700 people executed under the rule of the so-called reformist President Khatami, and of the 35 political opponents that the regime has murdered abroad. The Government acknowledge that the mujaheddin

"has not attacked UK or western interests."

They argue that the mujaheddin has no acknowledged presence in the UK, although it is supported here by the National Council of Resistance—the same body that was invited for many years to the annual Labour party conference.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): With regard to the number of Iranians living in this country because of the circumstances in Iran, does my hon. Friend agree that it astonishing that the Mujaheddin e Khalq should be placed on the list of proscribed organisations at a time when the Home Office accepts that membership of that organisation or association with it are proper grounds for asylum in Britain?

Mr. Corbett: My hon. Friend is right; that may not be the best recent example of joined-up government.

During the passage of the Bill that became the Terrorism Act 2000, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said that the legislation was aimed at groups in Britain that supported efforts to overthrow democratic regimes abroad, but he made clear that dissent was a vital part of our democracy. Does he consider the present regime in Tehran to be democratic? Not even the mullahs would describe themselves in that way, and nor should they, as they have stolen democracy from the Iranian people. If he needs some help on that, he should know that as lately as yesterday, the UN special representative on human rights in Iran, Professor Maurice Copthorne, reported:

"Breaches of human rights are in large part as common today as they were five years ago."

He also stated:

"The number of executions reported in the Iranian press from 1 January to 1 December 2000 are placed at about 2000."

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): When was the hon. Gentleman last in Iran, and when did he last speak to ordinary Iranian people, as I have done recently? If he speaks to them, he will find that most of them support progress and reform. He will also find little or no support for the mujaheddin or armed revolution.

Mr. Corbett: The hon. Lady's comments are interesting. I happened to be chosen to be part of an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to Iran. I think that it was three years ago. The then Iranian Parliament found the visit inconvenient, as myself and one of my hon. Friends were known critics of the mullahs' regime, which did not feel able to allow us to make the visit under the auspices of the IPU. The delegation never left the country and I do not know whether the invitation has been renewed. Whatever impressions she gained on her visit to Iran, they cannot wipe out the brutal atrocities and murders that the mullahs' regime carries out against its own people and its political opponents around the world. Those are matters of fact; if she wants to borrow "Crime Against Humanity", a book which details the murders committed in the single year of 1988 and lists the victims' names, I shall gladly lend it to her.

Professor Copthorne went on to say:

"The jailing of journalists and political dissidents and the general denial of fair trial continues unabated."

What puzzles me about that is that the Home Secretary told the British Committee on Iran Freedom in his letter that the mujaheddin is an "Iranian dissident organisation". He went on to say that

"it claims to be seeking the establishment of a democratic, socialist Islamic Republic".

He might more accurately have said that it leads a broad coalition that wants to establish a pluralist and secular regime that guarantees human rights and freedoms. What is it doing, therefore, on the list of proscribed organisations? It is the regime and not the resistance to it that belongs on the list.

I must tell my Front-Bench colleagues that it is suspected that when the regime's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kamal Kharazi, came here last year, he demanded the banning of the mujaheddin as the price of better relations between our two countries. It is further suspected that that call was repeated when my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office was in Tehran last month. The Home Secretary should know that last year, 335 Members of the House—a majority, as it is one more than a half—and 61 peers signed a statement on human rights and democracy in Iran. It called on our Government to support the Iranian people's struggle for freedom and democracy. That action was mirrored by a majority of members of the US Congress, 150 French Deputies, and Members of the Parliaments of Italy, Belgium and Luxembourg.

This year, in a statement headed "Iran—the cry is freedom", hon. Members are again signing up to say that the United Kingdom should support the millions, not the mullahs, in the rising demands for democracy and human rights. While she was in Iran, the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) might not have noticed the evidence from pro-democracy demonstrations across that country that the mullahs' regime is on its last legs. The so-called reformers and reactionaries are two faces of a single, repressive regime.

Mr. Hogg: The hon. Gentleman makes a serious case, but would he accept that one of the vices involved in the process on which we are embarking is that no independent body exists to assess the points that he is making in relation to the mujaheddin? Will he also accept that the review mechanism provided by section 5 of the 2000 Act is concerned not with the merits of the argument but with process and procedure, and with whether the Secretary of State has acted reasonably?

Mr. Corbett: I understand exactly what the right hon. and learned Gentleman is saying. However, in this case, the question is much easier. Either our Government regard

the regime in Iran as democratic or undemocratic. That is very simple, and I hope that the Secretary of State will give a clear answer when he replies to the debate.

The evidence that I have presented to the House shows that Iran has one of the most vile and corrupt regimes anywhere in the world. It is a regime that is afraid of its own people and one which will not tolerate dissent or enable any aspect of democracy. It closes newspapers, jails journalists, and brings out the army if there is any kind of demonstration for jobs and freedom. Those are not the hallmarks of a democratic country, and that is why I object to the mujaheddin being on the list.

I say in all seriousness to my right hon. Friend that, in this respect, this order repeats the mistakes of 1978, when this country backed another dying regime in Iran. If this order is passed, we shall add insult to injury, and betray the hopes of the Iranian people again.

11.57 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Let me start with a word or two of agreement with the Government. The Liberal Democrats argued, before the Terrorism Act 2000 was introduced, that we should have a UK-wide anti-terrorism Act, not an Act that treated part of the United Kingdom differently, as previously, when exclusion orders could be issued in relation to Northern Ireland. We also believed that the ability to review the legislation should exist, to reconsider the way in which terrorism was defined. We also argued that Parliament should be able to review the legislation regularly.

The Home Secretary knows from debates on the Act—the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), other hon. Members and I served on the Committee that considered it—that the definition of terrorism was highly controversial, and that my hon. Friends and I proposed much more narrowly drawn alternatives. We also proposed that the Act should lapse after five years if it was not renewed. We lost those arguments and the Government got their way.

Liberal Democrats have always accepted the need for the power to proscribe terrorist organisations. When the House debated the Bill, it specifically discussed the Irish organisations on the list, which had been the subject of detailed scrutiny in Committee. We foresaw from the beginning the problems that we are discussing tonight.

We foresaw problems in allowing the Secretary of State to make a subjective judgment—this is not a slight on his integrity—on the basis of information not available to other Members of the House, that enables him to issue orders that, if approved, proscribe organisations from that moment.

Organisations avoid proscription only if they can clear one of two hurdles. They must either persuade the Secretary of State to reverse his view or win a case before the appeal commission. As the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) and others have argued, that, too, is not an appeal in which both sides would appear with an equality of arms and a party could know the case against it and be able to rebut it.

It is also clear that the Home Secretary could have asked the Intelligence and Security Committee to give him a view, but he chose not to—that is why I put the specific question to him—although he asked it to comment on the Mitrokhin affair. The committee represents Parliament. It meets to deal with sensitive matters and to give an opinion that provides a broader base for Government decisions and for judgments to be made on them in the House. It was not asked to comment, however; nor was an independent judicial view taken, although we argued for that in Committee.

Perhaps the most telling concern of all is that, although we have had only an hour and two minutes of debate and have only 28 minutes left, the House is meant not only to judge on 21 entirely different organisations, but to hold one vote and make one decision that will proscribe every one of them, regardless of whether, according to the Home Secretary's list, they have a headquarters here, have members here or have been active here.

Mr. Hogg: I mean no slight on the Home Secretary, but does the hon. Gentleman accept that the real problem is that we do not have a clue about the strength of evidence on which the right hon. Gentleman relies? We have to accept his word. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is too fragile a basis on which to proscribe an organisation?

Mr. Hughes: My colleagues on the Liberal Democrat Benches and I share that view. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) referred to N17, which of course is a terrorist organisation. It has committed terrorist acts abroad, but never here. The mujaheddin has a good case for saying that it is taking on an undemocratic regime. It may be a terrorist organisation, but that does not necessarily require the Home Secretary to proscribe it. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam is involved in a peace process with an intermediary—the Norwegian Government—and is seeking to resolve an intractable and awful civil war in Sri Lanka. The International Sikh Youth Federation also seeks to play its part.

All those organisations have a case, just as 20 or 30 years ago the African National Congress would have had a case, or 10 or 20 years ago those opposing General Pinochet would have had a case. Many such organisations, by any definition, would be classed as terrorist for undertaking activity that may have been illegal in their own countries, but which would always have been legal in democratic countries. That is the difficulty of tonight's debate.

There has been no judicial confirmation of the proposed organisation and no cross-party agreement. There would be no appeal based on the merits of a case. We must be careful that we do not put outside the law certain activities and certain people when their opportunity to put their case under the criminal law is not the same as that for others in different contexts.

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): Will the hon. Gentleman elaborate on his case involving the example of N17 in Greece, which has a democratic Government? Why should it not be on the list?

Mr. Hughes: I do not argue that none of the organisations listed is clearly terrorist under the definition in the Act. I am not arguing on the basis of facts—not only in the list given by Ministers, but known to the House—that certain organisations have not owned up to

[Mr. Hughes]

committing terrorist activities. N17 is in that category. What appears to have happened, however, is that a list has been presented to the House on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, largely as a result of representations from foreign Governments about concerns abroad rather than as a result of concern about whether terrorist acts would be committed in this country—acts that this domestic legislation is intended to regulate.

Mr. Winnick: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No. The hon. Gentleman has already intervened several times.

My colleagues and I are unhappy about the motion above all because we cannot possibly give fair treatment to each and every organisation when we cannot vote on separate proposals that they be regarded and proscribed as terrorist organisations. Let me give an example. My constituency contains the headquarters of a Tamil organisation, Eelam house. I have been there to see members of the organisation, who have links with, and associate with, those who have—in their words—taken on a freedom struggle for the Tamil homeland. Many people in the world have been through that process prior to self-determination, but the order could make any Member of Parliament who talked to any such organisation guilty under the 2000 Act from the day of the order's implementation, before we had been able to argue the case.

It may be wrong for those organisations to be proscribed as terrorist organisations, or it may be not wrong but unhelpful. I merely say that we should be very careful about endorsing a proposal on a take-it-or-leave it basis. It would be better for the Home Secretary to withdraw the order, and allow the House to consider each organisation on its merits. That could have been done, it should have been done, and it is a great pity that it has not been done.

We are not giving proper consideration to what is a properly weighty proposal, intended to ensure that we deal with terrorism firmly and fairly. We are certainly not dealing with it fairly tonight.

12.7 am

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I shall be brief, because we have to be brief. This is a travesty of the way in which such an important and serious issue should be discussed. Debate is being limited to an hour and half, late at night, with a catch-all of 21 different organisations that the order proposes to ban. We have been given no opportunity to discuss those organisations in any detail, or to engage in any other form of parliamentary scrutiny of the legislation.

The history of anti-terrorist legislation is not good. The original Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1974 was rushed through the House, and resulted in serious miscarriages of justice. The first person to be arrested in this country under the Act was Paul Hill, a constituent of mine, who was subsequently imprisoned as one of the Guildford Four. He was finally released 17 years later, with an apology of a sort from the High Court and the Home Secretary of the day. I think that we should think very carefully about the effect of the overall ban that the Home Secretary is proposing.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) is absolutely right: if this legislation had been in place 10 or 15 years ago the ANC would certainly have been on the list, as would Umkhonto we Sizwe—which was undertaking some forms of military activity in South Africa—and many other organisations from different parts of the world.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): While no one denies the atrocities perpetrated by some groups on the list, what we are attempting to scrutinise tonight is the process, the thinking and the procedure behind this type of proscription. The history of Britain's withdrawal from empire is littered with groups that were described as terrorists, but survived to take tea with the Queen.

Mr. Corbyn: Indeed. I am sure that had such legislation been in operation in 1945, when the pan-African unity conference was held at Chorlton cum Hardy town hall, every one of the people there would have been arrested for being a terrorist, because they were seeking freedom from the British empire. Later, however, every one of those people became either a Prime Minister, President or Cabinet Minister of one African country or another. Later, without exception, every one of them took tea with the Queen.

The Home Secretary should also tell us—if he has a few minutes at the end of the debate perhaps he will do so—where the list came from. I am very well aware that the Indian Government, the Turkish Government, the Sri Lankan Government, the Iranian Government and undoubtedly many other Governments have been constantly pressing the British Government to close down political activity in this country by their opponents. I also believe that all those organisations—surely it is purely coincidence—are also on the State Department list in Washington. I am sure that that is just a coincidence of history and that there is no complicity whatsoever.

I also ask the Home Secretary to think through the implications of what hon. Members are saying. None of us likes bombing. None of us supports terrorism. None of us wants violence. The end game to violence and to achieving peace is a political process, giving people and their organisations the political space to argue and debate.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey mentioned the situation in Sri Lanka. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam are on the list of organisations to be banned. It is currently observing a ceasefire, although it has been violated by the forces of the Sri Lankan state. What message are we sending to the Tamil people living in this country, perhaps because they have gained asylum here? We are saying that an organisation that many of them support is to be banned. A similar point can be made in relation to the peace process in Turkey—which we hope will end successfully—where the Kurdistan Workers party is also observing a ceasefire.

Surely it would be far more useful to work with international organisations that are attempting to achieve ceasefires and peace than to ban them from operating in this country.

Mr. Winnick: I think that my hon. Friend has conceded that some of the organisations listed are

engaged in terror. In what type of continuing peace process is N17, for example, engaged? Greece is an entirely democratic country—the junta has, fortunately, been overthrown—and has been so for the past quarter of a century. N17, however, wants to destroy that democratic structure. As my hon. Friend knows, in June 2000 it murdered Brigadier Stephen Saunders.

Mr. Corbyn: My hon. Friend has jumped slightly ahead of my comments, but I shall help him with that. If an organisation is engaged in criminal activity, the criminal law is available to deal with it.

I believe that the proposed process is wrong because it would entail the Home Secretary making a decision on the basis of intelligence information. Subsequently, he would receive representations from hon. Members, from representatives of the organisation concerned and from anyone else who cared to make a representation that he cared to receive. Hon. Members and the organisations would not know what had been said to him. Subsequently, he may impose a ban, which may then be the subject of an appeal to the independent appeal committee that he has appointed. The chairman of that tribunal will also receive the security information, whereas the other parties will not. If the matter becomes the subject of a judicial review, a public interest immunity certificate may be granted by the Home Secretary.

Whoever is Home Secretary, under the order he or she is judge, jury and proponent of the initial decision. I believe that the process should be far more open and that if something is wrong, the criminal law is available to deal with it.

Despite the Home Secretary's earlier comments, I believe that there are serious problems with the legislation's compliance with the European convention on human rights and with our own Human Rights Act 1998. There are serious problems also with the possible criminalisation of people during the appeals process. If the House passes the order and all the organisations are banned, the order would, as I understand it, take effect immediately. Consequently, anyone involved in those organisations will automatically become a criminal. However, the organisation may appeal against the ban and it may be lifted. Nevertheless, there is the possibility of a miscarriage of justice if people are convicted of criminal activity by belonging to an organisation, despite the fact that the organisation can appeal and, subsequently, the ban might be lifted.

Fiona Mactaggart: I believe that my hon. Friend has met a constituent of mine who is an active member of the International Sikh Youth Federation, and who has certainly persuaded me that his activities have nothing to do with terrorism. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the order covers some organisations whose members are social and political activists, and that it could criminalise them in a way that would be inappropriate, given the work in which they are involved?

Mr. Corbyn: My hon. Friend is right. I met a delegation of people from the Sikh community this afternoon, as did many other hon. Members. One could not meet more active, upright or socially aware people. Are we to make them criminals for their membership of those organisations? That will be the effect of the order. The message being given to members of Muslim, Sikh, Tamil, Turkish and Kurdish communities around the country is that we are interested in banning their organisations because they are calling for fundamental political changes in their home countries.

We are in danger of making a very bad decision that will set a bad example of the true work of a democratic Parliament. We will be in danger of criminalising—or of driving into the hands of criminals—a lot of people who have no wish to take part in criminal activities. That danger will arise because we are not prepared to take part in what ought to be the political process to bring peace to places around the world where at present there are only difficult and almost intractable problems.

How many more organisations will be put on the list because Governments around the world find it inconvenient that international organisations use London as a base from which to spread political propaganda aimed at securing change in their home countries? Britain has given refuge to many people from different parts of the world for a long time. Enormous political changes have resulted, such as those resulting from the struggle to bring about independence from empire, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) referred.

The House should not pass this order tonight. I very much hope that the Home Secretary will reconsider seriously the great mistake that I believe he is making.

12.17 am

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): I, too, have a number of reservations about adding 21 new organisations to the proscribed list. It is true that many of those organisations are involved in violence in other parts of the world, but the judgment that we have to make is whether they have been involved in violence in the United Kingdom. An order proscribing every organisation involved in violence around the world would be very wide and difficult to police.

We in Northern Ireland have had plenty of terrorists from various organisations. On numerous occasions we have asked that they be proscribed. We have always been told that that was a difficult matter, that a careful balance must be struck, and that proscribing the organisations might give them more publicity than they would otherwise achieve. As far as we can see, the order strikes no balance and makes no judgment as to what activity a proscribed organisation might be carrying out in Northern Ireland. The fact that such an organisation is carrying out terrorism in other parts of the world is considered to be sufficient for it to be proscribed here. That is an undesirable feature.

I wish to emphasise a difficulty raised by other hon. Members—the use of the term "Irish Republican Army". I know that it has been said that the term is used in a generic way, to cover both the Provisional IRA and the Real IRA. That may be difficult to argue in legal terms. The order should be made explicit in its references to the Real IRA: in that way, there will be no doubt or controversy in any future legal discussion.

The Real IRA is a terrorist organisation which killed 29 people in my constituency. Its members are carrying out terrorist activities on the mainland. It is a very dangerous organisation. It is therefore right that it should be explicitly named so that there can be no doubt.

[Mr. William Thompson]

We must, however, ask ourselves what the point of proscription is. The IRA is a proscribed organisation, yet the Government are prepared to negotiate with its members. Various other terrorist organisations are proscribed—what difference has it made? The Government have still negotiated with them and made concessions to them—indeed, whether those organisations were proscribed or not does not seem to have made much difference. What is the point of proscription and what benefits will accrue from it?

In conclusion, we have reservations about the order and although we do not wish to support terrorism in the United Kingdom in any way, we believe that this is the wrong way to go about it at this time.

12.20 am

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): This has been a good, albeit all too short and perhaps truncated, debate. Let me make it clear at the outset, echoing what my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) said at the beginning of the debate, that we endorse the Government's central intention and do not intend to frustrate it tonight. Accordingly, I cannot encourage my right hon. and hon. Friends to do any differently. Nevertheless, I hope that the Home Secretary has listened carefully to the views expressed.

Terrorism is the most appalling scourge; the overwhelming majority of Members are united in denunciation of it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald rightly pointed out that the extent of globalisation, the increase in the facility of technology and the nature of international financial markets all conspire to assist the terrorist and make our task that much more difficult.

I readily acknowledge that in a procedure of this kind, intelligence reports naturally cannot be freely tossed around, or their contents exchanged, in the open political marketplace. I recognise the constraints within which the Home Secretary is operating. Nevertheless, at the risk of inflicting grave injury upon myself, I listened carefully to the speech of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), to the cogent and considered speech of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) and to the speech of the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn), who has been consistent on this subject. Their speeches raised legitimate concerns, which I suspect have permeated the Chamber.

Particular grievances have been raised about individual organisations such as the International Sikh Youth Federation, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the mujaheddin. Those concerns must be addressed. It is obviously a weakness of the arrangement that the Government have adopted that there is no opportunity to cherry pick and consider the merits of each organisation. We are invited en bloc to give our approval or en bloc to withhold it.

Tonight we will give the Government the benefit of the doubt in the name of presenting a united front in opposition to terrorism. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) makes it clear that he does not intend to follow suit, and his intentions are respected. However, I am setting out the position of the Opposition Front Bench.

I hope that the Home Secretary will respond seriously to the points that have been made. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham made the point that the test in an appeal seems purely to be the legal test of reasonableness rather than one requiring the merits of the case to be considered. Need that be the case? Is it unavoidable? Could the Home Secretary reconsider that test for the future?

My second observation is again intended to amplify the concern that my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary expressed at the outset—why have the exclusions? There is no reference to the Animal Liberation Front, despite the fact that two years ago about 800 recorded incidents of serious violence were perpetrated in this country by animal rights terrorists. Those are all on the record. There is a grievance. Elsewhere in Government policy, it is a public grievance that they are rightly addressing, which does not seem to be consistent with what is being said in this measure, so I hope that the Home Secretary will look into that.

Finally, my right hon. Friend made a valid point about Combat 18—a truly despicable organisation, which has deployed enormous violence in pursuit of its sinister goals on many occasions. The Government's intention is sound. The Secretary of State's motivation is, as far as all decent people are concerned, not remotely in dispute, but this is a democratic Chamber, democratic concerns have been expressed by democrats and I invite him to respond to those concerns.

12.25 am

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) for the way in which he spoke from the Conservative Front Bench and to my hon. Friends and Opposition Members for the manner in which they made what are in some cases very strong opinions felt about organisations that have been included in the order.

To all right hon. and hon. Members who spoke about individual organisations I would say that we will take full account of what has been said here and, obviously, of further representations made if, as I suspect, a number of those organisations that have been mentioned apply, initially to me, for de-proscription.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) made a powerful speech about Iran—a subject on which he speaks with considerable knowledge. He asked some questions about how I judge the current political position in Iran. For me, the criteria in determining whether an organisation should be included—I think that he will understand this—in the list are those laid down in section 3 of the Terrorism Act 2000. I have had to apply myself to the law, which has only recently been the subject of considerable discussion and agreement by the House.

I was asked about other organisations, including some involved in domestic extremism. The list is the list for the time being. It is open to addition or subtraction at any future stage.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North) *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I am sorry, but I do not have time to give way.

We keep those matters under review. I made the decisions in the light of the best evidence, my judgments and the advice available to me.

There are two final matters. One is the scope of the appeal before the Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission, which will be on judicial review grounds as that is laid down in section 5 of the 2000 Act. Since the coming into force of the Human Rights Act 1998, however, the grounds are wider and POAC will have to address whether refusal to de-proscribe amounts to interference with convention rights, which will in turn lead to questions about the proportionality of my decisions.

Finally, on the process, I appreciate that this has been a short debate but a good one. As far as I can recall, no amendments were tabled during the proceedings of the Terrorism Bill to call for a different process other than the affirmative procedure with one order. We will take full account of all representations made and I commend the order to the House.

Question put:—

Mr. Speaker: I think the Ayes have it.

Hon. Members: No.

Division deferred till Wednesday 14 March, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].

Science and Technology Committee

12.29 am

Mr. John McWilliam (Blaydon): I beg to move,

That Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Mr. Tony McWalter be added to the Committee.

I shall not detain the House, except to say that the change between the hon. Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas) and the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) has been agreed by both hon. Members and by all members of the Committee of Selection. I commend the motion to the House.

12.29 am

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): This matter should not pass without tribute being paid to the hon. Member for Corby. I have the honour of serving on the senate of the Engineering Council with the hon. Member for Corby—[Hon. Members: "Crosby"]—with the hon. Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas). I am grateful for that correction. The reason that I made a mistake about the hon. Lady's constituency is that I know her as "Our Claire". She serves with me on the senate of the Engineering Council and plays an active role in promoting engineering, both in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall.

I have not had a chance to speak to the hon. Lady this evening, to determine why she is leaving the Committee, although I am delighted that the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) will join it. He, too, has an engineering background. He took a BSc in pure mathematics as well as one in philosophy—an interesting combination.

I have some concerns that no explanation of the change has been given, other than the fact that both hon. Members have agreed to it.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I certainly do not want to cavil about the thrust of my hon. Friend's argument, but can he explain why he chose to describe a study of mathematics and philosophy as interesting for the purposes of the debate?

Mr. Fabricant: A friend of mine—with whom my hon. Friend is familiar—is a director of the John Lewis Partnership—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the motion is extremely narrow.

Mr. Fabricant: I shall not pursue philosophy, politics and economics, but will simply point out that the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead, who is to join the Committee—the purpose of the motion—holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in mathematics, which—

Mr. Bercow: Like Descartes.

Mr. Fabricant: Indeed. The holding of such degrees may or may not make an individual suitable for the Committee.

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[Mr. Fabricant]

Why have the two hon. Members agreed to make that swap? The hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr. McWilliam), who proposed the motion, said that the two hon. Members had agreed to the swap. However, before my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) intervened, I was about to ask why the swap is being made at such a late stage of the Parliament.

Mr. McWilliam: We do not seek to ask why Members want to change; if they want to do so, that is fine. The matter has been agreed by all parties. If the hon. Gentleman has a problem with that, he must have a problem with his Whips—he should ask them about it.

Mr. Fabricant: The hon. Gentleman sounds like Alfred, Lord Tennyson—

"Their's not to reason why,

Their's but to do"—

but not, in this case, die—I hope.

My point is important and sound. At this late stage of a Parliament, why have two people decided to change membership on the Committee?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman repeats the argument that he made earlier. I remind him once again of the narrowness of the motion and of the debate.

Mr. Fabricant: I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your guidance. I simply want to make the point that the hon. Member for Crosby has served well on the Committee—especially by promoting engineering both in the Chamber and in Westminster Hall. She has raised questions about the status of chartered engineers and members of the Engineering Council. It is most unfortunate that she is not in the House tonight to say why she is standing down. She has provided an excellent service.

Mr. Bercow: I echo what my hon. Friend says about the hon. Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas), but does not he agree that perhaps an even more salient question is why the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter), who is indeed a distinguished academic, is not present to participate in, or at least observe, the proceedings of the debate about the proposal that he be added to the Committee? Why is he not here?

Mr. Fabricant *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The House is perfectly entitled to debate the change of membership of a Committee whether or not the Members concerned are present.

Mr. Fabricant: Of course you are absolutely right, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham is saying that perhaps there is a little arrogance in the motion, in that the two people concerned are not here tonight. But I do perfectly understand—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I could put it to the hon. Gentleman that that really is irrelevant to the motion that we are discussing.

Mr. Fabricant: I think the point is that the motion concerns the behaviour of two individual Members or, if one likes, the service that they will perform on this Committee, which is a Committee of the House, and it would have been interesting, had they been present, to determine what motivation there was for one to leave and for the other to replace them, particularly at this late stage in the Parliament. *[Interruption.]* It is also a late stage in the evening, and I can see that Ministers on the Treasury Bench are particularly concerned that—

Mr. Keith Bradley (Treasurer of Her Majesty's Household) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Fabricant: They are not concerned that this motion is passed quickly. There is some confusion because of these sedentary interventions from those on the Treasury Bench. Some are saying that they want this motion passed, some are not, and I am a little confused on that point.

The hon. Member for Crosby has provided good service. I hope that she will continue to provide service on the Engineering Council. Just as a very brief aside—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again, I must remind the hon. Member just how narrow is this particular debate. Will he please confine his remarks to it?

Mr. Fabricant: The motion reads:

"That Mrs Claire Curtis-Thomas be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Mr Tony McWalter be added to the Committee",

but as the House authorities are allowing an hour for debate, presumably with the agreement of the Speaker, presumably there is some scope to discuss the merits of the two individuals concerned; otherwise, I cannot see how an hour, or even a minute, can be allowed for any particular area of debate.

Mr. Keith Bradley *indicated assent.*

Mr. Fabricant: I see that the Deputy Chief Whip fervently agrees with me on this issue.

In conclusion, unless anyone cares to intervene on me on this point, I will not disagree with the motion, as the hon. Member for Blaydon has said that both individuals have agreed to the change. However, it would have been nice if either of them had been present. It would have been interesting to know why this is happening at such a late stage in the Parliament, unless we are going to find out that it is not a late stage in the Parliament, and that the Prime Minister is announcing that there will be a general election in May—May 2002.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas be discharged from the Science and Technology Committee and Mr. Tony McWalter be added to the Committee.

Business of the House

12.40 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I beg to move,

That—

(1) at the sitting on 22nd March the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on any Motion in the name of Margaret Beckett relating to Election of a Speaker not later than Four o'clock, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any amendment selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and

(2) if proceedings on any such Motion have not been completed before Four o'clock, the Private Business set down by direction of the Chairman of Ways and Means for consideration at that hour may be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours after it has been entered upon.

The motion simply ensures that next Thursday—22 March—the House can reach a decision on a procedure for electing a Speaker. The Government intend very shortly to put down Standing Orders that would implement the Procedure Committee's recommendations.

I am grateful to the Committee for its report and recommendations. A good deal of thought and work has gone into the report. Next week, colleagues will have a discussion on that report; tonight's motion just sets out the framework for that discussion.

Members will note that the business motion will also allow the questions to be put on any amendment selected by the Speaker. The motion will give the House an opportunity to deal with any such amendments. It may assist the House this evening if I say that an amendment will be tabled to give Members a choice between an open and a secret ballot for Speaker, as recommended by the Procedure Committee.

It may also interest Members to learn that, back in 1972, when the House agreed the current Standing Orders on the election of a Speaker, the debate lasted for an hour and five minutes. Even though, as we age, we are doubtless more garrulous, I do not think that the time suggested tonight for the debate is unreasonable. I am pleased that the House is to have an early opportunity to discuss the Procedure Committee's report.

12.40 am

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield): Although I welcome the opportunity that the House will be given to discuss the election of a Speaker, I have to tell the Minister that I have serious reservations about the amount of time allocated to the debate, and I hope that I may now have the opportunity to develop them a little.

The Minister said that one hour and five minutes was spent discussing the matter in 1972, but one need only look at the Procedure Committee's report to understand what a revolution in our affairs has occurred since then. The Procedure Committee makes it clear that the changes made in 1972 were simply intended to bring some order to a system that had previously been governed by no regulatory mechanism whatever. Indeed, the Clerk, rather than the Father of the House, took the Chair before that date, and there was a free for all, without Standing Orders of any kind. I am sure that the Minister will find it easy to agree that what actually happened in 1972 was that a decision was taken simply to determine, by Standing Order, what should happen in future.

As we know, at the most recent election of the Speaker, it became fairly apparent that the system that had been set up in 1972, which had previously led to only one contested election before last year's, took a very great deal of time to go through. Not only did it take a long time to go through, but a large number of hon. Members expressed widespread dissatisfaction with the entire system. That is why the Procedure Committee decided to report on the matter. Indeed, it produced an extremely useful and interesting report, which repays careful study.

About 130 Members replied when the Procedure Committee sought our views, but the diversity of opinion expressed in the replies to the questionnaires that were sent out is simply colossal. It covers the full spectrum of choices that individual Members might wish to have. Given that this is completely non-party political matter, I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is apparent that no consensus on how best to proceed exists in those submissions.

I do not intend to consider the report this evening; that is not the purpose of this debate or of the motion. However, one has only to consider the diversity of views to understand that there must be enough time for those diverse views to be expressed. I am sure that the Minister will also agree that there is always a danger that when a Government, however well-intentioned, table a motion that ultimately expresses their view, a large number of hon. Members will be dissatisfied not only with that motion but with any amendment to it that the Minister says we shall have an opportunity to discuss. Apart from anything else, we do not even know exactly what is proposed for the implementation of the Procedure Committee's suggestions.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is one thing that makes Members of Parliament particularly vocal, and that is matters that affect them personally? Does he not agree that the election of a Speaker affects all 659 hon. Members? It therefore follows that, particularly given the diverse nature of the responses which my hon. Friend has already described, many of those 659 Members will want to make long and detailed contributions to the debate.

Mr. Grieve: I have no difficulty agreeing with my hon. Friend's comments. I am sure that he will agree that we must be careful to ensure that the House is not seen indulging in too much navel gazing. There are affairs of the nation to consider as well as those of regulating the House. I dare say that the public would think it rather odd if we were to devote days and days to discussing how we should elect a Speaker.

However, the issue certainly goes beyond simply the interest of Members. The Speaker has a very special status within our constitution. He is there as the defender of our rights.

Mr. Jim Dowd (Lord Commissioner to the Treasury): Or she.

Mr. Grieve: He or she is there as the defender of our rights, so it is important that we get right any changes that we decide to implement. It is important that the public should have the impression that there has been reasoned

[Mr. Grieve]

and, if necessary, leisurely discussion of the options, and it is important that the decision that we finally take commands consensus.

A point that has often been touched upon is that debate in the Chamber should not involve a short discussion and then a vote to decide who is in the majority. By the process of debate, we should at least reconcile those who may lose in the vote to the decision that the House has taken. That is what parliamentary democracy is all about.

I have outlined the basic principles, so I shall now consider the precise motion that has been placed before us. It is apparent that the matter will come before the House on Thursday 22 March. On an ordinary Thursday, we start early with Question Time. Business questions follow, and there is always the possibility of a statement. The motion proposes that we should conclude the discussion at 4 o'clock. The Minister knows that, because of business questions, it is improbable that we shall start any debate before 1.25 or 1.30 pm. I say this neutrally, but sometimes the allegation is made that the Government make statements either for their own convenience, because they want to indulge in a bit of spin, or because they wish to wreck the business of the House for that day by depriving hon. Members of the opportunity for debate. I am not seeking to suggest that they will do that on this occasion—not at the moment anyway. I merely wish to point out that we are facing a national crisis in agriculture because of foot and mouth disease, so it is perfectly on the cards that, for wholly legitimate reasons, a Minister may wish to come to the House on 22 March to make a statement. That usually leads to a further hour of the House's time being taken up, so the debate on the election of the Speaker may last for no more than an hour and a half. I have to say to the Minister that, on the basis of what I said a few moments ago about the controversial nature of the proposals, an hour and a half is wholly insufficient. I hope that he will take that point in the spirit in which it is intended.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): My hon. Friend is setting out a persuasive critique. Does he agree that the supreme irony of the situation that he has just described is that if what he described happened, we would have less time for a debate on the substantive motion concerning how we should operate in future than is potentially available to us this morning for this preliminary procedural discussion?

Mr. Grieve: My hon. Friend is right, although I thought I heard an hon. Member say from a sedentary position that it is not yet morning in parliamentary terms. That is correct. It is still yesterday or, perhaps, today, and we can continue with its being today for a very long time if necessary—sometimes for so long that tomorrow disappears. I do not want to inflict that on the House, but my hon. Friend makes an important point.

If we are to have a debate such as that referred to in the motion, it would be sensible to set the rest of that day aside for that purpose. If there is a possibility that the debate might go short—in 1972, as the Minister pointed out, an hour and five minutes proved sufficient—I am sure that the Government can table a host of matters to be debated thereafter, as is their custom, which will not interfere with or curtail discussion of the election of the Speaker.

Mr. Bercow: I am exceptionally grateful to my hon. Friend for his generosity in giving way. In view of the importance of the election of a Speaker and the respect that all right hon. and hon. Members feel for that high office, does my hon. Friend agree that, even if it were difficult—and it should not be—to accommodate a proper, lengthy and perhaps leisurely debate on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday, no right hon. or hon. Member should object to the notion that we might debate the matter on a sitting Friday? It would, after all, be a one-off.

Mr. Grieve: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Sitting Fridays are not, on the whole, supposed to interfere with the Government's carriage of their business, so if we were to debate the matter on such a Friday, it could not be suggested that we were putting our priority of navel gazing above the interests of the country at large.

I turn now to another aspect of the problem. I have touched on this, but it bears consideration. At the moment, we do not have the motion that the Government intend to table. We have got the order wrong. We can usually pick up in the Tea Room, the Corridors or elsewhere whether a motion tabled by the Government will command consensus and rapidly identify the issues that are likely to excite hon. Members and make them want to participate in the debate.

Without wishing to stray into the substance of the Procedure Committee's report, and just by way of illustration, I point out that the report contains several proposals. Those on which most hon. Members will focus relate to the system of voting, ballots and their secrecy and whether, at the end, the last two candidates should be presented in the traditional way. However, there are many other little points in the report, and experience suggests that those are points that can sometimes cause as many problems—if not more—as some of the basic issues. I am not clear whether a Government motion would seek to change or regulate the way in which the Speaker is affirmed by royal approval not in the other place, but by Parliament sitting in a single Chamber up the Corridor.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. Perhaps I could remind the hon. Gentleman that he said that he did not wish to stray too far.

Mr. Grieve: It is a timely reminder, Madam Deputy Speaker. If I am getting carried away, it serves as a warning and illustration to the Minister that some recondite issues may excite hon. Members. Our constitution reflects an important historical perspective and, bearing in mind the nature of society and the role of the House and of Parliament in general, they would want those issues addressed. However, I do not know what the Government are going to table.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The issue has a direct bearing on the debate. It is impossible to make a judgment about the suitability of the length of time that we will have to debate the issue unless we have a clearer idea about what the Government intend

the motion to contain. If they do not intend to debate all the issues that my hon. Friend raises, there may well be sufficient time. However, I fail to understand how we could have enough time for a more general debate on the detail that is necessary to satisfy the House.

Mr. Grieve: My hon. Friend is correct. He touches on the central issue.

It is unfortunate that the matter is being discussed at such a late hour, when many right hon. and hon. Members, especially after last night's late sitting, have no doubt decided that the call of their beds takes priority over our business. When the Minister has heard the arguments—I shall listen with care to his response—he may wish to consider withdrawing the motion and presenting it again when the Government's proposals have been tabled. That would allow them to gauge our response. Once they have an impression of our reaction, they will be better placed to decide the time that should be devoted to the motion.

I am sure that the Government take the matter seriously. If they decide that many right hon. and hon. Members want to participate in the debate to express their views and influence others, they may want to consider allowing more time. They may also want to allow amendments to be considered so that there are other options. I know not. I am not trying to complicate the issue; I am simply trying to explain that it could become complicated. If the Government do what I suggest, they may discover that the matter can be dealt with reasonably expeditiously while allowing time for their business to be transacted on the same day and enabling people to go away with the impression that they have had their say and are broadly satisfied with the result.

Mr. Bercow: I detect that my hon. Friend comes at the matter, and the motion specifically, completely—or largely—unsighted. Does he agree that although in no sense under a formal obligation to discuss the matter in advance, it might have been a parliamentary courtesy or propriety for the Parliamentary Secretary to discuss it through the usual channels, thus reflecting the spirit of the issue, which is pre-eminently a matter for the House rather than the Executive to determine?

Mr. Grieve: May I remind my hon. Friend that the Minister is always a model of courtesy? We know that that is true both inside and outside the Chamber. I would certainly not wish to criticise the Minister. Of course, the first date on which the Speaker's election is likely to be relevant to the House will fall after the general election. Obviously, I can speculate only remotely on whether there is any link between the imminence of the election and the decision to lay the motion before the House and allow it to discuss the report of the Select Committee on Procedure. Who knows? The Minister may care to enlighten us on that when he comes to reply to the debate. That would certainly make it far more informative.

That said, we are clearly unsighted, as my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) said, because we do not know what the motion will be. We are simply being asked to agree the procedure beforehand. I do not intend to labour the matter further.

Mr. Hayes: I can see that my hon. Friend is trying to deal with the matter as concisely as possible. However, he omitted to raise an important issue relevant to our debate—the public's expectation of how we should go about the business. There was a good deal of public debate after the election of the current Speaker, which centred on the conduct of affairs of the House. The wider public, not just hon. Members, expect us to debate the matter thoroughly and fully when it comes before the House. They will gain a poor impression of the House if we deal with it in a cursory fashion. I invite my hon. Friend to make that point before the Minister replies, as that view is shared by many people outside the House.

Mr. Grieve: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend, who makes an exceptionally good point. He is quite right; enormous interest was generated by the election of the Speaker. Subsequently, there was enormous press coverage and a great deal of criticism of our procedure. When we discuss whatever motion the Government introduce and whatever amendments are tabled and accepted, we must expect a great deal of public interest and attention.

Mr. Bercow: I do not wish to labour the point. However, to amplify the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), will my hon. Friend confirm that our concern is not merely with the debate that ensues in the immediate aftermath of the election of the Speaker, important though that is, but with the wider medium and long-term issue—namely, the fact that the Speaker effectively performs a critical ambassadorial role for the House?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is wandering far and wide of the remit of the motion.

Mr. Grieve: I shall resist the temptation offered by my hon. Friend to go too far down the road of exploring the Speaker's ambassadorial role, save to agree wholeheartedly that there are a multiplicity of issues relating to the Speaker's election and role which hon. Members have close to their hearts and which they wish to be considered.

Mr. Hayes: I have no desire to wander anywhere—neither far nor wide. I want to be specific about the nature of the debate. My point was not a wide point. It was a narrow point. The wider public will look at this debate and the judgment that we make now about the amount of time that we allocate—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is repeating points already made during the debate. The motion is clearly about timetabling.

Mr. Grieve: As I said before I gave way, Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not intend to labour the matter further. After 25 minutes of debate, we have covered, albeit at a slow pace, a number of pertinent issues relating to the wording of the motion. How on earth can the House do justice to the matter when the substantive motion will have to be dealt with in two and a half hours at best? The time allocated is not enough. We therefore cannot support the motion.

1.5 am

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Here we are again, with a motion on the Order Paper inviting us to limit the time for debate, possibly to as little as an hour and a half, if a substantive statement is made on Thursday 22 March. We do not have the terms of the motion that we will be invited to discuss on that day, relating to the election of a Speaker. The Minister said that the motion would endorse the second report of the Select Committee on Procedure, but that report is not a single, take-it-or-leave-it set of recommendations. There are choices to be made, such as the question whether there should be a secret ballot or an open ballot for the election of the Speaker.

Those are fundamental choices. I expect that hon. Members will come to the House without having made up their minds before they listen to the debate. The subject is one that the House should properly consider. On the single question whether the ballot should be secret or open, a variety of views was received by the Select Committee from members of all parties, each of them offering a different prescription. This is not a party issue.

The matter cannot be decided on the basis of a simple motion tabled by the Government. There must be consideration of the motion, which lends itself to substantial debate. Unusually in the House, that debate would have the capacity to change people's minds or to allow them to make their minds up according to the discussion that they hear.

Without knowing what motion the Government will table for Thursday, we cannot agree to tonight's motion, which would end discussion at 4 o'clock on Thursday. The Minister referred to the precedent of 1972, when the House took only an hour and five minutes to discuss the procedure for the election of Speaker. I draw attention to the conclusion that the Committee reached in paragraph 44(iii). It stated:

"The 1972 system is based on the assumption that the Government of the day and the 'usual channels' will operate behind the scenes in order to present the House with a single candidate, or at most a choice between two or three. Since at least 1983 it has become clear that this assumption is no longer correct. It is clear that the House is no longer willing to entrust the choice of candidates to the party machines. This means that (except in the special circumstances of the start of a Parliament when the sitting Speaker has been returned to the House) multi-candidate elections are likely to become the norm."

That demonstrates how the debate has changed. There was no controversy about the system in 1972. Indeed, it appears from the Committee's conclusions that there was a degree of trust that the usual channels would produce the correct candidates, probably because there would be only one, two or perhaps three options. In the election of our current Speaker, however, there has been a wholesale change. I think that that is a good thing, as it might suggest that the House is beginning to get up off its knees in its relationship with the Executive. It is good also in respect of the interaction of the two Front Benches.

Mr. Bercow: You have just reminded us, Madam Deputy Speaker, of the narrow terms of the motion, on which everybody accepts your guidance. With that in mind, does my hon. Friend agree that the central point of issue, which we invite the Parliamentary Secretary to take on board, is that the nature and extent of the debate for which the motion provides will be crucial not only to the credibility of its outcome, but to its perceived legitimacy?

Mr. Blunt: I agree thoroughly with my hon. Friend. It is easy for hon. Members to think of halcyon days when the House was independent of the Executive—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again, I remind hon. Members of the narrowness of the debate and the motion.

Mr. Blunt: I am very aware of the terms of the motion, Madam Deputy Speaker, but it is important for arguments to be advanced on the time scale that it proposes. The Parliamentary Secretary told us that an hour and five minutes was sufficient in 1972. He was asking us to accept that as much as an hour and half—or two and half hours, if there is no substantive statement—is unheard-of generosity on the part of the Executive.

Mr. Tipping: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for saying so, I did not use any of those words.

Mr. Blunt: But the implication—

Mr. Tipping: There was no implication either.

Mr. Blunt: I am happy to accept that the Parliamentary Secretary was not implying the suggestions to which I referred. However, his body language during the debate has given me some hope—it did so especially as he listened to the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve)—that our arguments are persuading him to accept that the time scale to which the motion refers, which extends until 4 o'clock on Friday 22 March, might not be sufficient in the light of the complexity of the issues. If that is the case, I do not know what he will do in the time that is available. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield said, Opposition Members will oppose the motion. I do not know what the Government can do if they accept that it allows insufficient time.

Mr. Hayes: Will my hon. Friend confirm that our point about credibility relates specifically to the timetable issue? If we do not allow sufficient time for the election of the person who personifies its credibility and legitimacy, hon. Members and the wider community will not regard the House and the lonely office of Speaker with the reverence that they deserve. Is not that a critical aspect of the timetable motion, as people will expect the House to give proper time and attention to its own affairs?

Mr. Blunt: If only people did regard the House with some reverence. I fear that it is not held in the highest regard outside. The reaction to the current proceedings for the election of a Speaker rather confirm that that is the case, certainly in respect of the response of the media and commentators.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): It is a great pity that we are discussing this important matter at this time of night. Does my hon. Friend agree that we are discussing whether sufficient time is being given for debating the method of electing a future Speaker, when

the issue should be whether we should have a timetable motion at all? This is an important matter on which the House should be able freely to express its views, to the extent that it wishes. This is not an appropriate matter for a timetable.

Mr. Blunt: My hon. Friend has made an essential point. This is, by definition, completely a House of Commons matter. It is outrageous that the Executive should table this motion to limit the amount of time, in principle, and also that they should seek to limit it to such an extraordinary extent.

We have just been through the process of an enormously controversial election of a new Speaker, which has generated this report. Given the report's recommendations and the fact that no sitting Speaker has been challenged since 1835, there should be no great rush to put the provisions in place before a general election on 3 May, if that is what is determining the Government's motion to constrain discussion of the matter.

This is an immensely important issue, and the views of Members of the House on the matter should not be constrained by an absurdly limited amount of time for debate. We should have the opportunity for our opinions exhaustively to be canvassed. The Procedure Committee has done that, to a degree, in the questionnaire that it sent out. However, that questionnaire, and the responses to it, raised as many questions as it provided answers. The Committee has made the best possible stab at a solution. It has not produced a completely prescriptive solution that would lend itself to a yes or no decision on the basis of the recommendations that it received. Some form of multi-option motion will be put before us.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I shall put this question in as unpejorative a way as I can. Does my hon. Friend agree that if this overbearing Executive carry on constantly producing these timetables, particularly on matters such as these, which are House of Commons matters on which Members may vote freely according to their diktats, they will ultimately bring the House into disrepute? Does he also agree that the public will, ultimately, not have the regard that they should have for their Parliament?

Mr. Blunt: My hon. Friend brings me to the context in which this debate is taking place. I hope that we have made the case on its merits as to why one and a half or two and a half hours are insufficient time for debate on this matter. That is because it is a House of Commons matter, because of the complexity of the debate, and because of the inability properly to canvass opinions of hon. Members in that abbreviated time.

Mr. Hayes: The motion is about the length of time that we shall have to debate the matter, and also about the time when it will be debated. We have not yet focused on that second point. It might be more appropriate to debate the matter in a new Parliament. Given that we face a likely general election—I put it no more strongly than that—it is possible that the new Parliament with many new Members, very many of them Conservatives, rather than the old one, should decide about the election of its Speaker. It seems odd to be debating this matter at the end of an old Parliament rather than at the beginning of a new one, given that we are talking about a significant change of procedure.

Mr. Blunt: That is the point that I was trying to make. We could face a general election on 3 May, so perhaps the motion is being rushed through so that the House can agree to the new recommendations before prorogation. I understand that the House may prorogue on 5 April to meet the deadline for a 3 May election, with the Prime Minister seeking a dissolution from Her Majesty on 28 March.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Once again, I must remind the hon. Gentleman that we are discussing a particular timetable for a particular motion.

Mr. Bercow: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) has raised an interesting point in debate and has expressed his opinion about what would be the appropriate procedure in a new Parliament. May I seek your guidance on the constitutional position? Let us assume that the Government do not accept his suggestion, but take the view, entirely reasonably and properly perhaps, that the procedure should be determined in this Parliament. Would you be good enough to confirm whether a subsequent Parliament could revoke that judgment?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Each Parliament is sovereign.

Mr. Blunt: The date in the motion—22 March—is important to our discussion. There has been wide speculation as to the date of the general election, when the Prime Minister will seek a dissolution from Her Majesty and when the House will prorogue to meet the deadline for a 3 May—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I must remind the hon. Gentleman that there is no mention in the motion of a date for any general election. Once again, will he please confine his remarks to the motion?

Mr. Blunt: I accept your ruling, Madam Deputy Speaker, although I am slightly puzzled as to why it is not possible to discuss the context in which the motion has been tabled.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The motion refers to a specific date—22 March. I seek your guidance. Surely it is in order to consider that date in the context of a forthcoming election.

Madam Deputy Speaker: A passing reference is acceptable, but the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) was beginning to debate the issue.

Mr. Blunt: You are correct, Madam Deputy Speaker, although I was trying to debate the context of the motion, which must be considered in respect of the wider

[Mr. Blunt]

reputation of the House. We are being invited to accept the motion without knowing the content of the substantive motion to which it refers. That is unacceptable.

Mr. Hayes: Does my hon. Friend agree that it has emerged that—in your words, Madam Deputy Speaker—each Parliament is sovereign? We know that a Parliament can last a maximum of five years, so if we debate the matter according to the Government's suggested timetable, this Parliament's judgment on the election of a Speaker will last a maximum of about a year. Given that it is highly unlikely that we shall elect a new Speaker, the next Parliament will be saddled with rules agreed by this Parliament under which it will have to elect its Speaker. Indeed, it may want to change those rules, so debating the matter today according to such a timetable is nonsense. Let us wait until we have undertaken full consideration and discuss it in the next Parliament, which can take a view as to whether it wants a new Speaker.

Mr. Blunt: I profoundly disagree with my hon. Friend. The procedures and precedents established in previous Parliaments govern how we operate. It is perfectly proper to discuss the matter thoroughly in this Parliament and to set out the procedures for which future elections of Speakers. We must do that at some stage and there is no reason why it should not happen on 22 March. However, there is every reason why the debate should not be limited to perhaps an hour and a half.

Mr. Bercow: Rarely do I dissent from what my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings has to say, but does my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) agree that, at least on this occasion, there is a lacuna in his argument? There is an important distinction between constitutional impropriety—the existence of which my hon. Friend is, I think, wrongly suggesting—and the anti-social character of a debate held at this late hour. The latter may be undesirable, but in fairness to the Government—it irks me to be fair to Ministers—there is nothing constitutionally improper about it.

Mr. Blunt: I agree with my hon. Friend.

The point I want to make relates to the context in which the motion appears, in relation to similar motions tabled by the Government. It raises an important issue concerning the reputation of the House and its ability to do its job properly.

I am a member of Standing Committee F, which has been considering the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. Motion 67 relates to action that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and three other Conservative Members felt it necessary to take because of the curtailing of discussion of that important measure, which contains 130 clauses.

When the Government presented timetable motions relating to Committee stages, Third Readings and so forth, we had at least seen the Bill, because it had been published and had received a First Reading; but when the motion relating to this Bill appeared on the Order Paper, the Second Reading debate had not taken place and the Government were not in a position to change the motion—to be taken immediately after Second Reading—to make some sort of allowance for the interest expressed on Second Reading and the controversy generated about the importance of the issues involved.

I think that the Government are making a profound mistake. I say that in all seriousness to Ministers, and to the deputy Chief Whip. This is not some silly point to be made at 1.30 am. I sincerely believe that to restrict debate on the process by which we are to elect a Speaker to, possibly, an hour and a half, in the context of the curtailing of debate on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill—that is one example, but it is now happening to every piece of legislation—is extremely deleterious to the reputation of this place. We are not doing our job as legislators or as scrutineers either of legislation or of the Executive, because the Executive are using their majority to prevent the rest of the House from doing that. The motion is another example—a most unfortunate example—of the Government's tendency to want simply to drive legislation through.

This is a House of Commons matter. The Executive should not be trying to limit time in such a way. I hope—although I am not sure that it is possible—that at some time and in some way the Government, if they have listened to the debate, will conclude that it is over-egging the pudding to expect the whole House to debate the election of a Speaker during a period of between one and a half and two and a half hours.

We have been much criticised in respect of our conduct of Opposition day debates. The Opposition Front Bench has sometimes decided to split Opposition days into two three-hour debates, to highlight two separate issues. In the case of home affairs debates, for instance, the result has been that the Home Secretary and the shadow Home Secretary have managed to take half the debate between them. Once the two Front-Bench spokesmen have summed up, precious little time has been left for Back Benchers on either side to participate. That is what happens when debate on an individual issue is limited to three hours. I believe that it has been a mistake to use Opposition time in that manner. It has prevented us from addressing, at length and with full Back-Bench participation, the issues that we wish to raise. Similarly, in this motion, the Government are saying that we shall have at most two and a half hours for debate.

Mr. Hayes: I appreciate that my hon. Friends the Members for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) and for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) do not share my desire to have such a broad debate, over quite such an extended time, on the matter. However, I think that we agree that the matter goes beyond the usual conduct of Government business and the usual guillotining of Government legislation. The motion and this debate have hit a much deeper and richer vein—the very business of Parliament. That is a matter of legitimate public concern and requires a full and thorough debate. I believe that, perhaps typically, my hon. Friend is understating the case.

Mr. Blunt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

I note that the motion has been tabled only by the Leader of the House. I am sure that that was a deliberate decision, as the motion deals with a House of Commons matter. I ask the Minster to convey to her our belief that it is not sufficient for her, as Leader of the House,

to propose such a short time to consider such an important matter. I therefore hope that, before we divide on the motion, the Government can find a way of reversing their position on the matter. I profoundly believe that the Leader of the House should find a way of doing so, and I hope that the Minister will tell her that.

1.32 am

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I do not wish to detain the House unduly on this matter. In fact, I had not intended to speak in the debate.

Mr. Bercow: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hayes: I must make a little progress, if my hon. Friend will bear with me.

I have become animated, not to say angry, as I have listened to the debate. I do not want to use hyperbole, but I believe that the motion is more than simply another example of the Government abusing their position so as to curtail proper debate on their business. I believe that the motion is about curtailing the rights of hon. Members on both sides of the House who want to express a wide range of opinions on the matter. We know from the election of the current Speaker—who is a very good Speaker—that hon. Members on both sides of the House hold a variety of views on the subject. We also know that the election of the Speaker is important both to the House and to the public. As I said in a brief earlier intervention, the public would judge us harshly if we were to deal with the matter in a cursory fashion.

Mr. Bercow: Entirely inadvertently, I am sure, my hon. Friend has traduced me. Does he accept that full debate on these important matters and debate in the next Parliament should not be regarded as mutually exclusive? It is even entirely possible to envisage a comprehensive and perhaps even leisurely debate on the matters being conducted before this Parliament concludes.

Mr. Hayes: That may indeed happen. My point is that a general election may be imminent—I do not want to get into a debate on the date of the general election—and it would be bizarre for this Parliament to agree a procedure for the election of the Speaker that would then be foisted on a new Parliament, which may be very different in its composition from this one. It might contain a different range and set of views.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. We are simply debating whether the amount of time indicated in the motion is appropriate.

Mr. Hayes: I accept your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but are we not also debating the date on which the motion should be discussed? My point is that the time allocated is inadequate, and that the motion may be set for debate on the wrong date. It may not be appropriate to debate it next week, as the speculation is that we may be coming to the end of this Parliament. My point is that it might be appropriate to have a wider, public discussion of the implications of the Procedure Committee's report, as happened after the election of our current Speaker. That should be followed by a thorough and full debate in the House.

Neither the time allowed on the day by the Government, nor the timetable that they have set, allow for full public debate or proper exploration of the matter before a possibly imminent general election. A curtailed debate, a limited timetable in the House and inadequate wider discussion among the general public, who will have views on the report, would be followed by a general election. An earlier occupant of the Chair suggested that the new Parliament would be sovereign and entitled to debate the whole matter again. There is therefore a legitimate point to be made about the date set for debate of this matter, as well as the time allocated for its discussion.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hayes: Yes, but I am due to be evangelising my party's cause at 8 o'clock in the morning. I do not want to be much later going to bed.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am sorry to keep my hon. Friend up for another 30 seconds, but I wonder whether he has considered an important point. The motion is in two parts, and they are different in their application. The first part does not protect debate, and so the Government can put as many statements on before it as they choose. I hope that the Minister will indicate whether any statements will be scheduled for that day. The second part of the motion protects the debate to be held on the private business regarding the Kent County Council Bill and Medway Council Bill. Would not it be reasonable for the Government to allocate greater time for the first section of the motion?

Mr. Hayes: My hon. Friend's intervention was so convoluted—untypically, as he always speaks with great acumen and lucidity—and my own desire for bed and cocoa is so great that I cannot deal with it—

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Hayes: Yes, but my hon. Friend must do better this time.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: I am conscious of being censored by my hon. Friend, but there has been so much hilarity and barracking in the Chamber that I have not been able to address the point seriously. However, I do not understand why my hon. Friend fails to grasp the point that the first part of the motion is very different from the second part.

Mr. Hayes: I think that it was G.K. Chesterton who said that people who have the impatience to interrupt the words of others seldom have the patience to choose good words of their own. I do not want to ascribe that fault to my hon. Friend, but he is right to suggest that we might end up with only an hour and a half in which to debate the motion. The matter is profoundly important, and it stimulates a variety of views across the Chamber. To have so short a time for its discussion is inadequate and scandalous. The seriousness and breadth of the Committee report is such that I suggest that many right hon. and hon. Members will want to contribute to the debate. We will be faced with a situation that I have seen before in my short time in the House in which right hon. and

[Mr. Hayes]

hon. Members will seek to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and will be disappointed. Not only will they be disappointed but their constituents and others will feel that they have not had an opportunity to make their views known properly.

Mr. Bercow: My hon. Friend is making a cogent point. Did he notice a moment ago that when he suggested that many right hon. and hon. Members might wish to contribute to this important debate in future, hand gestures from the Deputy Chief Whip appeared to cavil at that suggestion? Will my hon. Friend accept from me that there is a great difference between a debate at 1.40 am, resulting necessarily in a relatively modest attendance, and debate at a proper hour on a normal working day of the House, which would probably attract a great deal of interest from right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber?

Mr. Hayes: I suspect that such a debate would attract not only full attendance in the Chamber but a good deal of public and press attention. Indeed, I am convinced of it. I suggest that it would also be one of the more interesting debates in the Chamber from the perspective of the wider public. Unusual views would be expressed, and I suspect that those views would cross the party divide. We have had a taste of that in the debate that followed the election of the Speaker.

It seems unwise of the Government to curtail debate with this timetable motion. I have known the Minister for many years; we have known each other man and boy—well, almost. I know him to be a reasonable and decent man. I suspect that he wants the matter to be explored in the most extensive manner. I do not know whether he has been pushed into this, but it is unwise of the Government to curtail debate in this way because I think that the public will judge them harshly for so doing.

The debate is proposed to take place on the wrong date and at the wrong stage in the Parliament. There is certainly not enough time in which to debate the issues. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown) said with regard to the detail of the motion, the nature of the private business to be debated that day and the pressure that it puts on other business on the Order Paper renders the time allocated for debate on the election of a Speaker even less suitable. It is a bit of a pig's breakfast—a dog's dinner. *[Interruption.]* The Deputy Chief Whip laughs. It is a testament to the House that we can deal with this matter with a degree of good humour, but there is a serious point at stake.

The Speaker is in many ways the personification of the House's legitimacy.

Mr. Bercow: The embodiment.

Mr. Hayes: The embodiment and the personification. I do not think that the two are mutually exclusive. The way in which we elect the Speaker is therefore critical to that legitimacy. The way in which we debate that election is itself of great importance. That is why it is not simply the debate that will take place in a week's time which will attract public scrutiny but tonight's debate on timetabling that important business.

If the House ceases to take itself and the election of its Speaker seriously, I suspect that it will cease to be taken seriously. It is not too late to think again about this. We know that the motion as such has not been laid before the House so there is a certain amount of flexibility. It is not too late to think about the wider consultation and discussion that might take place on the Procedure Committee report before the House considers it.

I appeal to the Parliamentary Secretary, given our long and friendly relationship, to consider the matter again, take on board the comments made from what are, as I think that he will agree, some of the rising stars on the Opposition Benches, and do what I am confident that he will feel to be right: allow the fullest and fairest discussion of the matter when it comes before the House by relaxing the restriction that he is seeking to impose on us this evening.

1.45 am

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I wish to argue one clear, simple case, which I was unable to get across to my hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), and to secure a concession from the Parliamentary Secretary on the timetable motion.

As I said in an intervention on my hon. Friend, the timetable has two parts. The first relates to the debate on the mechanism by which we are to elect a new Speaker. The second protects debate on private business—not private Member's business—and relates to the Kent County Council and Medway Council Bills.

The two parts of the motion are worded differently. The first does not name the length of the debate, but merely states that proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion by 4 pm. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) said, if we have a business statement, a private notice question and another ministerial statement, we might have only one or one and a half hours in which to debate a matter that is critically important for the House—how it is to elect its next Speaker.

We do not know when those proceedings may be brought into effect—it might be in the next Parliament or the following Parliament. Nevertheless, these are critical and important matters for the House. To have them timetabled for only one and a half hours seems highly unsatisfactory. I wonder whether I can wring this concession from the Parliamentary Secretary: that we will not have any ministerial statements on that day. If he cannot give us an answer now, perhaps the business managers will consider it before 22 March. It is not within the Parliamentary Secretary's gift to control private notice questions, because those are in the gift of the Speaker, who will perhaps have heard what I have said.

It is wholly unsatisfactory that we should have such a short time in which to debate the first matter when the second part of the motion protects three extra hours of debate, over and above the time that is taken on any preceding votes. Often, timetable motions provide that time for debate should include the votes.

On the one hand, the Government and the business managers are being very generous to the private Bills, but on the other they are being very parsimonious about the amount of time that they are allowing for debate on this other important matter. The Parliamentary Secretary has

been nodding. I hope that my proposals will be seriously considered and, on that basis, I need not detain the House any longer.

1.48 am

Mr. Tipping: We have had an interesting debate that has focused on time and the timetable, which have been high on the minds of Opposition Members. They are concerned about when the general election will be held. I do not blame them. When one looks at the opinion polls, the phrase, "Lord, make us chaste, but not yet", comes to mind. I hear the Opposition saying, "Lord, give us a general election, but not yet, because we face real difficulties."

I will not be drawn on those matters.

Mr. Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Tipping: No. I will deal with the hon. Gentleman's question in a minute.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) was described, uncharitably, as being unsighted. Let me make it clear to hon. Members—I am unsighted as to the date of the general election.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield was not unsighted about the report of the Procedure Committee. He has clearly read it and knows that the election of a Speaker is an evolutionary matter. I noted his comment that the 1972 election was radically different from the current state of affairs. Hon. Members who have considered the report will realise that things have changed dramatically at various points over time.

The issue before us is clearly one of time and timetabling. Three substantive points were made. There has been some fair criticism that the motions were not laid before the House. I remind hon. Members of what I said in my opening remarks; the motions will be laid shortly. The hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) takes a close interest in when motions are laid, so I shall not make him a commitment that the motions will be laid today, tomorrow or the next day. They will, however, be laid shortly—certainly in good time for Members to consider them and to table amendments.

Mr. Blunt: The misfortune is that the motions were not available before this debate, because we are trying to make a judgment about the time for their debate. The substantive point is not about the motions, because I am sure that the Minister will put them before the House as soon as he can.

Mr. Tipping: I shall do so. There are motions in existence, but they need a little more polishing and refining. As the hon. Gentleman said, this is not a take-it-or-leave-it matter—there will be choices. As I said earlier, the only issue that divided the Committee was open and closed voting. An amendment will be tabled to enable the House to make a choice on that matter.

That brings me to the central point. Hon. Members have noted the great variation of view on this matter. Certainly, there is some variation, but what struck me when I read the Committee's report was the degree of consensus that had emerged—it voted on only one matter. One of the Committee's members is in the Chamber—my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill).

The Committee has provided a firm framework within which the House can discuss the matter. The motions that we table will mirror as closely as possible the recommendations of the Procedure Committee. I make that point directly to address those hon. Members who challenged me on the matter.

In fairness to the hon. Member for Beaconsfield, he is right to note that the time for debate will be limited. We heeded the advice of the Committee on that matter—especially the fact that its Chairman had asked for an early debate to be held on the election of a Speaker. Hon. Members referred to the various demands on the time of the House, so I am pleased that we have had the opportunity to arrange an early debate on the matter.

It is conceivable that the time for the debate could be restricted—hon. Members have said that it could be only an hour and a half. I got the point made by the hon. Member for Cotswold (Mr. Clifton-Brown), although I did not understand some of his points—I think that some of his colleagues had difficulty in understanding them. He asked me to try to ensure that the time was not eroded by statements and private notice questions. Of course, private notice questions are a matter not for me but for the Chair. However, I heard what the hon. Gentleman said and we will do our best to protect the time available. That is not an absolute guarantee: we will do our best.

That desire to protect the time—

Mr. Bercow: The hon. Gentleman is as mellifluous as ever.

Mr. Tipping: Emollient, I think—*[Interruption.]* Give me some more—I am on a roll. However, with a Whip and a former Whip sitting on the Treasury Bench beside me, I had better make some progress.

The Procedure Committee has given us a good basis to work from. It has provided a consensus. Every effort will be made to lay the motions as quickly as possible. They will mirror as closely as possible the Committee's report.

I have heard the plea of the hon. Members for Cotswold and for Beaconsfield that we try not further to erode the time available. I simply remind the House that, back in 1972, this debate was concluded in an hour and five minutes. Although we have not had the opportunity to discuss the substance of the report tonight, we have already spent a longer time examining these issues.

Question put:—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I think the Ayes have it.

Hon. Members: No.

Division deferred till Wednesday 14 March, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].

High Hedges Bill [*Money*]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

1.55 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Robert Ainsworth): I beg to move,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the High Hedges Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenses incurred by the Secretary of State in consequence of the Act; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided by virtue of any other Act.

The Government support the private Member's Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Solihull (Mr. Taylor). It brings relief to thousands of people in England and Wales who feel that their quality of life is blighted simply because they cannot persuade their neighbours to cut their hedges to a reasonable height.

The Bill gives people the opportunity to refer disputes to their local authority, which will consider whether the hedge is causing a serious problem. Local authorities are given powers in appropriate cases to require the owners of hedges to cut them to a reasonable height and to ensure that they do so. It also provides rights of appeal to the Secretary of State against the decisions of local authorities.

The main costs of the Bill will fall on local authorities. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions estimates that it will cost it some £2 million to deal with the backlog of about 10,000 existing cases spread over a period of three years. Thereafter, we expect the case load to drop considerably. Those costs will be met, in part at least, by fees paid by the complainants. Transfer of resources to the revenue support grant settlement will cover any shortfall.

The Secretary of State intends to delegate his appeal functions entirely to the planning inspectorate, assuming that 20 per cent. of cases go to appeal—in other words, 2,000 cases over the initial three years. That could amount to a cost of £2.1 million. Demand is then expected to fall when the backlog has been cleared.

I hope that the House will support the motion.

1.57 am

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): The Government seem to have money to throw around on this matter, so why did the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions today tell one of my constituents, a business man who has appealed against his business rates levy, that his appeal could not be heard until February 2003? I imagine that the reason is that the Government are saying that they have not the resources to allocate to business rates appeals. I am talking about people who are engaged in business, trying to make money despite all the difficulties and regulation that are imposed on them by the Government.

The Minister comes to the House tonight and says that the Government have £4 million available. Why are they choosing to spend it on high hedges rather than on enabling business men to get a timely resolution of their rating appeals? The Minister knows that, pending an appeal, the full rates demanded must be paid, despite the fact that the gentleman in question might win his appeal in two years' time. The Government say that they have this spare money to spend on high hedges. Why cannot they spend more money on speeding up the rating appeal process?

The Minister underestimates the number of cases that will arise under the Bill, if it ever reaches the statute book. An enormous number of people have complained about their neighbours' high hedges. Under the wide definition used in the Bill, any two conifers, not deciduous trees, planted close together amount to high hedge and could result in a complaint being made and the local authority being involved, and so on. I should be interested to know why the Minister thinks that that will result in only about 10,000 cases, given that our constituency postbags suggest that a very much larger number might be involved.

2 am

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The hon. Gentleman seems to suggest that there is no a real problem, but that flies in the face of half the comments that he has made and the fact that Conservative Front Benchers support the measure. A very real problem exists for many people, but there is no proper way forward for them. The courts are not adequate to deal with the size of the issue that they face, and the measure could provide a solution to that problem. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman can say, on the one hand, that we are throwing money around—effectively wasting it—and, on the other, that we have massively underestimated the problem, which could be much bigger than he thinks.

There was a consultation process, to which not only members of the public, but a large proportion of local authorities responded. A national organisation has been working on the problem for some time, so some reasonably serious estimates of the size of the problem exist, and our estimates were changed as a result of the consultation.

The hon. Gentleman raises an issue affecting an individual constituent. He cannot expect to deal with it at this time of night, his having given me no warning of it, so I do not intend to do so.

Question put and agreed to.

SITTINGS IN WESTMINSTER HALL

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January.]

That, following the Order [20th November 2000], Mr. Nicholas Winterton, Mr. John McWilliam, Mr. Barry Jones and Frank Cook be appointed to act as additional Deputy Speakers at sittings in Westminster Hall during this Session—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question put and agreed to.

Delegated Legislation

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [28 February.]

2.2 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I beg to move,

That the Motions in the name of Mr. Secretary Straw relating to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if they related to instruments subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation) in respect of which notice has been given that the instruments be approved.

Under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, we are required to set the remuneration of the electoral commissioners. The motion will do that.

Question put and agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees and Delegated Legislation),

Local Government Finance

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 75) (HC 228), which was laid before this House on 8th February, be approved.

That the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 76) (HC 233), which was laid before this House on 15th February, be approved.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees and Delegated Legislation),

Transport

That the draft British Waterways Board (Limit for Borrowing) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 15th February, be approved.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees and Delegated Legislation),

Education

That the draft School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (Amendment of Schedule 18) (England) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 119(9) (European Standings Committees),

Animal By-Products

That this House takes note of European Union Documents Nos. 12648/00, a draft Council Regulation laying down the health rules concerning animal by-products not intended for human consumption, and 12646/00, a draft Council Directive amending Council Directives 90/425/EEC and 92/118/EEC as regards health requirements for animal by-products; and supports the Government's objective of achieving a revised Regulation to protect animal and public health whilst ensuring that controls are proportionate to the risk they are designed to address.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I think the Ayes have it.

Hon. Members: No.

Division deferred till Wednesday 14 March, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Miners' Compensation (South Wales)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

2.4 am

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I apologise to my hon. Friend the Minister for calling him to the House at this very late hour, but the circumstances were well beyond my control and that of other Labour Members.

I am grateful to Mr. Speaker and the authorities here for allowing me the opportunity of an Adjournment debate on the levy imposed on miners' compensation settlements by the south Wales area of the National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers—NACODS. When the High Court found in favour of the miners in its historic decision of January 1998, I was delighted for the hundreds of thousands of formér miners across Britain. I represent a coal mining area, so I am fully aware of the lung disease and ill health of former miners and I was delighted by the immediate acceptance of Government responsibility by our then Minister for Energy and Industry, who is now the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, West (Mr. Battle).

The legal action had been brought by the south Wales area of NACODs and, over the succeeding weeks and months, I had every regard for Bleddyn Hancock, its general secretary, for his work and achievements despite his active support for Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party.

On 24 September 1999, a constituent, Mr. Tommy Williams of Glanamman, came to see my in my surgery. Now aged 70, he is a former miner and has been an active member of NACODs since 1958. He told me that, along with about 200 other members of the south Wales area, in the early 1990s, he had volunteered £800 to finance the legal action and to be screened to be one of the eventual test cases. Now that the legal action is over and costs have been reimbursed, he wants his £800 refunded as was originally promised.

Mr. Williams had attended a recent branch meeting about his own compensation claim and was asked to sign a form to pay a levy for his eventual settlement. The declaration concerned NACODS acting on his behalf in all matters involving the claim and the agreement concluded:

> "I further agree to contribute 5 per cent. as a paid up member and 10 per cent. as a non-paid up member of any settlement figure that I may receive to NACODS to assist with the costs of settling my claim."

Mr. Williams refused to sign and felt that the union was wrong in imposing the levy. The legal action was over, and there was no new major cost in processing his claim.

Mr. Williams was also bitterly critical of Mr. Bleddyn Hancock. I had not met Mr. Williams previously, but he is a member of the Labour party and deeply resented Mr. Hancock's incessant attacks on the Labour Government, accusing them at every juncture of bad faith in processing the miners' claims. I raised these matters with NACODS nationally in a letter to Peter McNestry and I was very surprised to learn that the south Wales area had ceded from the national union in June 1998. NACODS nationally had no levy, but charged £50 administrative costs for successful claims in industrial injury actions.

I then took up Mr. Williams's case with Mr. Bleddyn Hancock. After three or four robust exchanges of correspondence, there was no progress. Mr. Hancock vigorously defended his union's right to impose a levy on every individual that it helped, despite the fact that it was a class action involving thousands of claimants.

In a conversation on 13 January 2000, Mr. Williams quoted a settlement just agreed for a fellow NACODS member. The award was for £150,000 less a clawback of £5,000, giving £145,000. The levy of 5 per cent. would then give the union £7,250.

On 29 March 2000, I wrote to the certification office for trade unions and employer associations, asking it to investigate the above matters and for copies of recent annual reports for the NACODS south Wales area. In those reports, the membership from 1994 to the present is listed as 45, 45, 45, 854, 45, 40 in 1999 and about 30 today. I was staggered to find that the south Wales area of NACODS is such a tiny trade union. Mr. Bleddyn Hancock is regularly described as a south Wales miners' leader, as if he were the equivalent of Dai Francis or Will Paynter. The army that he represents is a mere shell of a trade union, with just 30 working members. The anomalous figure of 854 members for 1997 may represent retired miners.

Over the next six months, the certification office conducted a detailed informal investigation under the powers of section 37A of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992, as amended. As a result of its investigation, the £800 initially paid by Mr. Williams was reimbursed last May. On the more general question of the NACODS levy, the certification officer, Mr. Whybrew, took a fairly dispassionate view and decided not to appoint inspectors for a formal investigation. In his last letter to me, dated 19 October 2000, he said:

> "In passing I note the Association accepts that members seeking compensation need not make use of the union services to claim that compensation. I understand that where members, including lapsed members, are unwilling to give an undertaking to pay the levy, they are free to seek such support from elsewhere or to process the claim themselves."

Sadly, that is the position of my constituent, Mr. Williams. On 16 May 2000, Mr. Hancock wrote to him, restating the arguments for the levy and inviting him to leave the association. After 40 years as a loyal and active member of NACODS, that is Mr. Williams's decision.

I turn now to a 25-minute television programme, "Dragon's Eye", shown on BBC 2 Wales on Thursday 8 February this year. I had discussions with one of the presenters, Mr. Guto Thomas, during preparation of the programme. It contained considerable new material on NACODS south Wales area and the role of Mr. Bleddyn Hancock. I have the programme on video and I have carefully studied a transcript. Most of the time is taken up with a searching interview with Mr. Hancock by the presenter, Mr. David Williams.

As regards the levy, the point is put repeatedly that all the legal costs are being reimbursed by the Government, so why should members have to pay a 5 or 10 per cent. levy from their settlements? Mr. Hancock concedes that

the union could raise millions of pounds from the levy, argues that it has always been union policy and says that the money will be used to finance future legal actions.

The programme contained material, which was new to me, on the South Wales Occupational Health Project, a limited company set up by Mr. Hancock and others which involved the recruitment of thousands of miners from Yorkshire, Lancashire and south Wales for legal claims against the Government. A voluntary contribution of 7 per cent. of compensation settlements was involved, although Mr. Hancock says that the contributions were never collected, as the case was won before they were required.

The programme concluded with a lengthy cross-examination of Mr. Hancock's personal terms of employment and how decisions on his salary were reached. A study of the annual reports for 1998 and 1999 show that the general secretary's salary in 1997 was £12,158; in 1998, it was £26,950; and in 1999, it was £47,612. It doubled in 1998, increased by 80 per cent. in 1999 and increased fourfold over two years. That is for a part-time job, three days a week. I should add that Mr. Hancock receives £8,500 a year for one day a week as trustee of the miners' pension funds. In addition, form AR 21 on page 17 of the 1999 annual report gives a car allowance of £18,000. The programme also revealed an exceptional figure of a £70,000 salary for the general secretary in 1995. Those are highly eccentric salary changes, and the exchanges on those matters raised more questions than they answered.

Following transmission of the programme, the *South Wales Argus*, a vocal supporter of Mr. Hancock throughout the years, published an editorial on 9 February headed "End the levy, Mr. Hancock". It said:

"Unfortunately, we have to disagree with Mr. Hancock about the levy. We feel it is now unreasonable.

Its original purpose was to finance the court battle—a cause bravely fought and rightly won.

But since the government has picked up the legal bill for NACODS' High Court victory we feel it is no longer justified for the union to be taking a slice of the compensation cake."

It concluded:

"his union is still doing something that even his national president Sean O'Neill has described as an irregular practice adding that their function was to win compensation, not make money out of it."

I want the Department of Trade and Industry to consider the matters carefully and the Minister to ask the certification officer to appoint inspectors to conduct an investigation under powers in section 37(1)(b) of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992.

Let me summarise my concerns. First, is it right that NACODS south Wales area charges a 5 or 10 per cent. levy on compensation settlements when NACODS nationally and the National Union of Mineworkers have no such levy? I understand that a levy may be reasonable at an individual level if there is an accident or injury at work, but this is a class action involving 100,000 claimants. The union is not involved in further litigation; it is merely helping solicitors to process individual claims, the costs of which are fully reimbursed. The levy is simply being used for a windfall gain. It is immoral to take money from miners' pockets.

Secondly, how were decisions reached on the 5 and 10 per cent. levy? Mr. Hancock claims that the levy has always been union policy, but south Wales area NACODS only ceded from the national union in June 1998. Why did the south Wales area split from the national union? The 5 or 10 per cent. formula was introduced for individual personal injury claims. There should have been fresh discussions on its application to something as uniquely large as the chest disease settlement.

I understand that only working members have a vote; retired members have no vote. Is it right that a small handful of people—just 30 working members—impose the 5 per cent. levy on 1,000 to 2,000 retired members who have no vote? Lapsed members also have no vote, but are asked to contribute 10 per cent. of their settlements. Should not the old maxim "no taxation without representation" apply?

Thirdly, what is the role of solicitors in the administration of the levy? At my surgery on 24 September 1999, my constituent, Mr. Williams, told me that he had received an interim payment of £2,000 from his solicitors, Hugh James and Co of Merthyr Tydfil. Before they made payment, he was required to send a cheque for £100—the 5 per cent. levy—to NACODS. It appears that Hugh James was acting in such a way as to enforce the levy. Is that the company's general practice? If so, it is effectively aiding and abetting the enforcement of the levy. Is that ethical? I thought that a solicitor was meant to act directly on someone's behalf, but it appears that there is an odd arrangement between that firm of solicitors and south Wales area NACODS in the collection of the levy. Is that legal and proper?

Fourthly, what is the money for? South Wales area NACODS has only 30 working members, but has about 2,000 retired and lapsed members. It is expected that compensation settlements may average £20,000 each. If there is a 5 or 10 per cent. levy, the total income will be a windfall of more than £1 million. Indeed, Mr. Hancock concedes that order of magnitude in the television programme. What is the money for when there are only 30 working members and two members of staff?

Fifthly, the salary arrangements for the general secretary have given eccentric results. Are there proper accountable procedures? If there is a windfall of revenue due to that tiny trade union, the certification officer must be satisfied that there is proper decision-making apparatus.

Finally, south Wales area NACODS and Mr. Bleddyn Hancock, its general secretary, have rendered a terrific service to all miners through their High Court action. That action is now behind us. The Government are delivering due and proper compensation to miners and their widows, and reimbursing solicitors and trade unions for all their legal costs. The levy is therefore improper and cannot be justified. As the *South Wales Argus* said on 9 February, "End the levy, Mr. Hancock".

2.22 am

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mr. Peter Hain): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Carmarthen and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) on securing this debate? He is an excellent Member of Parliament and I hope that he will be rewarded at the next election with re-election with a good vote from his constituents. He has carried the torch of justice for miners and is now shining a bright light on what we both believe is an indefensible irregularity.

[Mr. Peter Hain]

I agree that we should all acknowledge the part that south Wales area National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers played in achieving justice for miners in winning compensation for respiratory disease through the courts. It was a long battle against the previous Conservative Government and British Coal, and south Wales area NACODS deserves credit for spearheading it. The association certainly incurred legal costs in that fight, but they have been and are being met in full by the Government.

I want to see all the compensation due to miners going to them. The elderly, the seriously ill and the widows should get their money in full. That is their right; justice for all of their suffering demands nothing less. I must make it clear to the House that the Department of Trade and Industry, since we assumed the liabilities of British Coal, has been responsible for meeting all the trial costs not only for respiratory disease litigation, but for vibration white finger as well. The House may not be aware that, to date, the Department has paid out over £14 million in trial costs alone to the six firms of solicitors that brought proceedings against British Coal, one of which was funded by NACODS. That firm alone received a significant proportion of the £14 million paid out in costs. Discussions are continuing with the solicitors and we anticipate making further post-trial costs payments shortly. There should be no significant on-going risk to NACODS of having to meet costs in individual claims. The Department has agreed with the miners' solicitors fixed rates of payments for all successful claims, which are intended to cover all solicitors costs.

The agreed costs for most successful vibration white finger claims will be in the region of £600 plus VAT and reasonable disbursements, although in some cases the costs are dealt with on the merits of each case. For respiratory disease, the agreed costs per successful claim range from £500 for chronic bronchitis-only claims to more than £2,000 for chronic bronchitis and emphysema claims that have gone through the full medical assessment procedure.

The level of costs will also depend on the complexity of the case. For example, where the disputes procedures have been invoked or where complex special damages are being claimed, extra solicitors fees have been agreed. A full breakdown of the costs paid to solicitors is available in the handling agreements for both diseases, copies of which are in the Library.

So far, £31.8 million has been paid to solicitors handling these claims. The total bill could be in excess of £250 million. Nobody has suggested that solicitors are short-changed. No one has complained to me about the level of the fees. We have also agreed to pay costs towards the care and maintenance of all claims that were registered before June 1999, regardless of whether they are ultimately successful. In addition, the Department is meeting all the costs of the medical assessment process, including spirometry testing, records collection and the respiratory specialists' time.

We have made it clear that we do not intend to recover any of these costs where the claimant is unsuccessful. Recovery of such costs by defendants is usual in personal injury litigation. The risks to the costs of solicitors and other legal representatives in handling claims under the claims handling agreements is therefore low, and covers only the administrative work that they need to complete for claims that are ultimately unsuccessful.

I know that claims handlers will charge a success fee—a fixed percentage of the total compensation—much as NACODS does, for handling claims. The Department has been keen to ensure that claimants know that they can pursue their case through a solicitor without such a success fee being taken from them. Solicitors are not able to do that, as the cases are still proceedings before the court. Claimants should not have to pay success fees to anybody.

I firmly believe that the compensation paid by the Department should go to the claimants, without any third party taking a slice of the compensation. Of course, if claimants want to give some of their compensation as a donation to their union in recognition of the support that they have received in pursuing their claim, that is up to them.

The south Wales region of NACODS needs to examine its conscience if it is taking what could be substantial sums intended as compensation for the suffering miners. I understand that no other British region of NACODS takes such a slice of the compensation. The south Wales National Union of Mineworkers certainly does not, and I pay tribute to its general secretary, Wayne Thomas, for the work that he has done in securing justice for retired miners and their widows.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 provides powers for the certification officer to investigate the financial affairs of unions. However, the certification officer is an independent statutory authority and it would be wrong for the Government to interfere in his handling of individual cases. I cannot therefore write to the certification officer on this matter.

However, if any claimant wishes to make a complaint about a union financial matter, the certification officer is required to consider whether to appoint an inspector. I would therefore encourage any claimants who are experiencing difficulties to contact their solicitor or, if they do not wish to do so, their local citizens advice bureau in the first instance.

I have spent the past six weeks questioning and re-examining previous decisions and proposals, and I was delighted on 2 March when the Prime Minister announced in Swansea that we were extending fast-track and interim offers to more than 6,000 claimants. That will mean that £30 million of compensation for widows and asthma victims will be brought forward and offered quickly. That is, of course, on top of the 33,000 payments already made, totalling more than £125 million. In fact, we have now paid out more than £360 million in vibration white finger compensation throughout Britain. In Wales, £60 million has been paid. Those figures are significantly greater than the recent coal subsidy and the regeneration money paid by the previous Conservative Government at the time of the 1992 pit closures. Some £1 million is already being paid out each day on those two major schemes, but it does not stop there. I am continuing to explore ways in which we can extend interim payments even further.

Progress is being made, but it is not good enough and not quick enough for those who have suffered the tragic loss of loved ones. In the past two weeks, we have agreed with miners' solicitors on the handling of compensation

for pension loss. That was one of the first matters that Bleddyn Hancock of south Wales NACODS raised with me, and £400 million in funding is available for that purpose. That is the last piece in the jigsaw, which means that full and final offers of compensation will be made in the next few months.

Of course, compensation can never be released quickly enough when people are suffering as many miners are. We need to bear in mind the fact that, with fresh claims coming all the time, there could be significantly more than 150,000 claims to settle. About 1,000 claims a week are still being received. We will continue to seek every means we can of reducing further delays, but that will require the co-operation of all parties. For my part, I shall ensure that the elderly and most injured are seen first. We are also prioritising widows who are claiming on behalf of their late husbands.

On vibration white finger, progress continues to be good. To date, we have settled nearly 21,500 claims and made a further 25,350 interim payments. In total, we have paid more than £235 million in compensation on vibration white finger. In Carmarthenshire, almost £2 million has been paid to 500 people. That is increasing week by week. I am delighted that claimants will see further progress in the next few months. They have a right to expect it.

As my hon. Friend rightly said, it is the Labour Government who are delivering, while others—I refer especially to Plaid Cymru—try to exploit the suffering of miners' families, widows and communities. We are delivering the programme and we expect all parties, including Plaid Cymru, to co-operate, to provide constructive criticism where it is appropriate and to make positive suggestions, which will be taken on board, as they have been previously. What matters is justice to miners and their families, widows and communities, which is why the Government have made available more than £2 billion to fund justice for miners who have suffered long years of ill health.

I have seen the need for such help. My constituent, Mr. Ken Herdman of Seven Sisters in the Dulais valley, Neath, is trapped at home. He is stuck in his front room, his bathroom, his living room and where he sleeps. He cannot go outside for walks like the rest of us. When he walks the few yards from his front room to his bathroom—something that we would do without even thinking about it—he has to stop to catch his breath. After he has returned from the bathroom, he takes up to half an hour to recover. All the time, his wife cares for him and is hovering in the background. It is to such long-suffering miners that the Government owe a debt. We are repaying that debt and will continue to do so.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: My hon. Friend vividly described a miner in Seven Sisters in his constituency. In the light of that description, does he agree that it is unjust that the miners' own trade union is clawing back 5 per cent. of the compensation settlement as a levy? We have heard Mr. Hancock say a lot about clawback and how wrong it is that it applies to some individuals. However, with regard to the union, all individuals are required to pay 5 per cent. of their settlement as a sort of compulsory clawback.

Mr. Hain: I regard that as unjust. The justice and full compensation should go to the people concerned, such as those whom my hon. Friend represents so ably in his constituency.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-six minutes to Three o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 14 March 2001

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Zambezi River System

1. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): What environmental impact studies have been undertaken by her Department into the Zambezi river system. [152209]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Chris Mullin): We are not currently funding any long-term environmental studies because there is no shortage of such studies. However, more needs to be done to build up water management systems in Mozambique and across southern Africa. We are helping organisations in the region to produce transnational water management agreements and have helped to develop a water resources management strategy in Zimbabwe to relieve the pressure on Mozambique. In addition, we are helping the Mozambique water authorities to obtain hydrological and meteorological data on the Zambezi and other major river systems so that flood predictions can be quickly produced and disseminated.

Mr. Corbyn: I thank the Minister for that answer and welcome the fact that many environmental studies are being undertaken on the Zambezi river system. In relation to those studies and to any contribution made by the Department for International Development, will my hon. Friend consider the long-term effects of land use changes in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia? They have led to massive deforestation, which has resulted in the soil being unable to retain large quantities of water, which in turn means fast run-off during the rainy season. All that raises rivers to extraordinary levels. Will my hon. Friend also consider the possibility of reducing the levels of the lakes at Kariba and Cabora Bassa with a view to their being used as retention lakes during the rainy season? That might reduce flooding in Mozambique.

Mr. Mullin: The unprecedented amount of rain in the Zambezi valley area makes it unlikely that any amount of planning would have avoided serious flooding. However, action can be taken to mitigate the effects, including better liaison between the water management authorities in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, better early-warning systems and better contingency planning. I am not aware that deforestation has been a major factor in the present crisis, but I shall make inquiries and get back to my hon. Friend about that.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): The Minister knows that the poorest people in the world suffer most from disasters such as that in Mozambique. Will he, therefore, congratulate Comic Relief on spending more than £110 million since 1985 on improving the lives of the poorest people in Africa? Would he, the Secretary of State and other hon. Members like to join us at a Comic Relief photo call on College green at 3.45 pm? You, too, would be welcome, Mr. Speaker, and red noses will be provided.

Mr. Mullin: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating anyone who attempts to relieve the suffering of the world's poorest people. I shall check my diary carefully to see whether I am available to wear a red nose on College green, but the House will understand that I have my reputation to protect.

Corruption

2. **Mr. Christopher Fraser** (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): If she will make a statement on efforts to combat corruption in developing countries. [152210]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): Since 1997, I have greatly increased my Department's anti-corruption work. We are increasingly helping Governments to strengthen their financial management systems, anti-corruption authorities, customs and tax authorities, and civil service and legal systems. Denunciation will not halt corruption: we need to build systems that prevent and catch it, as we can learn from our own history.

We are also working with the World Bank Institute and with Germany, Norway and the Netherlands to help to extend anti-corruption work across the developing world. The Proceeds of Crime Bill will strengthen the United Kingdom's capacity to seize and return assets plundered by corrupt Governments. We are helping the Governments of Pakistan and Nigeria to make use of existing legal systems to seek the return of such assets. We are committed to legislating to strengthen UK law against bribery and corruption abroad in line with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development convention against bribery of public officials abroad.

Mr. Fraser: I thank the Secretary of State. On 10 April last year, the Government said that they would implement the OECD convention as soon as possible. The globalisation White Paper goes on to say that poor people suffer most from corruption. Why, then, does the International Development Bill contain no provision on that point? Has the Secretary of State abandoned the Government's ethical foreign policy?

Clare Short: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has not researched his question thoroughly enough. We are committed to introducing such legislation, but it will be a large Bill and would not fit into the slim International Development Bill. If it had been combined with that Bill,

we should not have been able to introduce that Bill in this Parliament. The legislation to which the hon. Gentleman referred is important, and it will be introduced as soon as possible. I do not know whether the Conservative party has committed itself to legislation; in the past, it argued that that would be unnecessary since the existing law was enough. The Conservative party was wrong about that, as it was about much else.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): My right hon. Friend will know that there is far too much corruption and far too much expenditure on defence in many of the poorest countries, which means that they are not able to tackle the problems of poverty, which I know are of such concern to her. How many countries does she feel also do not have truly independent judicial and legal systems to apply proper checks?

Clare Short: My hon. Friend is right. In Africa, for example, many countries were often supported with big arms supplies and had large armed forces. The end of the cold war has led to the creation of very large armed forces that are not properly democratically controlled or resourced in order to protect the countries' real security interests. That has been the cause of coups and instability, which Africa needs help to deal with.

I agree that properly accountable security forces of the right size to cope with a real threat, transparent financing and independent judiciaries and magistracies are all very important. We are driving forward such systemic reform, rather than the pattern of tokenistic gestures of the past, but there is a lot to do. Effective modern state systems are needed to catch and prevent corruption.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Will the Secretary of State tell the House who pays for corruption, and how they pay for it?

Clare Short: As the hon. Gentleman knows, overwhelmingly, the poor pay the price of corruption. According to the very moving "Voices of the Poor" study published by the World Bank, which covered 60,000 people in 60 countries, and which we helped to fund, the poorest everywhere are really angry about corruption. It prevents them getting their children to school, opening a little market stall, being able to transport their goods or getting any drugs when members of their family are sick. On top of that, grand-scale corruption distorts the use of economic resources, therefore preventing good economic development and the improvement in lives that the poor so badly need.

It is astonishing that the issue was never dealt with in international development until Jim Wolfensohn took over at the World Bank. We, as a Government, have strongly followed that lead. I am afraid that it had not been a strong theme of previous British development efforts, but it most certainly is now.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): As the Secretary of State knows, I have a small interest in southern Africa. Does she think that we have a role in helping good governance through the anti-corruption model with respect to the import of computers in southern Africa, the cost of internet service providers and the way in which the internet is regulated? There is incipient corruption in that respect in southern African countries.

Clare Short: My hon. Friend will know that Africa has fewer internet connections than New York—I speak from memory—so it is in danger of being left behind in the technological transformation of the world. Africa is also the most expensive place in the world to be connected to the internet because telecom companies have not been liberalised and no new investment has been made. That is an urgent issue for Africa, and we are trying to support the reform agenda that is needed to get telecoms investment and access to information technologies, so that Africa will not be further marginalised.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): To answer the Secretary of State's earlier question, yes we have already made a firm commitment to introduce an anti-bribery Act, which should have become law by now.

Does the right hon. Lady accept that, according to a written answer on 31 July 1998, the Home Secretary acknowledged the need to introduce new laws on corruption under the OECD convention? Is she aware of the ministerial answer of 10 April 2000, in which a commitment was given to introduce legislation on corruption as soon as possible thereafter? Does she recall her globalisation White Paper published on 11 December, which acknowledged that corruption was a huge contributor to global poverty and that bribes to foreign officials were part of that? Yet, the Queen's Speech came and went and there was no room in it for such a Bill.

Will the right hon. Lady now accept her share of collective Cabinet responsibility for that extraordinary failure to legislate? It is not good enough to say that the issue is complicated. The issue of hunting is complicated, but the Government found time for that. Will she explain why her Government continue to turn a blind eye to the fraudulent and the corrupt?

Clare Short: I have been a Member of this House since 1983, but I have never come across such an extraordinary Front Bencher on either side of the House. The previous Conservative Government, of whom the hon. Gentleman was a member, took very little action against corruption in their international development programmes, and took the view that there was no need for a change in UK law in order to implement the OECD convention. We reviewed that advice, committed ourselves to legislation, and we will legislate. We have no lessons to learn from that very strange hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Streeter: The Secretary of State seems unaware that it was her Government who ratified the convention in 1998 and only since then has it become a live issue. Is not her shame compounded today by the sad fact that this very afternoon one of her Back Benchers is introducing a ten-minute Bill on the very subject of corruption, no doubt driven by his embarrassment and frustration at his Government's failure to act? We all know that that Bill has no chance of becoming law, so corruption will continue to abound while the Government sit on their hands.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not make a speech.

Mr. Streeter: Here comes the question. If the Government will not act to crack down on the corruption that blights the lives of the world's poorest, will they please make way for a Government who will?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman is ever stranger. I am not in the least ashamed that my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) is introducing a ten-minute Bill: I am absolutely delighted. In fact, I suggested it.

Zimbabwe

3. **Mr. Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough): If she will make a statement on aid to Zimbabwe. [152211]

4. **Mr. Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield): When she will next travel to Zimbabwe to discuss aid provision; and if she will make a statement. [152212]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): The economic and political situation in Zimbabwe is deeply worrying. The rule of law is increasingly being disregarded. The economy is set to shrink by a further 6 per cent. this year and the poor of Zimbabwe in particular are suffering badly—jobs are being lost, prices are increasing and there is now a potential for food shortages.

I have kept the UK development programme under close review since 1997. We have made it clear since 1997 that we support land reform in Zimbabwe, that the United Kingdom has fulfilled its commitments under the Lancaster house agreement and that henceforth we will fund land reform only if it is transparent and provides land to poor farmers. No such proposals have come forward.

I have recently authorised a £20 million HIV/AIDS programme because one in four adult Zimbabweans are HIV positive, and the country has lost 20 years in average life expectancy. I hope that the House will agree that we should do what we can to lessen the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe as a result of the terrible behaviour of their Government.

Mr. Leigh: The Secretary of State said last month:

"for us to be making a loud noise . . . inflames . . . President Mugabe."

Is it her view that one should not make a loud noise when confronted with evil, when the Movement for Democratic Change is driven underground, when President Chirac entertains this dictator to tea, and when British farmers are terrorised? The only thing necessary for evil to triumph is a Secretary of State who does not make a loud noise.

Clare Short: If making a loud noise would change the world, the hon. Gentleman would have achieved a lot more than he has achieved in his political life. The situation in Zimbabwe is so serious, causes so much desperate suffering to all the people of Zimbabwe and is so threatening to the economy of the whole of southern Africa that we should all be deadly serious and try to do everything that we can to prevent that suffering and bring the situation to an end.

Making the kind of noises that President Mugabe wants to hear as he loses political support in his country means that he can go back to his heyday when the country became independent, it plays into his hands and does not help the situation in Zimbabwe.

Mr. Fabricant: Is the Secretary of State aware that a week ago Sunday a 72-year-old lady farmer—a sprightly lady—went for a walk with her three dogs? As she left the farm gates, she was shot down by 15 bullets from AK47s. She died instantly. The Secretary of State will know that the Government are giving £11 million to Zimbabwe in aid this year, in addition to the European Union contribution. She fought consistently against the South African regime after she entered Parliament in 1983 and consistently argued for sanctions against South Africa. Does she not think that now is the time for sanctions against—

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has spoken for far too long. I must ask for briefer questions.

Clare Short: I am well aware of the recent death of that old lady. I am aware also that during the election campaign many black Zimbabweans as well as white farmers were killed, often only because they dared to support the opposition. Teachers were raped because they were seen to be opinion formers in rural areas. The situation is outrageous and terrible.

I agree that all decent people should do everything in their power to try to bring about a major change in the governance of Zimbabwe. However, people who are suffering from HIV/AIDS and receiving no support from their Government, in the absence of a prevention programmes, should not pay the price of President Mugabe's mis-government. Throughout the world, we should do what we can to support liberty and to support those who are suffering, and that is what we are doing in Zimbabwe.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Can my right hon. Friend tell me whether she or any of her officials have met the delegation of members from the Movement for Democratic Change, who are here from Zimbabwe? They are led by David Coltart MP, who was a justice shadow Minister. If not, would my right hon. Friend like to come to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Room at 4 o'clock, or send a representative, where the delegation will be briefing Members on the situation in Zimbabwe?

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I have met the leader of the Movement for Democratic Change; indeed, I sat next to him at a TUC dinner. He is an impressive man with a long record of commitment to democratic trade unionism and democracy generally. I was not aware that there was a delegation in the country. I do not think that I am free at 4 o'clock, but if I can manage to meet any members of that delegation, I shall be delighted to do so.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Does my right hon. Friend accept that those of us, including herself, who supported all the way the liberation movement in Zimbabwe now view with contempt what is happening? Does she also agree that, unfortunately, it is not the rule

of law that exists in Zimbabwe, but the law of thuggery? That should be condemned by all who believe that murder and the intimidation of judges, and the rest, should be condemned at every opportunity.

Clare Short: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is a tragedy for Zimbabwe. President Mugabe, who had a proud record of leading his country to independence has now despoiled that record. That is a tragedy for him and for the country. We must hope that there will be a change of Government as rapidly as possible.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): When I was in Zimbabwe just over a fortnight ago, the question on people's lips was, "What price the UK's ethical foreign policy now?" As the Secretary of State knows, four Select Committees, reporting on strategic export controls, have condemned the Government for a serious error of judgment in providing arms and military spares to Zimbabwe. The report published this morning concluded that the Government's response on licences was inaccurate.

Can we now know whether any of the responses from the right hon. Lady's Department were inaccurate? What objections did her Department raise to the licences being granted at the time? If she made any objections, what reasons were given to her for her colleagues ignoring those objections? On how many other occasions has her advice been sidelined? She cannot even get her legislation through the House; she has to give it to a Back-Bench Member to introduce in a ten-minute Bill. How can we help her to make the other members of the Cabinet listen to her voice and to bring an ethical and moral foreign policy into a reality?

Clare Short: There could be no better Opposition Member to second the hon. Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter); they are quite a team. The Government have massively strengthened controls on arms exports, way beyond the activities of the Conservative Government, of whom she was a member.

I had no part in the report that was published this morning. I have not read it and I did not give evidence to the Select Committees. *[Interruption.]* It is no good laughing. The hon. Lady knows about the way in which government works, or perhaps that has passed her by, as most other things do.

Vietnam

5. **Mr. Robert N. Wareing** (Liverpool, West Derby): What assistance her Department is giving to Vietnam. [152213]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Chris Mullin): Our programme in Vietnam is currently worth just over £5 million a year and is scheduled to increase significantly over the next three years, in recognition of the Vietnamese Government's commitment to poverty reduction and social equity. Rural development is the Government's highest priority for donor support, and many of our programmes reflect that. In addition we make a substantial contribution to the main multilateral aid programmes, and we work closely with other donors.

Mr. Wareing: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. During a recent visit that I made to Vietnam, people expressed appreciation of Britain's support for flood victims in the Mekong delta. The media in Vietnam highlighted the fact that Britain was top of the European Union league in giving assistance. The Department should be congratulated on that. However, much more needs to be done, especially to strengthen the infrastructure and to support policies that help to absorb a larger proportion of the rural population into the towns. Will the Minister assure us that that is uppermost in his mind?

Mr. Mullin: I thank my hon. Friend for the reported comments about our aid in the Mekong delta; I am glad that it was appreciated. Reducing migration from the countryside to the cities is a problem in all developing countries. The best way in which to achieve it is to help the rural poor to develop sustainable life styles and to raise their standard of living so that they do not feel the pressure to migrate to the cities. The Department for International Development and several non-governmental organisations are currently funding programmes that are designed to do that in poor, rural areas of Vietnam.

I have visited an Oxfam project in Ky An province in the centre of the country, which is regularly hit by typhoons. The project helps to strengthen dykes to protect rice paddies and enable people to derive a living from their land.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): The Department has rightly set its heart on operating with partners and other countries, especially in Vietnam. Its sector-wide approach is interesting and means conducting a close relationship with the Government of Vietnam. Does the Minister believe that those objectives are best served by having DFID's regional office in Bangkok?

Mr. Mullin: That was reviewed some time ago. Several minor changes were made, but it was concluded that the advantages of having a regional office for our programme in south-east Asia, which covers about half a dozen countries, outweighed disadvantages in, for example, cost efficiency.

The hon. Gentleman visited Vietnam recently, and he knows that three DFID officials are based in Hanoi. They have day-to-day responsibility for our aid programme in Vietnam.

Environmental Education

6. **Helen Jackson** (Sheffield, Hillsborough): What levels of support her Department is giving to projects that support better environmental education. [152214]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. Chris Mullin): The links between environment and poverty are clear. Better environmental education in schools and civil society, in developed and developing countries are vital to the

elimination of poverty. We are placing an inventory of our environmental education projects, worth approximately £11.8 million over the past 4 years, in the Library.

We are currently reviewing ways in which to strengthen that work and make it more relevant to helping poor people to improve their livelihoods sustainably.

Helen Jackson: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful answer. I welcome his translation from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to the Department for International Development. I hope that he will bring his environmental interests with him. Does he agree that some of the big issues that face the world in this century are environmental? They include deforestation, soil and water pollution and the startling decrease in species of animal, bird and insect. Will the Department examine such considerations before determining funding on any projects?

Mr. Mullin: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind words. We assess the environmental impact of every project, and sustainable development is at the heart of all the Department's actions. Environmental aid and development go hand in hand. We will not make progress on protecting the environment unless we tackle the development needs of the poor; we will not make further progress on poverty reduction unless we safeguard the natural resources on which poor people depend for their livelihoods. The environment and poverty are not separate issues; they go together.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [152239] **Miss Julie Kirkbride** (Bromsgrove): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 14 March.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I chaired a meeting of the Cabinet. I had intensive discussions on foot and mouth disease and I announced at a conference that the unemployment total had fallen below 1 million for the first time in 25 years and that record numbers of people were in work. I will have further meetings with colleagues later today.

Miss Kirkbride: Why, when many hundreds of thousands of decent, hard-working pensioners are forced to lock into a policy for their pension in their old age, did not the Chancellor of the Exchequer last week abolish the requirement to buy an annuity at the age of 75, as we on the Conservative Benches would do?

The Prime Minister: That was not done because of the cost that would result for the Exchequer. What the Chancellor has announced is a greater amount of support for pensioners than any Conservative Government whom the hon. Lady supported ever announced. All pensioners know that if the Conservatives were returned to power, the £200 winter allowance and free television licences would be taken off them.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Does the Prime Minister agree that the work that is being carried out by both the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the seconded vets in Cumbria to contain foot and mouth is excellent and that we should praise it? Today, I was talking to Nick Utting, group secretary of the National Farmers Union in Cumbria. He said that what would really help the situation is a relaxation of some of the rules. First, can we relax the rule regarding a suspected case of foot and mouth on the farm? Can the vets immediately start to cull those animals? Secondly, can we have a relaxation of the Environment Agency rules regarding the burial of beasts? The quickest, the traditional and the safest way of disposing of animals is to bury them immediately. Will the Prime Minister agree to look at the relaxation of the rules?

The Prime Minister: We are deploying some of those options and we are certainly looking carefully at the points that my hon. Friend has just made. I pay tribute both to my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and to the people, particularly in the veterinary service, who up and down this country have done a quite superb job in extremely difficult circumstances.

Our difficulty—I have no doubt that I will have opportunities to explain this again to the House during Question Time—is balancing any relaxation of the rules and making sure that we are not over-reacting to the situation. At the present time, I believe that we have the balance right, but, at both ends of the spectrum, obviously, we keep the matter under constant review. We do not want to place unnecessary restrictions on people; on the other hand, we must do everything that we can to eradicate the disease.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): May I join the Prime Minister in his tribute to everyone who is working so hard to try to prevent the spread of foot and mouth disease?

Since we last discussed the matter two weeks ago at Question Time, there is no doubt that we are in the grip of a national crisis. We have supported, and continue to support, the measures that the Government have taken, but, given that the spread of the disease is clearly not yet under control, will the Prime Minister consider several additional measures to control it more tightly and to use more of the available resources for dealing with it? Will he clarify this morning's announcement on slaughtering policy and consider more urgently whether the time has come to adopt not a relaxation, but an intensification, which the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) has proposed—to adopt a policy of slaughter immediately a vet believes, on the clinical evidence rather than on the basis of laboratory tests, that there is foot and mouth, as was the practice in 1967?

The Prime Minister: In relation to the issues on slaughter policy, the Minister of Agriculture will make a statement to the House tomorrow. We are looking at how we step up the slaughter in the areas most directly affected. One of the issues is that there are areas of the

country that are very seriously affected, while there are other areas in which, fortunately, at present at any rate, there has been no outbreak of foot and mouth disease at all. So it is entirely right that we look to see how we can take more urgent measures in the areas most directly affected.

In respect of those animals that we designate for slaughter, we are looking again at how we increase the intensification of the slaughter policy of those animals that either have the disease—obviously—or may have come into contact in some way with animals that do have it. Even if they themselves do not have the disease, it may be a sensible precaution to carry out a slaughter policy in respect of those animals also.

Mr. Hague: Further to that, any increased slaughter such as the Prime Minister has mentioned and we advocate will obviously add to the backlog of diseased carcases rotting on farms. Yesterday, the Government announced the limited deployment of the Army. While we welcome that, could the Army's role be extended to help clear that backlog? Similarly, there is clear evidence that we will not have enough vets to tackle the emergency, although the vets are working extremely hard, as the Prime Minister said. Will the Government consider using student vets and retired vets, as was the practice in 1967, in an effort to increase the available resources?

The Prime Minister: That is entirely right; no doubt the right hon. Gentleman has been in contact with the British Veterinary Association, as we have been in constant discussion with the state veterinary service and others. We are using some final-year veterinary students already and retired vets are important as well. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture will outline some extra measures concerning how we bring in vets from outside. We are already using vets whom the Army have provided. We are looking at how the armed forces can help, particularly in relation to the logistics of disposing of the animals. However, some of the more lurid stories about troops roaming the countryside, shooting animals and wildlife are not correct or helpful. Meetings are taking place today with the Ministry of Defence to see how the Army can assist in the process. It is self-evident that, if we intensify the process of slaughter, we have to increase the resources to carry that out.

Mr. Hague: Finally on this matter, we are well aware that the threat to people's livelihoods has now extended far beyond the farmers themselves. Large parts of rural Britain have been forced virtually to shut down. Hotels face closure as bookings have been cancelled and some rural tourist attractions face bankruptcy. We must get help to farmers and continue that help. Will the Prime Minister agree to help other rural businesses by measures such as giving exemptions from rates to those businesses worst hit by the crisis?

The Prime Minister: We will, of course, consider all the measures necessary to help. A series of measures is being considered by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment and the taskforce, which involves representatives of the tourism industry. The industry has been devastated over the past few days and weeks by what has happened. We have to see what financial and other help we can get to it as quickly as possible. Once the outbreak has been dealt with, we will have to see how we can move the industry forward so that it recovers as quickly as possible. That will be the other issue for the industry. It is not merely that bookings have fallen during the foot and mouth outbreak; we must look at the industry's future position. We are looking at all the issues and we will do whatever we reasonably can to help.

We can more clearly see day by day those areas of the country that are most severely affected and, of course, there are still significant areas of the country that have not been affected at all. Over the coming weeks, we must see what help and what lifting of restrictions we can allow in those areas that are not affected and that remain unaffected.

Jean Corston (Bristol, East): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there should be an urgent review of the way in which taxpayers' money is used to fund the parliamentary activities of Opposition parties? Is he aware that there has been an increase of 280 per cent. in funding to the Tory party and that, in defiance of previous procedures, it has been using the money to fund its party campaigning and even its election war room? This matter has never been debated in this House—

Hon. Members: Order!

Mr. Speaker: Order. I have told hon. Members before: do not tell me my job. I will soon tell the hon. Lady if she is out of order. She is not.

Jean Corston: It looks as though the Tory party has not only moved the goalposts, but carted them off the pitch. Is not this a fraud on the British taxpayer?

The Prime Minister: No doubt that is one of the public expenditure cuts that the Tories can announce in the coming weeks. If they are spending that amount of money on their political campaigning, I can only say that it has been remarkably ineffective.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Returning to the foot and mouth restrictions, does the Prime Minister feel that he is in a position to be any more specific this afternoon about appropriate compensation levels for farmers who, as a result of the restrictions, feel that their animals will have to be destroyed on welfare and compassionate grounds?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, this is an issue for the farmers who are affected, even though their animals do not have foot and mouth disease. It is also an issue that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture will cover in his statement tomorrow. We have to keep this aspect of the problem under constant review. The animal welfare issues may fit into an entirely different set of categories. It may be that some animals can be moved for their welfare, but others may have to be destroyed. At present we are looking for the best option in respect of each group of animals.

Mr. Kennedy: On the interests of the wider rural economy, to which the leader of the Conservative party quite properly referred, given that the difficulty is affecting bed-and-breakfast accommodation, local hotels and tourist attractions, will the Prime Minister give early

consideration to providing relief from tax and national insurance? Will he ask the Treasury to liaise with the Inland Revenue with a view to waiving tax and national insurance, or at least providing a period of relief so that those who are affected by short-term financial crises can have a degree of relief which is not available at the moment?

The Prime Minister: These issues will be discussed by the taskforce chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment. It is also important for businesses in the tourist industry and others, such as the Youth Hostel Association, which have lost considerable sums of money, that, over the coming days, we get a clear picture of exactly where the disease is located and which areas of the country are free from the disease. People are cancelling bookings in parts of the country where foot and mouth disease is not present and where, hopefully, it will become clear over the coming days that it will not spread. In circumstances where the disease is operating quite differently in different parts of the country, we also have to consider how to give proper effect to a set of rules that makes sense of the restrictions that presently apply to the whole country.

Liz Blackman (Erewash): Chelsea Brown, a two-year-old who lived in my constituency, was abused and brutally murdered by her father, who was sent to prison for life by Nottingham Crown court last week. Professionals have admitted that mistakes were made in the very difficult area of child protection. Can my right hon. Friend assure the House that everything possible is done to make sure that the procedures that govern this area are rigorously enforced and, where necessary, strengthened so that the very fine judgments that have to be made are made promptly and appropriately and in the interests of child protection?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. We have strengthened the protection available and it is important that we continue to look at ways of doing so. However, as she will know, very difficult judgments often have to be made by social services on the ground and, when a tragedy occurs, they can be attacked from both angles. We must certainly take every possible precaution to minimise the risk to which children are exposed and, of course, the welfare of the child should always come first.

Q2. [152241] **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): Education history is being made today with the launch of the first privately managed federation of state schools in Britain, building on the success of the first privately run state school in Guildford. May I thank the Prime Minister for acknowledging the success of this Conservative policy in his recent Green Paper? Does he further agree with me what a shame it was that, with the written backing of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, his local Labour party opposed us all the way?

The Prime Minister: I shall try to take that as congratulations for the policy that we are pursuing. It is important not only that we have a diverse range of providers in secondary schools, but that we put the investment into our school system that it needs. The only unfortunate thing about the Conservative policy is that, whereas we put into schools the investment that we need, he is committed to taking that investment out.

Q3. [152242] **Caroline Flint** (Don Valley): The announcement today that unemployment has fallen below 1 million will be welcomed by my constituents in Don Valley, where unemployment has been halved and youth unemployment has gone down by 86 per cent. In South Yorkshire, 178,000 industrial jobs were lost between 1979 and 1997. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that Labour in government will continue to fight for jobs, but also to fight for the range of skills and jobs that will ensure that South Yorkshire has a prosperous future?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to point out that there are over 1 million more jobs in the economy now, which takes us to a total of 28 million—more people in work today in Britain than ever before. But she is also right to point out the success of the Government's measures, in particular the new deal, which has taken 275,000 people off benefit and put them into work. The tragedy is that that policy, which has given us the lowest unemployment levels for 25 years, is opposed by the Opposition, who would scrap that policy were they returned to power. In committing themselves to that, they show their true colours. Such a policy will be bitterly opposed by many people in Britain who believe that everyone, not just a few, should have the chance to succeed.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): The Prime Minister will know that last week Russian forces in Azerbaijan captured two men widely believed to be responsible for murder and kidnapping in Chechnya. Given that one of those men, Mr. Ruslan Achmadov, is believed by the Foreign Office to be responsible for the murder and beheading of three Britons in 1998, including my constituent Peter Kennedy, will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating the Russian authorities on that operation? Will he also say when he believes those men will be brought to trial and whether it will be possible for the relatives of the dead to attend the trial? Will he ensure that Britain assists in bringing to justice the other people responsible for those brutal crimes?

The Prime Minister: I do not know whether the relatives will be able to attend the trial, but I shall be in touch with the hon. Gentleman on that. I was extremely pleased to hear of the arrest, and I welcome that. We shall give every assistance to the Russian authorities in pursuing the case. That particularly barbarous set of murders shocked people deeply at the time, so we are delighted that at least some of those responsible have been brought to justice. Like the hon. Gentleman, I wish to see all those responsible brought to justice.

Q4. [152243] **Mr. Andrew Miller** (Ellesmere Port and Neston): As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has just said to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint), there are over 1 million more jobs in the economy now than there were in 1997, a period of three years and 10 months. During the same period of three years and 10 months of Mrs. Thatcher's regime, 1.6 million jobs were lost to the British economy. Is my right hon. Friend further aware that, although there are

still areas of serious disadvantage and structural change in my constituency, partnerships between local and central Government and business and industry have created a situation where unemployment has fallen from 5.1 per cent. to 3.1 per cent. since May 1997. With that record—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I think that the Prime Minister knows what the hon. Gentleman is asking.

The Prime Minister: I do indeed know what point my hon. Friend was making, and so do the Opposition, which is why they are trying to shout it down. It is not just that unemployment is the lowest that it has been for 25 years or that record numbers of people are in employment, but with mortgage rates more than half what they were in Conservative years, with the national debt coming down, with the country's finances strong, with investment coming into our public services, it is no wonder at all that the Opposition do not want to discuss the economy.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Does the Prime Minister recommend that other Ministers behave towards the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards as the Minister for Europe has behaved?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges cleared my hon. Friend of all the charges except one, on which it recommended no penalty.

Mr. Hague: Well, the Minister has no need to hire an evasive lawyer when he has the Prime Minister to defend him. The Committee's report is a tale of obstruction and lack of candour in regard to allegations that included payments in exchange for help with planning permission and land acquisition. The Committee's inquiries could not be completed, and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards said that the Minister failed

"to provide full and accurate answers."

The Prime Minister can keep his Government's integrity or his Minister, but he cannot keep both.

If the Prime Minister is happy with the behaviour of the Minister for Europe, does he recommend that other Cabinet Ministers should treat Parliament in the same way as the Foreign Secretary? The Foreign Secretary briefs journalists about Select Committee reports before they are published and then denies in this House that he has done so.

The Prime Minister: The allegations against my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary are complete nonsense, as my right hon. Friend said at the time. However, in respect of my hon. Friend the Minister for Europe, as I said, the Standards and Privileges Committee is an all-party Committee and it cleared my hon. Friend of all the allegations. It is true that he was not cleared on one allegation, but the Committee recommended no penalty. In those circumstances, for the right hon. Gentleman to say what he has said is, frankly, fatuous.

Mr. Hague: We all know that, when the Prime Minister mumbles, he is not sure of his case. The investigation into eight of the accusations were not completed by the Committee, for the reasons that I have given. The Foreign Secretary told the House that

"there was no briefing—no leak to the press"—[*Official Report*, 24 February 1999; Vol. 326, c. 416.]

However, we now know that he had done precisely that. Are not those facts just the latest indictment of a Government who promised to be purer than pure? Since then, we have had the Formula 1 scandal, the favours for lobbyists, the leaked Select Committee report, the home loan scandal, the Lord Chancellor's dinners, the two resignations of the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the affairs of the former Paymaster General. Now we have the Foreign Secretary's contempt for this House and the behaviour of the Minister for Europe.

The Prime Minister said that he would introduce a new kind of politics. With that record, is not it the one promise on which he has actually delivered?

The Prime Minister: As I said a moment or two ago, my right hon. Friend answered all the allegations. They were complete nonsense when they were made, and they are complete nonsense now. As for my hon. Friend the Minister for Europe, he was cleared of the allegations that were made, as I said.

I think that there is a point that should be made. The Leader of the Opposition gets up to ask questions the week after the Budget, but he does not ask about that, because he dare not. He gets up on the day of the best unemployment figures for 25 years, but he does not ask a question about that, because he dare not. He gets up on the day when we announced the best employment figures ever, but he does not ask about that, because he dare not. He asks no questions on schools, crime, transport or hospitals. In fact, he asks no questions about matters that affect the real lives of real people, because he has nothing to say. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Q5. [152244] **Mrs. Anne Campbell** (Cambridge): Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that it would be entirely wrong for any candidate in the forthcoming election to stir up racial prejudice? Will he give an assurance to the House that he will take action against any activist who is found doing so?

The Prime Minister: I certainly give that assurance. I strongly welcome the initiative from the Commission for Racial Equality. I hope that all political parties sign up to it and have their candidates do the same. Any Labour party activist or candidate who breaches those rules will be subject to discipline. I hope that we all not merely sign up to the initiative, but observe its spirit as well as its letter.

Mr. Tim Collins (Westmorland and Lonsdale): The Prime Minister said that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asks no questions relating to the real lives of real people, but will he confirm that he was asked three times today about foot and mouth, a disease that is destroying the lives of real people in my constituency? Is he aware that £10 million a week is being lost by tourism businesses in the Lake district at the moment, and that 350 jobs a week are going? If this crisis continues until

Easter, those figures will triple. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is coming to Windermere in the Lake district tomorrow to listen to real people with real concerns. Will the Prime Minister come and listen to those concerns, and will he act on them?

The Prime Minister: It is—*[Interruption.]* I think that Opposition Members should calm down a little. I think that the hon. Gentleman is rather over-sensitive in his defence of the Leader of the Opposition, but of course I accept that people are losing their jobs in tourism. It is precisely for that reason that the taskforce under my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment was established yesterday. It is precisely for that reason that we have given agrimonetary compensation to farmers—something that the previous Conservative Government never did. It is precisely for that reason that we shall look at what more help can be given to the tourist industry. I should have thought that this is an issue on which both sides of the House should work together to see what we need to do to relieve the suffering of people in those areas. Certainly, for our part, that is precisely what we shall do.

Q6. [152245] **Mr. Jim Dobbin** (Heywood and Middleton): Will the Prime Minister comment on the article in *The Mirror* today on the possibility of the appointment of a Minister to look after and champion the cause of ex-service men and women? As the president of the United Services club in Heywood and Middleton, I know that my members would be delighted if that were to become a reality. It would be a recognition of their tremendous sacrifices in both world wars and other conflicts.

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to announce that today I have appointed my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Defence to be the Minister for veterans' affairs. Our armed forces veterans have made a major contribution to the peace and security of our nation, and it is only right that they should be recognised in that way. The Minister will be supported in the work that he does across Government Departments, but it is no longer right that particular issues that affect veterans are the responsibility simply of one Minister in one Department. There has to be co-ordination by a Minister across Departments, and that is what we are announcing today.

Q7. [152246] **Mrs. Ray Michie** (Argyll and Bute): May I tell the Prime Minister that 21 rural post offices in my constituency of Argyll and Bute, which is a vast area with many islands, have closed or reduced their hours of working in the past two years, and that many more are under threat? Does the Prime Minister accept that the Government's promise of financial assistance by 2003, which is very welcome, will in fact be too late? Heaven knows, rural areas have had enough to contend with as it is without losing the post office network.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady's point about rural post offices is a fair one. We understand the difficulties that they face, which is precisely why we published the proposals that we did. Not all the help, of course, has to wait until 2003; there is help available before then. We are looking, particularly with the major banks, at how we can put in place some of the services that rural post offices will have to provide if they are to have a viable and sustainable way of living.

I was looking recently at the pattern of closure over the past 20 years. As the hon. Lady knows, there has been a pattern of closure of rural post offices for a variety of reasons, not the least of which has been their financial viability. As well as making a public commitment to them, which we are prepared to do, we must look at the ways in which they can provide a service that people in rural areas will want to use in the future.

I understand the concerns that the hon. Lady raises. We are working on this as hard as we can. We will get the money to the post offices as quickly as we can, but serious issues about their long-term viability must also be addressed.

Mr. Phil Sawford (Kettering): In my Kettering constituency, a group of travellers has moved on to privately owned land where they are illegally camped. I am sure that these circumstances prevail in other parts of the country. Will my right hon. Friend urge local authorities, which are unable to move on any travellers in these circumstances, to provide adequate provision for toilets, waste disposal and disinfectant to protect everyone's interest?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that local authorities should do that. I know that many local authorities are faced with similar problems to those in my hon. Friend's constituency. If he will allow me, I shall look into the issue that he raises and write to him.

Q8. [152247] **Mr. Simon Burns** (West Chelmsford): As the Hammond inquiry cleared the right hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson), can the Prime Minister explain why he had to leave the Government?

The Prime Minister: For the reasons I gave at the time. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.]* Order. Mr. Mackay, be quiet.

Q9. [152248] **Mr. Ronnie Campbell** (Blyth Valley): What message does the Prime Minister have for my constituents in Blyth Valley? After a number of years of a reduction in unemployment there, this month there has been a rise of 1 per cent. in unemployment. What message does the Prime Minister have for my people back home?

The Prime Minister: It is for precisely that reason that we are putting money into coalfield areas and their regeneration. In constituencies such as that of my hon. Friend—including those that have been severely hit by structural change in the past few years—the Government have been prepared to make investment that the Opposition would never make in the future of such communities. Up and down this country, whether in areas such as my hon. Friend's or mine, or, indeed, in some of the more traditionally wealthy areas in the south, unemployment is falling, and employment and living standards are rising. That shows the need for a solid, stable economic base such as that which the Labour party has provided and the Conservatives never did provide.

Rural Tourism (Foot and Mouth)

3.30 pm

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the consequences of foot and mouth disease for the rural tourism industry.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The tourism industry has been badly affected by the foot and mouth outbreak. The industry is a huge and successful part of the economy. It employs about 1.8 million people and contributes as much as £64 billion to the economy. We have been in close touch with industry representatives, the English Tourism Council, the British Tourist Authority and other parts of government during the past two weeks and have been carefully assessing the impact. We have also been in close contact with the Scottish Executive, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The impact is mainly on rural areas throughout the UK, but the problem also affects our towns and cities, as visitors from Europe and elsewhere are deterred from coming here at all. That loss of business should be debated with sensitivity and care.

Early on, we agreed with the ETC and the BTA that we were determined not to fuel the damaging media coverage that is already so badly affecting our overseas markets and day visitors. Stories of cancellations and loss of business have to be reported, but they will not help the industry to achieve bookings, especially overseas, where the context is less well understood.

Within the Government, I have been making the position absolutely clear, reporting the difficulties faced by the industry as they have grown and ensuring that the needs of this vital part of the economy are known. I reported to the Cabinet this morning.

As we approach the Easter break—usually a time when a large number of bookings are made—all those involved are very worried about the loss of trade. People in many hotels and attractions have been laid off, businesses are closed and some parts of the countryside are very quiet indeed. The holiday season is gradually starting again and the usual growth in bookings is not materialising. The ETC has advised us that the loss of business is probably of the order of £100 million a week and has suggested that the impact might even reach £250 million a week if the outbreaks continue well into the main season. Those are serious losses.

In everyone's interest, the first priority must be to tackle the disease itself. Our discussions with the industry suggest that it understands fully the need to control the outbreaks of foot and mouth disease, not only to secure agriculture in rural areas but because the image and success of the countryside as a tourist destination is so closely tied up with it. The farming community does so much to look after the countryside that visitors and tourists enjoy visiting. It has the fullest support of the tourism industry, walkers groups and all those who enjoy recreation in the countryside. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will make a full statement about that tomorrow.

It is also very important, however, to convey the message that visitors can still find a great deal of hugely enjoyable recreation outside our cities. Rural Britain is not closed, as some would have us believe. The opportunities offered in market towns and villages, and in touring by public transport and by car are all still there to enjoy.

It would also be appropriate for me to say something about sport. The Government are not recommending the cancellation of any sports event. Any decisions will be for the governing bodies of sport, which should take a common-sense approach that is, above all, proportionate to a realistic appraisal of the risk involved. Therefore, sporting activity, just like any other activity, should not take place within infected areas. However, events elsewhere need not be affected, provided that reasonable precautions are taken.

My hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting is in Devon now. I will be in Cumbria on Friday and Saturday meeting representatives of the tourism industry. My hon. Friend has been told that more accurate and detailed information will help people organising activities to decide how to stage them, and help visitors to decide where and when to travel. That applies equally to sport. We shall put that matter to the rural economy taskforce to be addressed urgently, as one of its first tasks.

I assure the House that the impact on the tourism industry in rural Britain will be properly addressed and that, when the time comes and the outbreak is over, we will do everything that we can to restore the image of Britain and the British countryside as a tourist destination.

Mr. Ainsworth: I thank the Secretary of State for his reply. Many people in the tourism industry and across rural Britain will find it highly unsatisfactory that, rather than offering a statement to the House on the present crisis in rural tourism, Ministers have had to be persuaded to come here by the Opposition. However, I assure the Secretary of State that Conservative Members will give every support to sensible measures aimed at limiting the scale of the crisis and offering help where it is needed.

It is certainly true, as the Secretary of State said, that plenty of tourist and visitor attractions that are not in rural areas are still very much open for business. However, no part of the rural economy is immune to the consequences of foot and mouth disease. Its effect on farmers has obviously been devastating. As the Secretary of State rightly said, the Government's first task has been, and remains, the containment and eradication of the disease. However, it in no way belittles the problems of farmers to recognise that tourism represents as much as 20 per cent. of economic activity in large areas of the countryside and that it is responsible for up to 400,000 jobs overall. Many of those jobs are now at risk. Employees are already being laid off or asked if they will take unpaid leave.

In areas such as Devon, Cornwall, mid-Wales, the Lake district and the borders, business in hotels, guest houses, restaurants and pubs is reported to have declined by up to 80 per cent. in the past two weeks. There is clearly an immediate and pressing problem with cash flow, which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

The Secretary of State did not comment on the idea of establishing action zones or safe zones. That idea seems to have been floated by a Minister in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. We have to express some reservations about such a scheme.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): He did not mention it.

Mr. Ainsworth: I would welcome the Secretary of State's comments on the issue, because the Minister for

the Environment was broadcasting to the nation on the "Today" programme this morning that safe zones were the answer to the problem. How will a safe zone be defined? Is not the corollary of creating safe zones the creation of unsafe zones? The disease is still spreading. What if today's safe zones become the unsafe zones of tomorrow? The Secretary of State has also said that the Government intend to set up a taskforce. A taskforce will not achieve anything at all.

To deal with the pressing problems of cash flow, have the Government considered the British Hospitality Association recommendation that VAT should be deferred for three months for the worst-affected businesses in rural areas, such as hotels? If so, what action will be taken? Clearly, the business rate is a major fixed item of expenditure. The bills come in regardless of the collapse in trade, so is not it time that the Government considered offering business rate relief for a limited period to small rural businesses affected by the crisis? Has the Secretary of State considered that? If so, what action will be taken?

Has the Secretary of State considered the Federation of Small Businesses' suggestion that the Government might follow its example and make loans available to businesses affected by the crisis? I appreciate that it is not easy to define which tourism businesses, or businesses of any sort, should be eligible to benefit from such relief measures, but there is no reason to exclude everybody from help just because that is difficult.

As for the medium term, what proposals do the Government have for putting in place a recovery plan for the rural economy and rural tourism businesses? For example, what extra funds will be made available to the BTA to restore confidence in our main overseas tourism markets? A major marketing effort will be required to attract overseas tourists back to Britain, but, above all, people in rural Britain and in tourism businesses affected by this appalling crisis want action from the Government to deal with the situation.

I note that the Chancellor has revealed that the Government have underspent their budget this year by £1 billion. If this desperate crisis is not a reason to spend some of that money, I would like to know what is.

Mr. Smith: This is of course a time for addressing serious problems seriously and the majority of the hon. Gentleman's remarks were certainly in that spirit. May I tackle the main points? The first is the notion of establishing safe zones, which I did not speak about and which is not specifically on the agenda at present. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture is in charge of Government policy on the management of the disease and he will address the House tomorrow on precisely how the disease can be combated, particularly in those areas where no outbreaks have yet occurred.

On compensation through a variety of possible means that the hon. Gentleman suggested, those are matters that we shall wish to address in due course. Ultimately, it will be for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to make decisions about them, but we shall consider seriously the impact that has been felt across the rural economy and how best to address that impact. The recovery plan for rural tourism matters for our overseas markets and, in particular, our domestic markets. We shall be in close discussion with the ETC and the BTA about how the best possible promotion of rural tourism can be put in place as soon as the outbreak is over.

Perhaps the most important message of all—I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman agrees—is that the countryside is indeed open for business. For example, South Hams district council in south Devon has just issued an extremely good notice to visitors, setting out clearly what they can and cannot do. Among the things that visitors can do are exploring towns, taking river boat trips, walking on beaches, visiting castles, abbeys, gardens and garden centres, looking around pottery centres, visiting the aquarium in Plymouth, playing golf, visiting local antique shops and art galleries and enjoying locally produced food and drink.

A variety of good-quality tourism activities are available to people right across rural Britain. The more consistently we put that message across, the better for our hard-pressed tourism industry.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I commend my right hon. Friend on the frank and sensitive way in which he has dealt with the private notice question. May I remind him, however, of the seriousness of the situation? No mention has yet been made of tourism in the north-east of England, where we are trying to solve our unemployment problems in what is a rapidly growing and very job-intensive industry.

Will my right hon. Friend also bear in mind the fact that there are now 160 Labour Members with a significant rural hinterland? This is an important issue for all Members; it is not cared about exclusively by the Opposition.

Mr. Smith: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend. Tourism is an increasingly important issue for the north-east.

Over the past five to 10 years, the rural economy has become much more bound up with tourism. The growth of farm tourism, for example, has been a major element in the expansion of tourism activity in rural areas, and it has been almost completely wiped out during the foot and mouth epidemic. These issues are gravely affecting many parts of the country, and they need to be taken seriously.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): First, does the Secretary of State accept the BTA's estimate that if this goes on for another three weeks, the industry as a whole will have lost upwards of £2 billion? Whereas in many industries that loss would be concentrated, in the tourism industry 120,000 small businesses risk not just loss of profit but bankruptcy. Does the Secretary of State agree that there is no case for seeking to divide the interests of the farming community from those of the tourism industry, and that it is imperative to recognise that speedy eradication of the disease is in the interests of both?

Secondly, does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the Government have an immediate task to carry out—indeed, he has begun to carry it out this afternoon—in conveying the reassuring message that Britain is still open? That message, however, must be delivered abroad as well as domestically. At present, 45 per cent. of inquiries about foot and mouth disease are being made to our offices abroad.

Finally, while I endorse what the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) said about funds for promotion and marketing abroad, does the Secretary of State accept,

[Mr. Robert Maclennan]

in regard to the recovery plan for the industry, that it is also vital for individuals whose continuance in business is imperative if our industry is to be sustained to be given early indications of financial reliefs? Tax reliefs may be the easiest way of relieving the pressure, and enabling such people to sustain their fragile businesses.

Mr. Smith: The right hon. Gentleman is correct to identify the potential financial losses overall. According to our best estimates at the moment, around £100 million a week of business is being lost; but that figure will start to rise substantially during the Easter weekend, and subsequently during the main holiday season. If the present situation continues, there will be considerable financial losses.

The right hon. Gentleman is also correct to say that there is no case for dividing the interests of the farming community from those of the wider rural economy. The best answer for all in the rural economy, be they farmers or non-farmers, is for us to get the outbreak under control as rapidly as we can, and to see the back of foot and mouth disease so that we can restart both normal agricultural and normal tourism operations.

The right hon. Gentleman is right, however, to identify two tasks that are especially important. The first of them is immediate—getting the reassurance message across to people that there is no reason at all why they should cancel holidays in the countryside or not regard the countryside as a place to visit, enjoy and find recreation. We will be very strongly putting across that message in the coming days.

Secondly, we have to examine the need for a recovery plan once the outbreak is brought under control. As I said, we are working very closely with the BTA and ETC on doing that.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I appeal to the House for brief questions.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): I thank the Secretary of State for sending the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting to Devon today. However, may I stress to him that it is not only a rural problem? The city of Exeter depends on the tourism industry for 2,800 jobs and for £85 million a year. The south-west tourism industry is telling me that, first and foremost, it desperately wants accurate information to be disseminated from a central point. Although many parts of the south-west are not no-go areas, the impression is being given that people should not go there. We have wonderful beaches, wonderful coastal paths, and, as my right hon. Friend said, wonderful towns and cities. Will he therefore ensure that accurate information is disseminated so that people start coming back to areas that are not affected?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right to say that this is not just a rural problem, as people who may have booked rural holidays would usually in the course of such a holiday seek to encompass visits to towns and cities. Additionally, much overseas business is being affected by the general impression that is being given, despite the BTA's best efforts to try to correct those impressions, and much overseas business comes to the towns and cities. My hon. Friend is also absolutely right to identify the giving of accurate information as an essential thing that we have to do. The rural economy taskforce is urgently examining that matter.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): The Secretary of State mentioned sporting events. He will be aware that, this week, my constituency has lost the biggest horse-racing programme in the entire racing year, which is costing the race course about £8 million. He will also be aware of the knock-on effect in my constituency, and in surrounding constituencies, on guest houses, hotels, restaurants and shops that have lost an entire week's business. Yesterday, the Leader of the Opposition came to speak to some of those people in my constituency. What message can the Secretary of State give me to take back to people whose businesses, which rely on this week above all other weeks in the year, have been devastated?

Mr. Smith: I of course understand entirely the difficulties that are facing those businesses and to which the hon. Gentleman referred. Decisions on whether to proceed with sporting events, including racing events, are entirely a matter for the sporting authorities themselves. The Government have not insisted or recommended that any particular sporting event should not be held. That is a matter that the sporting authorities will have to consider carefully against the obvious common-sense rules about the proximity to livestock, the way in which people get there and so on. Those are the common-sense rules that should apply. I am afraid that they apply to everything, of whatever size and scale.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Will my right hon. Friend emphasise the fact that, despite all the bad publicity, the Lake district towns are still open for business and that those who have visited our towns historically should keep coming? There is no problem in the towns. However, may I also welcome his visit this weekend to the Lake district, particularly to my own constituency, and express support for the proposition that he fully consider the possibility of safe zones being introduced in the county of Cumbria?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify the continuing roles that towns in areas such as the Lake district can play as tourism destinations. I look forward to meeting later this week some of his constituents who have been affected by the foot and mouth outbreak in Keswick.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will the right hon. Gentleman have a word with his colleague the Minister for the Environment as he appears to know nothing about the safe zones that were being announced on the "Today" programme as I was getting up this morning? Would the Government please co-ordinate on that matter?

I received a fairly helpful reply during the Budget debate from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who said that the Government would consider using funds to begin returning the countryside to a proper structure at the end of this terrible epidemic. Will the Secretary of State consider how people can substantiate their losses? It is terribly difficult to do so, but those who produce accounts and who have had severe losses could present last year's accounts in comparison with the figures achieved this

month. In that way, they could begin to justify why the Government must try to assist them with their cash flow, simply to keep them going. That is not a political point, but a plea for something that the country needs. The Government must help.

Mr. Smith: As regards the right hon. Gentleman's comment on safe zones, I must tell him that there was no such announcement. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture is considering what policy should be developed for the important areas of the country in which there have been no outbreaks. He will have something more to say to the House about that tomorrow.

The right hon. Gentleman made a second point about substantiating losses. Issues regarding direct or indirect compensation are ultimately matters for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. We shall, of course, give those matters careful consideration, but our immediate tasks remain the dissemination of right and unbiased information to the public and ensuring that we do all that we can to stamp out the outbreak.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the lesson of BSE is that top priority must be given to ensuring that those parts of the rural environment, such as Norfolk, where there have been scares but, as yet, no outbreak of the disease must remain disease free? Despite the commercial pressures, we must take care to balance the just demand for publicity for positive movements by people with our long-term interests. We know from the BSE crisis that getting that balance wrong can result in a very great cost.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why the primary duty of the Government lies, as it has since the first day of the outbreak, in making sure that the outbreak is brought under control. We must not let it expand beyond the cases that may have already incubated before it was identified.

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): Does the Secretary of State appreciate the contradiction in what he has said about containing the epidemic while encouraging people to go to the countryside? Farmers in my constituency—those who fear foot and mouth and those whose animals are suffering from it—do not want to see people tramping about. On the other hand, tourism and farming are intertwined because of bed and breakfast, farm shops and the diversification of farm industries. All those things are hit by the crisis, and it will take a long time to sort matters out. If the Government do not set up a compensation package to raise the pressure from incomes and cash flows, there will be no infrastructure for tourism in rural areas.

Mr. Smith: There is no contradistinction between containing the epidemic and encouraging people to visit the countryside. We will very clearly continue to insist that people do not walk across fields, come into close proximity to livestock or walk along country paths, but there is a whole host of activities that can be enjoyed in the countryside. The best possible thing that we can do for the rural economy at this precise moment is to encourage people still to visit the countryside, to engage in activities that do not put livestock at risk or spread the disease, and to say that rural Britain is not closed to visitors.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): My right hon. Friend knows only too well how important tourism is to my constituency. Indeed, both he and my hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting have recognised the great work of the Scarborough tourism forum. With that in mind, will he comment on the possibility that small businesses, which, obviously, make up the bulk of tourism across the country, may be the best vehicle for marketing the better quality message about what is open?

In the terms of the *Yorkshire Post*, the start of the season is Easter. We really need to ensure a good start to the season—this year in particular. Will he have urgent discussions with people such as representatives of the Yorkshire tourism authority, to ensure that it works with small businesses?

Mr. Smith: Representatives of the Yorkshire tourist board, along with those of all other regional tourist boards, will be meeting my hon. Friend the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting tomorrow to talk through some of the issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) is right to stress that the message on what can and cannot be done must be clear. That is why having a central and accessible point of advice is so important. We are urgently working on that.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): The Minister will know that a quarter of all the foot and mouth outbreaks are in my constituency in the Lake district. Agriculture, tourism, and the haulage, retail and all other sectors have been ravaged. I understand that, across the border, Dumfries and Galloway unitary authority is issuing forms to all businesses that are affected, so that they can state their monetary losses in order that the Scottish Parliament may one day reimburse them. Will the Minister look carefully at that and ensure that we, just south of the border in the Lake district, who are suffering even more, are not at the end of the day at a financial disadvantage to our colleagues and friends just north of the border? Will he in the longer term consider a massive advertising campaign once again to attract people to Britain and to get people back into the countryside, when it is safe to do so?

Mr. Smith: As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said just a moment or two ago to the House, we will of course be looking with great care and very great sympathy at what more can be done to help the rural economy over the next few weeks.

On an advertising campaign, the right hon. Gentleman is right to say that we must ensure that, as soon as the outbreak is over, the message "Come back to the countryside" is loud and clear, for both the overseas market and, even more important, because the vast majority of visitors to our countryside comprise domestic tourism, for British people who may be considering taking a holiday there.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster, Central): Last weekend, I met members of Doncaster's Strawberry Island boat club and members of other boat clubs around

[Ms Rosie Winterton]

south and west Yorkshire. Although, obviously, they were very understanding about the fact that it is difficult in the present circumstances to allow movement of boats, they were concerned about the long-term effects on the hire boat industry. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he is in touch with British Waterways and representatives of the hire boat industry and that he is aware of their concerns? Perhaps he can make the issue an item on the agenda of the meeting to which he referred with the Yorkshire tourist board.

Mr. Smith: We are indeed very much aware of the impact on recreation on waterways. We are taking close account of it. We will discuss it with the regional tourist boards when we meet them tomorrow.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Does the Secretary of State agree that the ramifications for the tourist industry are not restricted to this island but also apply to Northern Ireland? It is now clear that the consequences in misery and financial loss far beyond the farming community are incalculable. At one time, the country enjoyed a high health status because restrictions were placed on movement of animals into and out of it. Those firm controls were swept away by Europe on the ground that they were a restriction of trade rather than a health issue. Is it not clear that such restrictions always have been and always will be a health issue? Will the Government go back to their colleagues in Europe and tell them that they wish to have the former strict conditions on movement of animals and plants restored?

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that the ramifications for tourism spread right the way across the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, tourism had been picking itself up dramatically in the wake of the Good Friday agreement and the maintenance of a more settled peace in Northern Ireland. To see that progress now put at risk is obviously extremely disappointing.

The hon. Gentleman's question about the movement of animals is of course a matter for my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. I am sure that he will have noted carefully what the hon. Gentleman had to say.

Mrs. Ann Cryer (Keighley): I declare an interest as president of the Keighley and Worth Valley Railway Preservation Society. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, especially as my constituency is at the moment completely free of foot and mouth, the Worth valley railway specifically and the Brontë area more generally remain an excellent destination for Easter tourism?

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right. As I have said, there are many activities that can still safely be undertaken in the countryside, and we need to encourage as many people as possible to take up those opportunities.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): My question is linked to the one asked by my namesake, the hon. Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton). Leisure tourism linked to the inland waterways is important to my constituency and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, but it has been halted by the closure of the towpaths. Was the Secretary of State as surprised as I was to learn that no representatives of British Waterways or, for example, the British Marine Industries Federation have been asked to sit on the much-heralded rural economy taskforce? Will he speak to his colleagues about that as a matter of priority, and ensure that steps are taken to assist that part of the leisure sector to survive this dreadful period by helping with business rates, talking to banks about cash flow or other such steps?

Mr. Smith: I shall of course draw the hon. Lady's point to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends. However, the fact that those organisations have not attended a meeting does not mean that their concerns are going unnoticed. We are very concerned about the impact on inland waterway recreation. We will continue in close discussion with representatives of the inland waterway organisations.

Mr. Nick Ainger (West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire): Five years ago, my constituency suffered the devastation of the Sea Empress oil spill, which had a massive detrimental effect on our tourist economy. One of the ways in which the effects were ameliorated in the short term was significant increases in the tourism marketing budgets, funded both by the Wales tourist board and the insurers. That certainly had an impact and improved the situation quickly. Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that Wales as well as England will benefit from any additional marketing? Will he reassure me that the rural economy taskforce will include representatives from not only the Wales Office but the National Assembly for Wales?

Mr. Smith: On the benefit that Wales could get from a marketing campaign, the marketing of Wales specifically as a destination is a devolved matter and would be one for the WTB. However, the British Tourist Authority, which has oversight of the marketing of Britain as a whole, including the wonders of Wales, will ensure that Britain is marketed as soon as the outbreak is over. There is Welsh representation on the rural economy working party, and Welsh representatives attended the meeting that took place earlier today.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The Secretary of State will be aware of the coruscating impact and deep sense of foreboding in the Yorkshire dales among thousands of businesses that are wholly dependent upon tourism. There are two things that he can do in short order. First, he can give local authorities the means to relieve business rates. Secondly, he can instruct the regional development agencies, which the Government created, to help small businesses that fear that they may not meet their obligations. He will reassure people in the Yorkshire dales if he makes it clear that he does not want large numbers of people meandering around the area in their cars as if it were an open area where one could choose between the parts that were infected and those that were not.

Mr. Smith: We shall carefully consider issues such as business rates. As I said earlier, it will ultimately be a matter for my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Regional development agencies may well have a good role to play, and we shall seek to discuss that with them.

The message must be crystal clear on the way in which visitors conduct themselves. We do not wish visitors to go on to farmland or into proximity with livestock. However, there are many other activities in which visitors can engage in the countryside, and we want to encourage them to do so.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The Secretary of State knows that, unfortunately, my constituency has a huge infected area. He will be aware also that it is one of the most popular destinations for spring holidays. In those circumstances, I am confident that my constituents will share his view that it is important not to overreact.

Will the right hon. Gentleman consider the lending institutions, banks and building societies that are overreacting? I have evidence of a lending institution that has forthwith withdrawn funding facilities. Will he make urgent representations to banks, building societies and other lending institutions to take a more balanced view, as he has done?

Mr. Smith: Yes and yes. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that it is important not to overreact. The message that can usefully go out from all parties in the House is that we should not do so. That would fundamentally undermine the very rural economy that we are trying to protect. I would want to make representations to lending institutions about the need to consider sympathetically the needs of rural businesses.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): May I welcome my right hon. Friend's recognition of the scale of the problem? Nowhere is that more relevant than in Plymouth, and the surrounding Devon and Cornwall area, where tourism is a vital activity. I thank him for sending the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting to Devon, including Plymouth, today. I believe that, as we speak, she is concluding her visit to one of the jewels among our tourist facilities: the national marine aquarium.

In promoting the important message that the public should consider what they can do in rural areas and cities such as Plymouth, I urge my right hon. Friend to take a leaf out of the book of local ramblers in the area that I represent, who instead of rambling across Dartmoor are donning their boots and walking along some of the roads in Plymouth, which have some of the most beautiful vistas in the United Kingdom, as he well knows.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right. I remember my visit to the national marine aquarium a year or so ago. The message must be clear: there are plenty of activities for people to do; please come to rural Britain.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): My right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Mr. Curry) mentioned the Yorkshire dales; the same problems exist in the Derbyshire dales. More than 20 million people usually visit the Peak district. At the weekend, a representative of the Peak park said on radio that people should not go into the towns. Why has not the Department issued clearer guidance so that everyone knows the exact criteria that the Secretary of State mentioned? This afternoon, he has conveyed mixed messages.

Mr. Smith: The hon. Gentleman could not have been listening because I could not have been clearer about our message. If someone from the Peak district said that no one should come to Derbyshire, I cannot agree. Last night, a representative of Buckinghamshire county council was asked on "Newsnight" whether Buckinghamshire could be "reopened". He replied:

"I wouldn't welcome it at the moment."

I cannot endorse such an attitude. We want to ensure that people visit the countryside and engage in safe activities, of which there are plenty.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does my right hon. Friend recall that the busiest weekend for hotels in my constituency has been ruined by foot and mouth disease, which led to the cancellation of the Wales-Ireland rugby match? Hotels in urban Newport are a centre for visitors to the area's hinterland, which includes the Wye valley and the Brecon beacons, and the other marvellous attractions of rural and urban south Wales. Is it not wrong to suggest that there is a division between rural and urban tourism, which are inextricably intertwined? If assistance is provided, is not it right to give it to those in rural and urban areas? We could get into the grotesque position whereby a large, prosperous rural hotel, which could be part of a multi-million pound international chain, receives assistance while small, struggling hotels in my constituency and other urban areas get nothing.

Mr. Smith: My hon. Friend is right. There should not necessarily be a distinction between our approaches in urban and rural areas because some urban settings are also experiencing the impact of foot and mouth disease.

As I said earlier, it is up to the governing bodies of sport to decide whether events should go ahead. I am pleased to note that, so far, the France-Wales match, which is due to take place at the weekend, is still on.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): As of 11 am today, Cheshire has become unsafe. Our first confirmed case has occurred in Baddiley in the south of my constituency. The Secretary of State should carefully consider consulting the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food about banning much more movement in rural areas. First and foremost, we must stop the spread of the disease. Travelling around the country, whether it is tourists or lorries carrying dead carcases from Devon to the Widnes rendering plant, should be restricted. We have a national emergency, and we should introduce measures accordingly.

Mr. Smith: It is important to follow strictly the veterinary advice that we receive. That advice is clear: in some circumstances, movement of people or animals is dangerous and poses a risk and should not therefore be permitted. However, other activities are perfectly safe and can be permitted. We must distinguish clearly between them.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): It is already possible for councils to provide relief on business rates in cases of hardship. Will my right hon. Friend remind his colleagues of those powers and encourage them to provide the resources to enable councils to do that?

We encourage diversification from pure farming activities in rural areas. Regrettably, some people, including some of my constituents, must consider that possibility earlier than they might have done. Will the

[Mr. Mark Todd]

Government consider targeting some of the money for diversification on aiding business reconstruction and change in some of the areas where it is most needed?

Mr. Smith: In relation to my hon. Friend's second point, much of the rural development money to which he refers will come on stream from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food quite rapidly—it will come on stream very soon. Many people may want to consider taking advantage of it.

In relation to local authorities, any advice that is given to them will be a matter for the Deputy Prime Minister and the funding of any such initiatives will be a matter for the Chancellor.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): I do not think that the Secretary of State is fully aware of the nature and extent of the crisis that is developing in the countryside. If it continues into the Easter holiday period, thousands of rural businesses will go bankrupt. I was pleased to hear him say that he was looking into inland waterway holidays and narrow boat holidays, but is he aware that British Waterways has closed the whole of the inland waterway network and all towpaths? Although none of us wants to take undue risks with the spread of the disease, will he look, or have his Department look, into whether absolute closure is entirely necessary? Can there be some selective and progressive lifting of the restrictions, subject always, of course, to the fact that people must not walk on farm land and must stick to roads? If they do that, perhaps the risk of the spread of the disease in that way will be minimal and there could be some relaxation of the regime.

Mr. Smith: I am very much aware of the extent of the problems that are being experienced. I made sure that I made that clear in my initial response to the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth). There are many waterways where parts of the waterway can be accessed via roads and tarmac, so we need to look sensitively at where access can be achieved, without any risk to animals or to the rural environment. Those are precisely the sort of things that we will talk with the waterways authorities about.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr. O'Brien) said, Cheshire has had its first outbreak today. Fortunately, my constituency is still free of foot and mouth, but does the Secretary of State accept that what the farmers and the people of our rural areas want is the eradication of the disease as quickly as possible? Farming in my constituency is predominantly livestock farming. To make an income, many farmers have had to open bed-and-breakfast facilities. The inland waterways are an important part of tourism, and part of my constituency lies in the Peak park, but we do not want people to come to such rural areas at the moment because they are likely to bring foot and mouth with them. Does he accept that the great problem in the rural areas is cash flow? If the Government could help those affected through the business rate or in any other way, such as through intervening with lending institutions, I should be grateful.

Mr. Smith: We have made it crystal clear—indeed, I have made it crystal clear today—that the first and most important priority is to eradicate the disease. That has to remain the bottom line; it governs everything that we do in respect of our response to the epidemic However, the message that we are getting very clearly from people, including farmers and people running small businesses throughout rural Britain, is that they do not want people to get the idea that rural Britain is a no-go area. It is not. Many things can be usefully and productively done in rural Britain. We want to encourage people to do those things. We do not want to encourage people to engage in risky activity.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): Seaside resort hoteliers who observe these proceedings will be disappointed that there has been no specific mention of seaside resorts, which, de facto, not being rural areas, are all open for business; the season is beginning very early. I endorse everything that others have asked the Secretary of State to do, but I have one further idea. A number of language schools in seaside resorts are suffering because of misinformation from foreign Governments. What are our embassies doing about that? Will he speak to the Foreign Secretary to ensure that they do all that they can to put right the bad messages that are going out?

Mr. Smith: The embassies and high commissions abroad, as well as the British Tourist Authority, are actively seeking to counter misinformation and to put out information about what is happening and the vast number of things that can still be enjoyed. Language schools are part of that fabric of activities that are still very much on the agenda. On seaside resorts generally, I would hope that some might seek to benefit from the present difficulties, as recreation on the beach and in the town at seaside resorts is still very much possible. I hope that that message will be sent clearly as well.

Mr. Peter Luff (Mid-Worcestershire): Nothing the Secretary of State has said today convinces me that he really understands the urgency of the situation that he faces, particularly in relation to the inland waterways sector. My constituent, Mr. Edward Helps of Alvechurch Boat Centres Ltd., faces the complete loss of all his business—not 80 or 75 per cent., but 100 per cent.—for many weeks and months ahead. What would the Secretary of State say to Mr. Helps?

Mr. Smith: I understand the difficulties that face many in the rural economy, particularly those running small businesses, be they on inland waterways, be they small hotels, guesthouses or farms that have become heavily reliant on bed-and-breakfast income. Those enterprises are being severely affected by what is happening. That is why we need to ensure that the best quality of accurate information is available and why we need to look carefully and sympathetically at what measures can be taken over time to try to assist those affected.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): The Secretary of State has completely missed the point. North Shropshire, touch wood, is currently a foot and mouth-free zone. Two miles away, there is foot and mouth in Cheshire. Bed-and-breakfast bookings are down by 100 per cent. and holiday park bookings by 80 per cent. The one area where the Government can help is with liquidity. How many telephone conversations has he had

with the Chancellor to discuss VAT? How many conversations has he had with the Deputy Prime Minister about business rates? How many banks has he rung to talk about liquidity? He can help, but he does not appear to have done anything.

Mr. Smith: This is not the time for partisanship.

Mr. Paterson: But what has he done?

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman asked a question. He is now getting the answer.

Mr. Smith: It is a time for seriously addressing serious issues. I am in regular contact with my right hon. Friends the Chancellor, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. That is precisely why we have brought together all the relevant Ministers with outside organisations in the rural economy working party. We are urgently addressing precisely those issues. If, rather than ranting, the hon. Gentleman took time to look at what is happening, he would see that we are addressing the serious issues.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): In recent hours, I have been talking to a hotelier in my constituency whose bookings are down by 70 per cent. I have talked also to a rural publican whose bar receipts are down by 90 per cent. When they hear the Secretary of State saying that rural Devon is not a no-go area, there will be stark staring disbelief. Does he realise that the Government are not powerless in the matter? There are fiscal levers that they could use. They could consider income tax or VAT, or the remission or delayed payment of business rates. He has said nothing about that today. I am sorry to have to say this but, in all my years in the House, I have never heard a Secretary of State speak on a subject with so little grip on it. His idea of a response to this crisis is to find a piece of countryside where the disease has not yet struck and walk around it with impunity. That is incredibly wrong. To blame the crisis in the tourism industry on the press is not realistic. We want to hear from him even now. He cannot say that he has done anything, because if he had done something he would have told us about it. He should go away and discuss with his ministerial colleagues what can be done.

Mr. Smith: What the hon. Gentleman has just said is a complete and utter distortion of what I have said and what the Government have done. None of us are advocating—

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is.

Mr. Smith: None of us are suggesting that anyone should get out of their car and walk across fields or agricultural land or in proximity to livestock. We are very clear—and have been from the word go—that those aspects of countryside recreation are not acceptable. However, we are seeking to encourage legitimate and safe recreation in rural Britain. I am very sad that the hon. Gentleman does not seem to share that ambition. He raised some other points about different ways of assisting rural businesses in the face of this crisis. Of course, we are looking sympathetically at all possible options. That is why we have the rural economy working party. It is why my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and others are looking at these issues to see what can best be done over the next few days and weeks.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I am going to call the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Thomas) and then we must move on. However, I can give those who have not been called today an assurance that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food assures me that he will make a statement tomorrow and I shall call them then.

Mr. Simon Thomas (Ceredigion): Small businesses in my constituency are almost entirely in agriculture and tourism and they are suffering dreadfully. Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming a private initiative in my constituency by Sir Ray Tindle, the owner of *Cambrian News*, to provide £250,000 to help those small businesses? Will the Government consider match funding and similar private initiatives and the deferring of VAT payments and business rates? Finally, although I agree with his comments on coastal towns such as Aberystwyth, the Secretary of State is in danger of sending out a mixed message today about other rural areas. In most of my constituency one can hardly move without falling over a sheep. I do not understand the Government's current guidelines on rural tourism. Will he release clear guidelines for rural areas and make sure that the media also know about them?

Mr. Smith: In relation to the hon. Gentleman's point about the assistance fund, we are looking at these issues very carefully. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, we shall do whatever we can to help. Of course, we understand that the rural economy is suffering very badly indeed.

In relation to the hon. Gentleman's point about mixed messages, there is no mixed message. The message is very clear indeed. Some activities in rural areas are dangerous and cannot be permitted—activities that bring anyone into proximity with livestock, cross open land, enter fields, traverse agricultural land or go into farms. Those activities are rightly prohibited to halt the spread of the disease, but many other activities are perfectly legitimate and can be undertaken. The message that those activities are allowed is extremely important because if we do not give out that message, not only will we deprive large numbers of people of being able to enjoy themselves and take their recreation in the countryside, but we will also do yet further damage to the rural economy.

Points of Order

4.34 pm

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I have given you notice. At 9.30 this morning the Department for Education and Employment launched its proposal to replace the costly, ineffective and bureaucratic new deal with an even more costly, ineffective and bureaucratic new deal mark 2. At that point, the document in question was available to the press, but it was not available in the Vote Office. When I asked the Vote Office when it expected to have it, I was told that it was making strenuous efforts to obtain copies of the Green Paper, but had been told that it would not be available until 4 pm. In the event, I gather that after heroic efforts it secured copies by lunch time.

Will you, Mr. Speaker, confirm that it is a gross discourtesy to the House if Ministers publish documents and give them to the press before they are made available to hon. Members, particularly if they are prepared to go ahead with a press conference when hon. Members cannot have sight of the document?

Mr. Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice of his point of order, which has enabled me to investigate the circumstances.

I understand that the Command Paper in question was laid in the proper way this morning and that a written answer was given at the appropriate time. To that extent, parliamentary requirements were met. Copies of the Command Paper, however, were not available in the Vote Office until lunch time, although copies could be consulted in the Library of the House. In that regard, the expectations, and, indeed, the requirements, of Parliament, were not met.

I have received a letter of apology for this from the Secretary of State for Education and Employment which I shall cause to be printed in the Official Report. The essence of this is that the copies of the Command Paper intended for the Vote Office were inadvertently sent to the wrong destination. It is manifestly the responsibility of Ministers to make sure that such mistakes do not happen.

Following is the letter:

"I am writing to offer my sincere apologies to you for the difficulties caused by the fact that copies of the Green Paper 'Towards Full Employment in a Modern Society' (CM5084) laid before Parliament and placed in the Libraries of both Houses at 9:30am this morning were not more widely available at that time to Members in the Vote Office.

The Stationery Office advised us yesterday evening that due to printing difficulties they were unable to satisfy our full order for copies to be delivered this morning. My officials therefore made arrangements for sufficient copies to enable us to deliver 100 copies to the Vote and Printed Paper Offices by 9:30am. I regret that these copies were misdirected. As soon as they were located, my officials made arrangements for them to be delivered to the Vote Office and I believe they arrived there shortly after 12.30pm.

We did make copies available this morning to the main Opposition spokesmen and I can only apologise that due to the delivery of the copies intended for Parliament to the wrong address, Members of Parliament did not have access to the Green Paper as early as they should have."

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Will you advise me what is appropriate conduct for a Department in replying to written parliamentary questions? I asked the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he had received from other Ministers on a planning matter concerning a business school in my constituency about the timing of his decision or its announcement.

I received a holding answer last Friday. On Monday, the local new Labour Millbank operative, who is also the prospective candidate for the constituency, received a copy of the substantive reply, which she lodged with local journalists that day, well before the answer appeared in *Hansard* on Tuesday morning and before I received the reply on Tuesday. The answer that I received yesterday was dated Monday and addressed to "Dr. Evan Harris, MP, House of Lords". I am not sure whether that was flattery or wishful thinking, but it was either incompetence or a deliberate attempt by the Department to deny the House and the questioning Member of Parliament rapid access to the Department's response, and stands in stark contrast to its rapid release and availability to a Labour party activist.

What advice, Mr. Speaker, can you give the Minister to ensure that departmental officials know that Members of Parliament are to be found in the House of Commons, not the House of Lords? Furthermore, what advice can you give me to ensure that Back Benchers are able, through parliamentary questions, to hold the Government to account, and that parliamentary answers are not released to Government party politicians by the Government before the House and the questioning Member are notified?

Mr. Speaker: I have already responded to the hon. Gentleman in writing on the matter. I have no grounds for intervening further.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. During the BSE crisis, there was justifiable criticism that food safety and agriculture were the responsibility of the same Ministry, and, at times, Ministers from the Department of Health came to the House to deal with public safety issues. Those responsibilities have now been separated, but we have yet to hear about the food safety aspects of foot and mouth disease. You kindly told the House that you expect the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food to answer questions in the House tomorrow. Will you inquire about whether a Minister from the Department of Health will deal with the food safety issues? Everyone says that there are no human health risks with food and mouth disease, but we were told that about BSE, and it is important that we should have an opportunity to question a Health Minister on issues concerning the Food Standards Agency.

Mr. Speaker: That is up to the judgment of the Minister involved. The hon. Gentleman can, of course, table written or oral parliamentary questions.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Further to the point of order raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris)—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I would not expect any further points on that matter. I have given an answer and I do not wish to intervene further. The hon. Gentleman should ask the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) whether he can look at the letter that I sent.

Bribery of Foreign Public Officials

4.40 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for combating the bribery of foreign public officials in international business transactions by implementing the OECD Convention of 1997; to amend the Prevention of Corruption Acts 1889 to 1916; to make further provision for the investigation of, and about the jurisdiction of courts in England and Wales in relation to, certain bribery offences; to amend the Criminal Justice Acts 1987 and 1993; to make provision about the powers of the Attorney General in relation to such offences; and for connected purposes.

This is a modest Bill. It addresses an urgent need for this country to comply with, and be seen to be in compliance with, the OECD anti-bribery convention of 1997. I hope that the measure will command all-party support. Its effect substantially accords with the declared policies of Her Majesty's Government to criminalise the bribery of foreign public officials and to make detection and prosecution of such bribery effective. Bribery of public officials to obtain or retain business is a two-way process. It may be driven from the demand or extortion side, or from the supply or bribing side. The convention addresses only the supply side, as does the Bill.

I am privileged to be a member of the Select Committee on International Development. We are just concluding an inquiry into corruption, during which the immensely damaging effects of bribery on economies and investment have become clear. Those who suffer most are usually the poorest in society. There is mounting anger among those who, through corruption, are denied the fundamental services that we take for granted.

The Government, and the previous Conservative Government, are to be commended for co-operating with the OECD states to bring forward the convention in record time. The OECD's original recommendations on corruption and on ending the deductibility of bribes for tax purposes were made in 1994 and 1996. The recommendation to proceed to a convention came in May 1997. The convention was signed in December 1997, was ratified by the UK in December 1998, and came into force in February 1999. The preamble states:

"Bribery is a widespread phenomenon in international business transactions, including trade and investment, which raises serious moral and political concerns, undermines good governance and economic development, and distorts international competitive conditions."

My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, in a foreword to the Home Office paper of June last year, said:

"Corruption is like a deadly virus. Left unchecked it weakens economies, creates huge inequalities and undermines the very foundations of democratic government. The international business community is increasingly coming to realise that a culture of corruption is a disincentive to investment and trade.

We are committed to the fight against corruption wherever it is found. Corruption knows no boundaries. And the development of e-commerce makes it increasingly difficult to pin down the physical location at which a corrupt transaction has taken place. The law has to catch up with these realities."

As chairman of the all-party group on socially responsible investment, and a member of the anti-corruption non-governmental organisation Transparency International (UK), which has numerous leading companies as corporate supporters, I can confirm that responsible and progressive companies in this country, operating internationally, have already appreciated the need to safeguard their corporate reputations in the area of corruption, as they do already in connection with the environment, health and safety and child labour. Through ethical business codes, compliance procedures and training, and in other practical ways, such companies are sending out a clear message that corruption is to be outlawed as a means of obtaining or retaining business. Again, legislation in this country must now catch up.

This matter is urgent. The OECD working group on corruption, in an evaluation issued in June 2000, concluded that UK laws were not in compliance with the convention and urged the enactment of appropriate legislation by the end of 2000. The Government accept the need for this legislation, but apparently they would prefer it to be part of a comprehensive measure reforming the general law of corruption, including the bribery of parliamentarians and other potentially controversial reforms. That measure will come before the House when parliamentary time allows.

Meanwhile, other leading G7 nations and most of the signatory states have taken steps to bring their laws into line with the convention. Some of them now view the UK's inaction with increasing frustration and irritation. While there is no clear offence of bribing foreign officials, offshore bribes, incredibly, remain tax deductible, as is confirmed by the Treasury's guidance to inspectors of taxes.

There is no compelling reason for this limited but vital reform of our criminal law to await a much wider Bill at some indeterminate future date. The offence stands alone. It needs to be dealt with urgently for the UK to maintain credibility in its determination to deal with international economic crime.

My Bill reads the offence into existing legislation. It therefore in no way prejudices a future comprehensive Bill which I am sure will come forward in due course. Also, at a single stroke, it cures the scandal of UK tax deductibility of foreign bribes. Mercifully, domestic corruption in this country is not too serious; when it is discovered, our existing legislation, although unchanged since 1916, has proved to be an adequate basis for prosecution.

The publication by the World Bank of its list of companies found to have behaved corruptly in regard to Bank-funded procurement reveals a significant number of British businesses. In no case has it been possible to prosecute in this country. The UK and the City of London must not be allowed to be corruption and money-laundering havens. The report last week of the Financial Services Authority showed that $1.3 billion, the proceeds of corruption and looted funds of the late President Abacha of Nigeria, had been laundered through London banks. Easy laundering of funds leads to greater extortion in corrupt regimes. The reputation of the City demands that we show the world that we are not soft on economic crime.

In addition to creating the offence of bribing foreign public officials, the Bill would enact the Government's proposals for expanding the jurisdiction of the courts of England and Wales. It would include nationality based jurisdiction, so that even if all the components of an offence—offer, acceptance and payment—took place offshore, it could still be prosecuted here.

It will never be easy to detect and prosecute international bribery, but to give the authorities the greatest chance of success, the Bill proposes expressly to

[Mr. Tony Colman]

widen the powers of the Serious Fraud Office to investigate and conduct criminal proceedings for serious and complex corruption in the same way as it does for fraud. The SFO has the advantage of exceptional compulsory powers of investigation and over the years has gained unique experience in dealing with such offences. However, the SFO investigates a case of corruption only if it includes fraud, which it frequently, but not always, does. The distinction is artificial and, I believe, unnecessary.

The Bill also proposes to remove the requirement for the consent of the Attorney-General to institute a prosecution for the new offence of bribing foreign public officials. The Law Commission, in its recent review of the law of corruption, recommended that. The OECD convention requires that to protect the independence of prosecution, the discretion whether or not to investigate and prosecute foreign bribery should be based solely on professional motives and is not to be subject to improper influence by concerns of a political nature. No one suggests that a Law Officer would exercise his or her powers improperly, but the Attorney-General is a member of the Government. For this reason, the OECD working group recommended that the UK should reconsider that requirement.

I should like to pay tribute to the Departments and organisations that are working hard to curb the damage wrought by corruption worldwide, but particularly in poor and emerging economies. The Department for International Development is at the forefront of UK initiatives in this area. Following the recent review of the Export Credits Guarantee Department, new business principles and practices have been introduced to ensure that publicly funded support does not go to business induced by bribery. The ECGD's policies now expressly include promotion of the full implementation of the OECD convention.

The World Bank has in recent years initiated an anti-corruption strategy. Transparency International never ceases to keep the issue at the forefront of world concern. There is much more to be done, but these and comparable initiatives are changing the way in which business is done. The enactment of the Bill is essential as a priority in any future commitment to legislation. I commend it to the House.

4.49 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): I oppose the Bill presented today by the hon. Member for Putney (Mr. Colman), but wish to make it clear at the outset that it is nothing personal. Indeed, without wishing to overstate the case, it pains me somewhat to oppose the hon. Gentleman, who is one of the most courteous Members of the House. He is a likeable cove, and a man for whom I have considerable respect. However, he has not done himself justice today, because the Bill will not achieve its stated objective. It is important to emphasise to people listening to this debate that it is not even intended to do so. In short, it is a classic example of a triumph of style over substance—something that we have seen consistently from this Government for nigh on four years.

I want to explain why that is so. The hon. Gentleman, who serves on the Select Committee on International Development, is well informed about the issues and reads closely from a carefully prepared script. As he knows, the Government set out their thinking as recently as November 1997, when they stated in their White Paper "Eliminating World Poverty: A Challenge for the 21st Century" their support for measures to counteract bribery and corruption in the specific context of international business transactions. Thereafter, however, no legislation was introduced to give effect to the OECD convention.

In a written answer published in column 33W of the *Official Report* on 10 April 2000, a Minister—I think that he spoke for the Department for International Development, but he certainly represented the Government—said that the Government intended to introduce legislation as soon as possible to give effect to the provisions of the OECD convention. That answer was given 11 months ago, but nothing has happened since. No action has been taken and the Government have made no progress. I assume that the answer was provided at least partly in response to the justified criticism made in January last year by George Moody-Stewart, head of the UK chapter of the anti-corruption non-governmental organisation Transparency International. He pointed out that although the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were said to have an ethical foreign policy, it was difficult to make that claim without support for the OECD convention.

A most remarkable and instructive development occurred when my hon. Friend the Member for South-West Devon (Mr. Streeter) challenged the Secretary of State for International Development on that subject. Hon. Members will have observed that the right hon. Lady was in an especially tetchy mood. She demurred when my hon. Friend teased her by saying that the Government had done absolutely nothing to give effect to their high-falutin' declarations of good intent and had become embarrassed by the fact that the hon. Member for Putney had introduced a Bill to deal with those good intentions. She dissented and said that she was not embarrassed for the simple reason that it was her idea that he should introduce the Bill. The hon. Gentleman is shaking his head—that is not a career-enhancing move. It is a dangerous initiative and I would expect better of him. The Secretary of State said that it was her idea, but now he is claiming parentage. Let there be an argument between Birmingham, Ladywood and Putney, but those involved should bear in mind that the issue is of the greatest importance.

As someone who believes passionately in the integrity and efficacy of the House of Commons and who wants to see those two qualities restored, I am concerned that if we support the Bill we will be engaged in humbug and nonsense—it will be nonsense on stilts at that. The hon. Gentleman knows that the Bill will not be enacted before the election; indeed, it is not intended to become law. The Government could have addressed the issue in their recently published International Development Bill, which contains no fewer than 20 clauses and six schedules. He now tells us that that issue is both "essential" and "urgent", but the Secretary of State declined to use a Government Bill to achieve the objectives that we are considering.

Ministers are now seeking to spin to the public the impression that they are serious about those objectives and that a prominent Back Bencher, who is a very worthy, assiduous and trusted member of the International Development Committee, is going to deliver the goods. The public should know that that will not happen. The Bill will not become law and is not intended to be enacted. Of course, it might be intended to assist the hon. Gentleman, who has a majority of 2,976 in Putney, where he faces a formidable threat in the form of Mr. Michael Simpson, the constituency's energetic, talented and determined prospective Conservative parliamentary candidate. Mr. Simpson needs to secure a shift of only 1,489 votes to ensure that he becomes the representative of that constituency in this House. I therefore understand the hon. Gentleman's domestic difficulties, but I hope that he will understand that that cannot be my prime motivation.

The Government are doing themselves a disservice and the hon. Gentleman is compounding the sin. These people have the time to introduce a Bill to criminalise the country pursuits of tens of thousands of hitherto law-abiding people but, apparently, they do not have the time to introduce a Bill to give effect to the intention stated by Ministers as long ago as November 1997. That is shabby and unworthy.

I do not wish to divide the House on the matter, because we have other important matters to address today. However, I am genuinely disappointed in the hon. Gentleman. We all had high hopes for him. He should not reduce himself to being a craven lickspittle of the Secretary of State for International Development.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Tony Colman, Mr. Bowen Wells, Dr. Vincent Cable, Ann Clwyd, Barbara Follett, Mr. Nigel Jones, Ms Oona King, Ms Tess Kingham, Mr. Andrew Rowe and Mr. Tony Worthington.

BRIBERY OF FOREIGN PUBLIC OFFICIALS

Mr. Tony Colman accordingly presented a Bill to make provision for combating the bribery of foreign public officials in international business transactions by implementing the OECD Convention of 1997; to amend the Prevention of Corruption Acts 1889 to 1916; to make further provision for the investigation of, and about the jurisdiction of courts in England and Wales in relation to, certain bribery offences; to amend the Criminal Justice Acts 1987 and 1993; to make provision about the powers of the Attorney General in relation to such offences; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 20 July, and to be printed [Bill 64].

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you tell the House what remedy is available to us if we want to ensure that, whatever view we may have about a guillotine timetable, if there is a guillotine and a significant part of that guillotine time is taken up by other matters—for understandable reasons about which colleagues have no complaint—the lost time could be made up so that the maximum guillotine time is permitted?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, but the Order of the House does not allow for that flexibility.

ESTIMATES

Motion made, and Question put forthwith pursuant to Standing Order No. 145(2) (Liaison Committee),

That this House agrees with the Report [8th March] of the Liaison Committee.—*[Mr. Sutcliffe.]*

Question agreed to.

Orders of the Day

Criminal Justice and Police Bill

As amended in the Standing Committee and pursuant to Order [12 March], considered.

New Clause 13

COLLECTIVE HARASSMENT

'.—(1) In section 7 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 (interpretation of sections 1 to 5), there shall be inserted the following subsection—

"(3A) A person's conduct on any occasion shall be taken, if aided, abetted, counselled or procured by another—

(a) to be conduct on that occasion of the other (as well as conduct of the person whose conduct it is); and

(b) to be conduct in relation to which the other's knowledge and purpose, and what he ought to have known, are the same as they were in relation to what was contemplated or reasonably foreseeable at the time of the aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring.".

(2) This section has effect in relation to any aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring that takes place after the coming into force of this section.'.—*[Mr. Charles Clarke.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.58 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Charles Clarke): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following amendments: No. 60, in clause 43, page 34, line 31, after "the", insert "immediate".

No. 61, in page 35, line 1, after "cause", insert "serious".

No. 62, in page 35, line 1, after "or", insert "serious".

No. 63, in page 35, line 6, after "any", insert "serious".

No. 64, in page 35, line 6, after "or", insert "serious".

Mr. Clarke: New clause 13 follows the debate in Committee, when, during the debate on new clauses to tackle the problems caused by animal rights extremists, I undertook to consider further whether the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 gave adequate protection against acts of collective harassment. My hon. Friends the Members for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) and for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) made powerful and effective speeches in favour of that re-examination, and Opposition Members also spoke in favour of it. I undertook that, if the Act needed improvement in this respect, I would come back on Report with an amendment. This is what I now do.

It is already an offence for a group of people to arrange for one person to engage in a course of conduct that harasses another. What is less clear is whether it is an offence for a group to arrange for, say, each member to do just one act of harassment. For instance, one person might order an unwanted taxi to call for the victim, and another might arrange for an unwanted consignment of gravel to be dumped in the victim's driveway, as in the example given in Committee by the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald). In such a case, the victim is at the receiving end of a series of harassing experiences, but no offence may have been committed by any one person.

We believe that, in practice, it is indeed possible that such a group would have to engage in some sort of course of conduct to make and check the necessary arrangements and that, in doing so, its members could well be liable to prosecution directly under the 1997 Act. However, we have concluded that it is prudent to make it explicitly clear that collective harassment of such a nature is no less an offence than a campaign of harassment by one person—a point made by my hon. Friends the Members for South Thanet and for Peterborough.

Subsection (1) amends section 7 of the 1997 Act, which defines "conduct" and "course of conduct" in sections 1 to 5. It will insert new subsection (3A), which adds to the definition of "conduct". Paragraph (a) provides that conduct by one person shall be taken, at the time it occurs, also to be conduct by another if it is aided, abetted, counselled or procured by that other person.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): I understand that the new clause has been introduced because of the problems relating to animal experimentation, but it does not refer to animal experimentation. Could it have a wider remit? Many of my constituents suffer from antisocial behaviour associated with prostitution, which sometimes involves harassment from a number of people. Could the new clause help them? They welcome, too, the measures to deal with the problems associated with kerb crawling, which they have called for for a long time.

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is right to suggest that the new clause is not limited to animal rights and could apply in relation to other issues. I pay public tribute to her for her exceptionally energetic campaigning on dealing with prostitution and kerb crawling in her constituency and more generally.

As my hon. Friend knows, other measures which we considered in Committee will introduce new offences to address those matters, and the Government have allocated resources to fight the effects of prostitution through other programmes. I can confirm that the new clause will have general application, though I shall be surprised if it is applied directly to prostitution in the way she suggests. However, I hope that other measures will give at least some reward for her energetic campaign on behalf of her constituents.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): The Minister fairly pays tribute to the hon. Members for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) and for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) for their contributions in Committee.

On animal rights extremists, the Minister knows that we greatly welcome the fact that the Government have responded to what we said in Committee about the need further to amend the law and we are grateful to him for introducing the new clause, but has he addressed the issue in relation to conspiracy, which we raised in Committee? Organisations such as the Research Defence Society and the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry are concerned about it.

Mr. Clarke: I shall come to that point, but we have not addressed it in the way the hon. Gentleman suggests, for reasons that I shall give in a moment.

Paragraph (b) provides that the knowledge and purpose of those who aid, abet, counsel or procure such conduct relate to the moment at which the conduct was aided, abetted, counselled or procured, not to when it took place. That will enable knowledge and purpose to be considered in relation to what was planned or should have been expected at the time of planning. Thus the new clause still allows for a defence of reasonableness.

We believe that the new clause will add a valuable measure of protection for individuals such as members of the scientific community against a concerted campaign of harassment. If the 1997 Act were not amended, the perpetrators could escape prosecution; I agree with all members of the Committee who moved amendments and spoke in the debates on those matters that that is unacceptable. That is why we have introduced the measure. We believe profoundly and strongly that we must take all the action we can to protect legal research in this country and ensure that those who engage in that research are properly protected and free from intimidation.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: In a moment. First, I shall respond to the point raised by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins). We indeed considered confirming collective harassment as an offence by amending the conspiracy provisions in the Criminal Law Act 1977. We have weighed in the balance the points put in Committee, which were made with integrity by all sides. We have concluded, however, that we shall be able to provide more comprehensive protection for scientists and others involved in such work by using the concept of aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring an act of harassment. We feel that that is a more efficacious way of achieving the end desired by Committee members. In fact, I think that the alternatives were proposed as probing amendments.

Mr. Hughes: I do not dissent from the purpose of the new clause, but can the Minister tell us why, as well as rejecting the idea of governing this particular mischief by means of a conspiracy approach, the ordinary law of aiding and abetting does not cover what the Minister seeks to do? The new clause does not create a new offence; it merely adds an interpretation provision to the 1997 Act. Surely it would always have been possible for anyone to be prosecuted for aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring the substantive offence, and to be liable to the same penalty as would have been incurred following prosecution under the original Act.

Mr. Clarke: We considered that point, and I think there is some merit in it. That is why I said earlier that we believe that, in practice, it is likely that such a group would have to engage in some course of conduct to make and check the necessary arrangements, and that in so doing its members could well be liable to prosecution directly under the 1997 Act. We concluded, however—I tried to respond to representations by Members on both sides, although those of my hon. Friends were particularly powerful—that it would be prudent to specify that collective harassment of that nature is no less an offence than a campaign of harassment by one person.

I suppose that the hon. Gentleman's point endorses the point that he continually makes—with which I have a great deal of sympathy—that the codification processes could clarify some of the issues over time.

We believe that amendments Nos. 60 to 64 are inspired by an attempt to produce what those who tabled them consider a better balance between people's rights to engage in peaceful process and the need to protect people in their homes, but that they fail to achieve their aim. As we said in Committee, we feel that the insertion of the word "immediate" adds nothing to the term "vicinity"; its only effect would be the creation of a greater opportunity for arguments in court. The insertion of the word "serious" would present similar opportunities for argument in court about how serious the distress or alarm would be. We think that the effect, although not the intent, of the amendments would be a loss of clarity.

I hope the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) will consider withdrawing his proposals.

Mr. Hawkins: Let me again stress the unhappiness of Conservative Members about the limited amount of time we have in which to consider no fewer than 11 groups of new clauses and amendments. We have just a fraction over three and a half hours to debate them all, which means that if we did so—although I greatly fear that we shall not be able to—we should have less than 20 minutes to discuss each group. That is wholly inadequate. There is a long history of disputes between the two sides about time; now there is a problem again. In our view, proper scrutiny by Parliament is once more being bypassed.

As I made clear in my intervention on the Minister, we greatly welcome the Government's positive response to the points that I and my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) made in Committee and which were supported by the hon. Members for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) and for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman). Speaking not only for ourselves but on behalf of those in the scientific research community, we felt that there was a need to toughen up the law more than the Government were proposing to do in the Bill—specifically, in what started out, in Committee, as new clauses 6 and 7. Those new clauses were the Government's response to the very powerful speech made on Second Reading by the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major).

There is no doubt that the type of intimidation and harassment that has been inflicted on so many law-abiding employees of research companies such as Huntingdon Life Sciences is wholly unacceptable. The issue's importance is highlighted by the nature of the attacks, some of which have occurred in my own county and even in my own constituency, where the research facilities of two companies have been targeted by extremists and terrorists. The attacks have included the fire-bombing of people's cars when those cars were parked next to their houses, the fire-bombing of sheds, sledgehammer attacks on people's cars while they were still inside them, bomb attacks on cars, the smashing of windows in people's houses, the spraying of cleaning fluid into people's eyes, other physical assaults, and, as the Minister mentioned, the ordering of gravel deliveries and hearses to people's houses.

[Mr. Hawkins]

The attacks were committed by people who are campaigning supposedly for the welfare of animals. Such behaviour is entirely unacceptable and can never be justified. I am sure that all hon. Members support proper animal welfare standards. However, the supposed defence of animal rights can never justify attacking or threatening the life of a human being.

In Committee, Opposition Members felt that the Government's proposals did not address two specific issues—conspiracy, and rotating harassment. As I said, we are very grateful that the Government have taken on board our concerns. I also echo the Minister's comment that, on both sides of the Committee, there was an extremely serious and proper debate on these very serious matters.

We are, however, concerned that the Government have come down only on the aiding and abetting side of the equation. If the provisions are enacted and experience subsequently shows that they are not effective or sufficient, and particularly if organisations such as the Research Defence Society, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry and others that have written to me—including the British Pharmacological Society and the Biotechnology Industry Association—feel that it is necessary to re-examine the offence of conspiracy, we would be grateful if the Government took account of those facts. Of course I expect, however, that it will be an incoming Conservative Government who will have to respond to that matter.

The provisions undoubtedly address a very important issue. I reiterate that we are very pleased that the Minister responded to the points that we made in Committee. He described the discussions that he had had with officials on how to balance the issues, saying that they had only narrowly decided not to seek to amend the Criminal Law Act 1977 and conspiracy law as we had suggested. I am slightly surprised that they chose to pursue the aiding and abetting approach rather than the conspiracy approach. Nevertheless, we welcome that approach, and we feel sure that the organisations whose specific representations we expressed in Committee will welcome it.

I should like to speak briefly to amendments Nos. 60 to 64, which were tabled by Liberal Democrat Members. We fear that the amendments would weaken the ability to determine the "vicinity" of a place where harassment was occurring.

5.15 pm

The Minister will recall that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire referred in Committee to the serious concerns of the National Farmers Union, of which the House should be aware. The NFU's excellent head of parliamentary affairs, Barney Holbeche, has been in touch with my hon. Friend and me to express concerns arising from the fact that the dwelling of a farmer or someone employed by him invariably forms part of the premises of the farm. That happens for obvious reasons to do with the maintenance of high animal welfare standards.

The original new clause 6 gave constables wide powers to direct anyone seeking to harass a victim to bring that treatment to a halt. That power would be available where a person was present outside any premises used by the victim, at his dwelling or in its vicinity. The Liberal Democrats seek to weaken that provision by restricting it to the "immediate" vicinity. That would water down the Government's proposals and increase the concerns of the NFU at a time when, in the light of the foot and mouth crisis, we should not want to give our farmers any less protection.

I share the NFU's concerns about how "vicinity" might be interpreted, even under the amended Bill. Farmers want an assurance that the direction of a constable cannot be flouted by animal rights terrorists being able simply to walk to another side of the premises and continue their intimidatory activity. In subsection (5) of the original new clause 6, which the Government introduced in Committee, it was anticipated that a constable could make exceptions to his direction, including conditions regarding the distance from the premises or the location at which people who did not leave the vicinity must remain. Does that mean that a constable would have the power to direct persons to leave the premises and to stay at a significant distance—at least a mile, say—where they would be out of range when it came to intimidatory behaviour?

The NFU has drawn a comparison between that provision and a provision in the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994; both my hon. Friend the Member for North–East Hertfordshire and I sat on the Standing Committee that considered it. That Act includes a power to direct a person who is within five miles of the boundary of the site of a rave not to proceed in the direction of the rave. There is, therefore, a precedent for setting a clear distance, to be found in a piece of legislation introduced by the Conservatives.

The NFU is also concerned that the Bill does not make clear for how long a direction would be valid. Clearly, the value of a direction would be limited if it would be lawful for a person to return to the scene only an hour later, once the police had left. The NFU again draws a parallel, this time with the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, under which a person transgressing the law while exercising the Government's so-called right to roam could be banished from the access land in question for 72 hours. The NFU is concerned that there may be a lacuna in the Bill before us.

We would not support the Liberal Democrat proposals to water down what the Government have done by specifying the "immediate" vicinity. The Liberal Democrats are clearly wrong on that, and we shall be interested to hear what the Minister has to say about the NFU's genuine concerns on behalf of all farmers. I conclude by repeating that we welcome new clause 13.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I, too, welcome new clause 13. I thank the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), for his complimentary remarks about the contributions made in Committee by my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) and by me. I also thank the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) for offering the same compliments. Although it might suggest that we are having a bit of a love-in, I should add that the Minister has moved considerably towards meeting the requirements put to us by the scientific community.

People accuse the Government of being inflexible, not listening or being arrogant, but the Minister's actions during our proceedings gave the lie to that: none of the

amendments was in the original Bill. By strength of argument, not only from those in the scientific community and Government Members, but from Opposition Members, a case has been made to protect a group of people who are under threat. The Minister has listened to that case and has acted.

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): Has my hon. Friend, like me, received several letters from just some of those scientific organisations that he has described, making such points and thanking the Government for moving so swiftly?

Dr. Ladyman: I have indeed. All my contacts in the scientific community are absolutely delighted by the progress that has been made, and feel that there is now light at the end of the tunnel not just for those who experiment on animals but for scientists in general, who have come under threat in recent months.

In the light of that openness, may I put it to my hon. Friend the Minister that there are opportunities even beyond Report to table further amendments in order to improve the work that has been done? I ask him to keep an open mind, to keep reviewing the changes that have been made and not entirely to close his mind to the line of action suggested by Conservative Front Benchers on conspiracy legislation. There may be some work in that area that could improve the Bill further.

I certainly very much welcome new clause 13. As I am not a lawyer, I found it almost impenetrable. It is only because I know what it is meant to achieve that I could work out what it is trying to achieve. I shudder to think how some poor judge will try to wade his way through it.

Mr. Charles Clarke: My hon. Friend has already made some nice remarks, but if he lists the poor judges whom he knows, he will benefit the whole House.

Dr. Ladyman: I withdraw the comment. I would not want ever in my political career to mislead the House. I clearly have done so if I have given the impression that there are any poor judges. Let us say that unfortunate judges will have to interpret the semantics of the provision.

I can more or less work out proposed subsection (3A)(a) to the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, but I find proposed paragraph (b) fairly complex, to say the least. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to consider the paragraph again in order to ensure that it will achieve what he wants. If my interpretation is right, the offence is committed if an individual procures somebody to carry out an act of harassment, but he will be judged according to what he knew at the time that he carried out that procurement.

I worry a little that if the person subsequently realises that an act of harassment has been procured—perhaps he has asked somebody to demonstrate at a particular address—and becomes aware that the address is very close to a scientist's home, or if he subsequently becomes aware that others have also procured people to carry out acts of harassment, he will be able to defend himself on the basis that he did not know when procuring the act that others had procured similar acts. If he does not make any attempt to stop the act of harassment that he procured, he may be able to defend himself under the paragraph.

I might have got that around my neck, and parliamentary draftsmen and lawyers might assure my hon. Friend that people will not be able to defend themselves in that way, but, just in case, I ask him to continue to monitor the provision as the Bill proceeds.

I conclude by once again thanking my hon. Friend the Minister on behalf of scientists for the steps that he has taken so far, but ask him to continue to keep an open mind as the Bill proceeds to any other ways in which we can work together to protect scientists further.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I shall comment first on new clause 13. I am grateful for the Minister's letter honouring the undertaking that he gladly gave in Committee to review the legislation on harassment and intimidation. It is dated 12 March and it covers various Acts, including the Public Order Act 1986, the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 and section 241 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992. Various provisions on obstruction appear in the Highways Act 1990, the Metropolitan Police Act 1839 and the Town Police Clauses Act 1847. In addition, there is common law provision on breach of the peace, which does not need a statute. The Minister also helpfully dealt with the fact that it is open to people to take civil proceedings.

The Minister was kind enough to acknowledge that one of the things that I try to ensure is that we do not pass unnecessary laws. Every time anything happens out there in the big wide world, there is a tendency to think that there is a need for a new law to deal with it. In such circumstances, people often do not check whether a law exists or what the existing law means in practice. It is one of the jobs of the Government, questioned by the legislature, to ensure that we do not already have sufficient provision, however old it might be.

The new legislation proposed in new clause 13 in effect interprets the Protection from Harassment Act. The most reasonable argument for it is that under existing legislation someone must have pursued a course of conduct. Under the new clause, individual activities can constitute harassment, intimidation and threat. That seems to be a proper extension of the law, which was why my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) and I supported in Committee the principle of the new clause that has now become clause 43.

New clause 13(2) sensibly provides that the amendment to the law is prospective, not retrospective. It is important to include that in the Bill—some legislation is not clear on the point. There should be no case for retrospective legislation, unless there is a particular and extremely important reason that commands great consensus—for example, the War Crimes Act 1991, although its retrospective nature raised questions.

I do not intend to vote against new clause 13, but I am not entirely persuaded that the existing law is insufficient. I understand the argument that new clause 13 inserts into existing legislation an explanation of who might be covered by it. That is helpful, but those of us who have been here for a little while know that Ministers often resist writing things into legislation: decisions about what is inserted in Bills are a little subjective. I do not object to the new clause because we want the law to be clear, for reasons that Members such as the hon. Members for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) and for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) and the right hon. Member for Huntingdon

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

(Mr. Major), as well as colleagues of mine such as my hon. Friends the Members for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) and others have made plain. It is helpful that people understand what they are not allowed to do and that being part of a group that is doing something is sufficient to be in breach of the law, even if they try to put themselves at one or two removes from the group of people who intimidate. Liberal Democrats believe that civil protest is right and proper and that expressing a view in opposition to whatever the subject might be, including experimentation, is valid as a political and personal position. There is, however, a limit—when someone starts to intimidate and harass a person who is participating in lawful activity. On the general issue, we are happy to find ourselves in the same position as the majority of Members, if not all of them.

5.30 pm

Amendments Nos. 60 to 64 turn on whether clause 43 is sufficiently tightly drawn so as not to be dangerous in achieving the balance between civil liberties and the protection of potential victims. I do not propose to press amendment No. 60. I hope that that shows the relatively flexible and, I hope, intelligent way in which we have all tried to conduct the debate, when we have been allowed to have it, but that is a separate issue.

Our decision to table an amendment to insert "immediate" stemmed from the argument about whether vicinity needs to be more tightly defined. There is an argument that vicinity should be defined, but it is met in part by the rest of the clause, which requires that it is for the police to decide whether the place where someone perpetrated the offence is near enough to cause harassment or intimidation. I am as persuaded as I can be that, for the time being at least, it is proper not to define the law on vicinity more tightly, and to allow the police to have discretion.

I do not take the same view about the threshold, whereby, however low it may be, someone could be convicted even if all that he did was to cause the victim alarm or distress. The Minister will recall from our debate in Committee that there are alternatives. A conviction could be secured either if someone did something that complied with all other conditions, but was likely to result in the harassment of the victim, or, in the absence of harassment, something likely to result in harassment or cause alarm or distress.

We believe that we must all expect and be expected to put up with some alarm or distress in certain circumstances, but that there must be a threshold.

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman is trying to do, but his argument is subjective. Alarm or distress is experienced by the victim, who will interpret whether that alarm or distress is serious. That is not likely to be affected by particular actions. Two of my constituents have had protesters outside their home. The woman is often alone in the house at night, and she has felt very alarmed and very distressed by protesters simply standing outside the home. That might not be interpreted by a court as something likely to cause serious alarm or distress, but it certainly has that effect on that individual.

Mr. Hughes: I understand that valid point. I believe that the hon. Lady used the words "very alarmed and very distressed". If someone is very alarmed and very distressed, and the view is taken that the action caused, or might have caused, the individual to be very alarmed or very distressed, I would accept that it would fall within the higher category of serious alarm or serious distress.

An recent example was given in Committee, albeit in a different context—the protest against the President of China when he came to this country by people arguing for a free Tibet.

Mr. Charles Clarke: That is irrelevant.

Mr. Hughes: It is a relevant political example. The President of China might have been caused alarm or distress because he did not like people protesting against his actions. Our debate is about the extent to which people are affected.

The Bill asks the court and the relevant police officer to judge whether an action is likely to cause alarm or distress. There is a danger of our becoming over-authoritarian if we argue that any action that is likely to cause any alarm or distress, no matter how slight or for how short a period, is sufficient to constitute an offence. That runs the risk of criminalising a person who is charged with the offence.

Mr. Hawkins: The hon. Gentleman recognises that, under the Bill, the alarm or distress must be occasioned by harassment. There is a danger that his proposal, which would water down the measure, would allow extremist protesters to get away with their actions in court, as the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) suggested. We do not want to pass a law that extremist campaigners can get round, and thus achieve a triumph of publicity to add to the distress and alarm that they have caused.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman's premise is wrong. Clause 43 states that, first, the person must be

"present outside or in the vicinity of any premises".

Secondly, the constable must believe,

"on reasonable grounds, that the person is present there for the purpose . . . of representing to the victim or another individual . . . or of persuading the victim or such another individual . . . that he should not do something that he is entitled or required to do; or . . . that he should do something that he is not under any obligation to do".

That is followed by what I described as the third hurdle, which is that the person's presence

"amounts to, or is likely to result in, the harassment of the victim; or . . . is likely to cause alarm or distress".

The interpretation of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) is usually correct. However, in the case that we considering, harassment is not required; the other grounds are sufficient. The courts could deem actions that were likely to cause alarm or distress, however slight, sufficient. Like many colleagues, I have argued such matters in court, and I know that the words will be debated, whether they are "alarm", "distress", "serious

alarm" or "serious distress". If the defendant pleads not guilty, such a debate will be held, and the verdict will depend on the interpretation of the threshold.

Dr. Ladyman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: I shall give way shortly, but I do not want to take much time.

I am simply anxious to get the balance right. We must proceed carefully with the new measure to ensure that we protect victims—we all support that—but that in doing so we do not prevent people from protesting. We might have a society that prohibits protest if we legislate on the basis that someone might be caused alarm or distress by it. If we do that, we will make great inroads into the right to protest. We must strike the right balance. Without the higher qualification that we propose, the balance swings against the civil rights of the protester and overly and unnecessarily towards the protection of a victim, who does not need matters to go that far.

Mrs. Brinton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: No, I have promised to give way to the hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman).

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I do not want to restrict people's rights to protest properly. However, the letter that the Minister provided at the hon. Gentleman's request mentions the Public Order Act 1986. The Minister's interpretation of section 5 is that an action that is committed in someone's hearing, and is likely to cause alarm or distress, or be interpreted as insulting, could be an offence, unless it is demonstrated to be reasonable. Political protest would be deemed reasonable. All that the Bill does is to prevent people from staging a demonstration, which might be reasonable under some circumstances, outside people's homes, where it is clearly not reasonable.

Mr. Hughes: This is as good and sensible a debate as we had upstairs. I understand that point, but it is equally possible to argue the alternative view—the Minister's letter was helpful in going over the matter—which is that, whereas current law allows people to put in the defence of reasonableness, the proposed new law does not. The Government would get rid of the defence of reasonableness, but keep the threshold of alarm or distress, as in, among other things, the Public Order Act. If there were still a reasonableness defence, it would be much more acceptable to have the unqualified alarm or distress threshold.

I understand the point, but if the Government get rid of the defence of reasonableness altogether and someone turns up in court and says, "I was distressed" or "I was alarmed"—how could the court say that he was not?—that could be sufficient to render someone else guilty of a crime. That is where we must be careful. The balance is therefore tilting in the wrong direction.

I accept that the logical conclusion of trying to get the law right—the Minister reminded us that the Government intend eventually to codify the law; it was mentioned in the 10-year plan announced the other day, which we support—is that we go through similar legislation and ensure that there is a consistent threshold. It might be either the lower threshold, if that is what the Parliament of the day thought appropriate, or the higher threshold, if it supports my view. At least we would have a common threshold. We could then weigh up which, if any, needed a reasonableness defence.

I understand the debate. There is no reasonableness defence in the Bill and people do not need to prove harassment. If we are going to convict someone, we should ensure that they are doing something that is more than just a little bit distressing, and is causing or is likely to cause more than a little bit of alarm or distress. Therefore, if the opportunity were to arise—I realise that the amendment will be voted on after the new clauses—we would like to test the mood of the House on the matter later in the proceedings.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: I do not intend to detain the House long. I want to express my strong support for new clause 13 and to thank the Minister for the measures that have been taken. In my constituency, the issue is considered important as I have a number of constituents who work on experiments with animals.

I reiterate the point that I made in an intervention on the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes). I cannot support, and hope that the House will not support, the weakening of the measure by including the word "serious" to describe alarm and distress. As I said, the word "serious" should be interpreted by the victim, rather than by the perpetrator.

Mr. Oliver Heald (North-East Hertfordshire): May I say how much I agree with the hon. Lady? Does she agree that, whenever the word "serious" is used in the law, there is quite a battle in court over what it means? Serious bodily harm is a classic example, of which there have been numerous cases. I strongly support the hon. Lady on that point.

Mrs. Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is a barrister, which I am not, and I would not like to generalise beyond this particular point, although I am pleased to have his support and I thank him for the point that he has made. I hope that the House will not support the amendments that have been tabled by the Liberal Democrats. I strongly support new clause 13.

5.45 pm

Mr. Charles Clarke: Some interesting points have been raised in the debate. On the question of timing, I had not intended to return to private grief. However, in the light of the remarks of the hon. Members for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), I should place on record the fact that in the 55 or so minutes that we have been debating this new clause—described by the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) as covering one of the most important, if not the most important, aspects of the Bill—there has not been a single Member of the Opposition in the Chamber, other than those who served on the Committee. *[Interruption.]* I apologise; one Member was here for a few minutes at the beginning. However, that fact weakens the general argument about timing. I appreciate the comments from some of my hon. Friends about the approach of the Government. We are determined to resolve this matter positively.

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

We had an entertaining exchange on the meaning of the word "poor". My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) referred to poor judges, using the word to mean "unfortunate". I intervened, using the word poor to mean "impoverished". He responded by taking it that I had meant "incompetent" judges; of course that is an oxymoron, or, as one of my officials advised me, a two-word paradox.

Dr. Ladyman: I would not like it to go in the *Official Report* that I had not understood my hon. Friend's joke. I realised that he meant "impoverished".

Mr. Clarke: Perhaps it could go on the record simply as a very poor joke and part of the general attack on lawyers for which the Government are now becoming famous.

Mr. Heald *rose—*

Mr. Clarke: I give way to a lawyer.

Mr. Heald: I hope not to annoy the Minister too much, but does he agree that five Labour Back Benchers—apart from his Parliamentary Private Secretary—two Conservatives and two Liberal Democrats in the Chamber is not very different from the balance in the House?

Mr. Clarke: I was referring to the argument—made with a lot of sound and fury—that the Government have been tyrannical in not allowing time for debate.

On the question of the word "vicinity", I was grateful to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey, who indicated that he was listening to what we said about the use of the words "immediate vicinity". There is nothing further I want to say, except that it is open to the police officer concerned to give whatever directions he considers necessary to prevent harassment, alarm or distress in the circumstances. It is an offence to refuse to follow those directions, including those about distance from premises.

On the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet on conspiracy, the new clause deliberately puts knowledge and purpose on the part of the person

"aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring"

an act of harassment back to the time that the act was planned. We do not want to catch those who, at the time, had a valid reason for their actions, which is why the wording is as it is. If there were a genuine coincidence between one person's aiding and abetting an act and other acts which resulted in harassment, it is right that no offence should arise if the coincidence were genuine.

Dr. Ladyman: If, having planned the act and initiated it by getting somebody to commit the act for me, I subsequently became aware that circumstances had changed and did not try to stop the act, would I have a defence or—as I would prefer—could I be prosecuted?

Mr. Clarke: If my hon. Friend did not have a defence, he could be prosecuted. However, I will take note of that point and write to him, as I would not want to mislead him.

Conspiracy—a matter raised by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath—will already be an offence if two or more people agree on a course of conduct which would in itself be an offence. The drawback of the Opposition amendment in Committee was that it would have caught the conspirators only if one person carried out at least two acts of harassment. Where that was the case, there would already be an offence under either section 1 of the Criminal Law Act 1977, under common law or in relation to the

"aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring"

of an offence.

The Government amendment is preferable because it relates to each bit of conduct that we are discussing which makes up a course of conduct. Someone who encourages or agrees with others to carry out acts of harassment will be responsible in law for each of those acts. That is why I give the answer I do to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet, with the qualification that I will write to him.

Finally, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey raised the issue of harassment. First, let me emphasise that it is not an offence under clause 43 to cause alarm and distress in itself. The offence is in failing to comply with the direction. The direction will not be not to cause distress, but, for example, to go half a mile away, to stop shouting or to leave the area. I strongly support the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) made extremely powerfully. It is the Government's view that individuals should have the opportunity to live in their homes with their families without having to suffer any alarm or distress, serious or otherwise, from protesters. There is a galaxy of ways in our democracy for people to hold a peaceful protest which does not involve loitering around somebody's house in circumstances which can cause alarm and distress.

To deal with a point that my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet raised in an intervention, the qualification of alarm and distress with the word "serious" would create a higher test than currently applies in section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986, which covers a person causing harassment, alarm or distress by using threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour. It would also require a higher test than under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, which also requires only harassment, alarm or distress.

With the assurance that the hon. Member for Surrey Heath sought—that we will keep the matter under review and look at the situation as we move forward—I urge right hon. and hon. Members to support new clause 13. I urge the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey to think again before he decides to divide the House on the introduction of the word "serious". I think that it would give encouragement to those who want to protest in that way and I urge him to think about it most carefully.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 1

EXCLUSION OF PRISONERS CONVICTED OF ASSAULTING POLICE OFFICERS, OTHER EMERGENCY SERVICE WORKERS AND NHS STAFF FROM POWER TO RELEASE SHORT-TERM PRISONERS ON LICENCE

'In section 34A of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 (power to release short-term prisoners on licence), after subsection (2)(b) there is inserted—

"(ba) the sentence is for any of the following offences—

(i) an offence under section 89 of the Police Act 1996 (assaulting, obstructing or resisting a constable);

(ii) an offence under section 38 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 (assault with intent to resist arrest);

(iii) an offence of common assault or an offence under section 18, section 20, or section 47 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 (wounding, causing grievous bodily harm and causing actual bodily harm) which was committed against a constable in the execution of his duty, any member of staff of the emergency services in the course of his duty or any member of staff of the National Health Service in the course of his duty.".'.—*[Mr. Heald.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Mr. Heald: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider the following: New clause 2—*Exclusion of prisoners convicted of offences against children from power to release short-term prisoners on licence—*

'In section 34A of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 (power to release short-term prisoners on licence), after subsection (2)(c) there is inserted—

"(ca)(i) the sentence is for an offence listed in paragraph 1 of Schedule 4 to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000; or

(ii) the sentence is for an offence listed in paragraph 2 of Schedule 4 to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 which is committed against a person under the age of 18; or

(iii) the sentence is for an offence which causes the prisoner to fall within paragraph 3 of Schedule 4 to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000.".'.

New clause 3—*Court to state the existence and effect of section 34A of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 when passing sentence—*

'When passing a custodial sentence under which a prisoner would qualify to be released under the provisions of section 34A of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 (power to release short-term prisoners on licence), the court shall state in ordinary language—

(a) the existence and nature of the power of the Secretary of State to release the prisoner under that section;

(b) the minimum term the prisoner would serve were the Secretary of State to release him immediately after having served the requisite period as defined in subsection (4) of that section.'.

New Clause 4—*Exclusion of prisoners convicted of offences punishable by maximum sentence of ten years more from power to release short-term prisoners on licence—*

'In section 34A of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 (power to release short-term prisoners on licence), after subsection (2)(a) there is inserted—

"(ab) the sentence is for an offence for which the maximum term of imprisonment is ten years or more;".'.

Mr. Heald: The Government refer to it as the home detention curfew scheme, but we call it their special early release scheme for prisoners. As the House is aware, we have covered this territory on other occasions, so I shall not put our case in tremendous detail. We are discussing the policy that allows those who have been sentenced to up to four years in prison to be let out up to two months earlier than the normal halfway point of their sentence, so someone sentenced to three years can be let out after 16 months. The Government are quite shameless about it. They say that it is not a secret, but the basis of the scheme.

The latest figures show that from 28 January 1999 when the scheme began to the end of January this year, 31,540 criminals were released early under the scheme. The figure has since risen to 32,000, as the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng), told us this week. Among those released are 64 criminals convicted of manslaughter, seven convicted of attempted murder, 4,152 convicted of wounding and assault occasioning actual bodily harm or grievous bodily harm, 2,919 burglars, 1,348 robbers, 4,310 drug dealers or traffickers, 80 blackmailers, 50 kidnappers and almost 1,300 guilty of affray and violent disorder. We consider that those are serious offences and that it is ludicrous for the Government on the one hand to say that they are trying to be tough on crime, and on the other to let out these sorts of people when they have not served even half their sentences.

Since the scheme was introduced we have tried to get it changed and we have succeeded. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison), who has run a substantial campaign on the matter, was finally able to persuade the Government that registered sex offenders should be excluded from the scheme altogether. That became law last year.

New clause 4 takes our campaign a stage further because it would stop the release under the scheme of the most serious criminals—those who are convicted of offences where the maximum penalty is 10 years or more. It would mean that somebody guilty of manslaughter, attempted murder or causing death by dangerous driving or of drug dealing or trafficking would be excluded from the scheme. The scheme should concentrate on those who have not committed the most serious offences. If the scheme is to continue, which seems to be the Government's fixed intention—I have to be honest with the House and say that we would scrap it—it should concentrate on the less serious offenders.

The Government have consistently rejected our new clause 1, which would stop the release of those who have been found guilty of assaulting a police officer. So far, 15 criminals convicted of obstructing an officer, 13 of assaulting with intent to resist arrest and 246 who assaulted a police officer in the execution of his duty have been let out early under the scheme. Indeed, 25 further assaults on police officers have been committed by those

[Mr. Heald]

who were released early under the scheme when they should have been in prison. The 246 guilty of assaulting police officers were sentenced to an average of 4.8 months in jail, but served only six weeks. In my view it makes a mockery of the comments of the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), who said:

"Assault is a serious offence and assaults on police are deplorable . . . We recognise our responsibility in supporting the police to protect the community. We expect the courts to use their full powers when considering sentences in cases where the police are assaulted."—[*Official Report*, 15 February 2001; Vol. 363, c. 255W.]

As I said in Committee, it is ludicrous to say to the courts, "Come on, pass tough sentences on these people who assault police. Let us back up the police" and when they do, let prisoners out when they have served far less than half their sentence. Almost five months is the average sentence, but only six weeks is served. It is ludicrous and it is letting our police down. It is quite wrong to blame the courts in this way. If we ask the courts to hand out tough sentences and then let the criminals out early, it really beggars belief.

In Committee, the Minister of State described our arguments as a gimmick. That was wrong because not only are these serious points, but they are supported by the official Opposition and by the Liberal Democrats. To some extent the new clause is a combined operation.

In Committee, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) put forward the idea that the exemption should apply not just to those who assault police but to those who assault emergency service and health service workers. There is no doubt that it is a major problem. Doctors and nurses in accident and emergency departments are most concerned about the fact that people assault them. Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members have combined on this matter. I have to say that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey is a bit of a late convert, having previously said something different about police assaults, but I pay tribute to the fact that he has thought the matter through and has reached this conclusion. In Committee we were united in pressing the Government on this point. If the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats agree on an issue and ask the Government to think again, in my view it is incumbent on them to do so. I have found the Government's arguments on this point very feeble and I hope that the Minister who replies to the debate will put forward a stronger argument. He might even agree. That would be good, but we will have to wait and see.

6 pm

New clause 2 would exclude from the scheme any person convicted of an offence against a child. In Committee, the Minister of State's response to the new clause was unsatisfactory.

New clause 3 deals with what we would call honesty in sentencing, and what the Government occasionally call honest sentencing. The new clause is right at the centre of the debate about honest sentencing. Before the election, the present Home Secretary called for sentencing courts to explain exactly what a sentence means. That was included in the Labour party's manifesto for the 1997 general election. On page 23, it said:

"The courts will have to spell out what each sentence really means in practice."

In January 1998, the then Lord Chief Justice, Lord Bingham, sent out a practice direction to judges on the matter, requiring them to explain the effect of the sentence passed in practice—that is, how long an offender would serve in custody before release. At the time, the Home Secretary said:

"Judges will now explain what a sentence means in terms of time spent in prison, the period of supervision after release and the period during which the offender might be recalled to prison. This . . . fulfils our own policy commitment to make sentences easier to understand."

The practice direction therefore makes it clear that judges should sentence a prisoner and then explain the early release arrangements that apply. Therefore, a judge sentencing someone to three years should say, "The sentence is three years. You will be released on licence after 18 months and may be returned to prison if you commit any further offences while on licence." That was the position at the time that the practice direction was issued.

After that, the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 was passed, which included the special early release scheme for prisoners. The effect of that is that a prisoner is released not after serving half a sentence but up to two months earlier. The discretionary power of the home detention curfew scheme was introduced on 28 January 1999.

I have considered how the matter has been dealt with in the courts and I am not satisfied. Other lawyers take a similar view, or at least their view is somewhat different from that of the Government. Last year, in the other place, my noble Friends moved an amendment to prevent the release under the scheme of a prisoner who had not been given the proper explanation when he was sentenced. That was prompted by the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) who sits as a recorder, a stipendiary magistrate, and who, speaking on Report, said:

"As I understand it, when we pass a sentence, we do not mention the home detention curfew scheme at all. It is purely an administrative rather than a judicial matter."—[*Official Report*, 12 June 2000; Vol. 351, c. 669.]

He went on to explain exactly what he did do. I have asked other lawyers who sit in court and they tell me that they agree with my hon. Friend.

In the other place on 31 October 2000, the Attorney-General opposed our amendment which stated that one could not be released without being told in advance. He said clearly that it would be entirely wrong for judges to mention the home detention curfew scheme at all when passing sentence. He went on to explain his reasons for that at column 915.

On 31 October last year, despite the manifesto promise about the court spelling out what a sentence means in practice, it was clearly the Government's view that the existence of the scheme should not be mentioned by judges, and it is our experience that judges were not doing that. Therefore, we were somewhat surprised when, in answer to a question from me, the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Norwich, South, who is no longer present—I wonder why—said:

"The Government are committed to ensuring that the implications of sentencing are explained in open court, but believe that this is best achieved through the issue of practice directions from the Lord

Chief Justice. The then Lord Chief Justice issued a practice direction in January 1998 requiring a court imposing a custodial sentence to explain the practical effect of that sentence for the benefit of the defendant, any victim and members of the public. Although the practice direction was issued before home detention curfew became available, it specifically states that if the statutory provisions governing early release are materially amended, then the model statements annexed to the direction will require modification. Courts are therefore already expected to explain the possible effect of home detention curfew on the offender."—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2001; Vol. 361, c. 485W.]

We want to know what the position is. On the one hand, the Attorney-General says that judges must not, at any cost, explain the home detention curfew scheme to defendants as they are sentenced. On the other, the Minister of State says that they are expected to explain the possible effect of the home detention curfew scheme on the defendant. Who is right—the Attorney-General or the Minister of State? If the Minister of State is right, can the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock), give the House a cast-iron assurance that, when the 32,000 criminals released from prison early under the scheme were sentenced, the possible effect of the home detention curfew scheme on release dates was mentioned in court? It is our belief that, for the past two years, the effect of the home detention curfew scheme has not been mentioned by the court, but that the Home Office thought it was.

I commend the new clauses to the House and I hope that we will have a firm and positive response from the Minister, particularly on new clause 3.

Mr. Simon Hughes: As the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) said, new clause 1, in the name of Conservative and Liberal Democrat Members, is a composite of two clauses moved by each party in Committee—the one to which the hon. Gentleman alludes in relation to assaults on police officers, which we supported, and one tabled by the Liberal Democrats dealing with assaults on ambulance, fire service and NHS personnel. We are happy that those matters have been rolled together, resulting in a portmanteau proposal.

In Committee, the Minister put forward certain arguments for not accepting the new clause or one like it. I am aware that two relevant matters are in the background—the review by Lord Justice Auld of the criminal justice system and the review on sentencing, both of which are due to report shortly. Whoever takes office after the next general election will be obliged to consider both of those, take advice and consult on them, and may well be minded to introduce legislation as a result.

I understand that in relation to all the new clauses, it is perfectly reasonable to say that they might properly be left until those two reviews are complete; I accept and understand that. I think that the Minister of State accepted that, although the criteria for home detention curfew were arrived at in a different way, there was nothing to preclude an exemption from that criteria by category of offence, and that it would be perfectly proper to review the system to achieve the results that we wanted.

I urge the Minister to be more positive and, ideally, to accept the new clause, even though there is a review coming. I am not naive enough to pretend that the argument that we should wait for the review is not reasonable, but the proposal has already achieved a great deal of agreement.

In addition, the concern about the issues addressed by the proposal is very great. Therefore, if we want to ensure that our legislation is credible and that we appear to respond to reasonable public demand by means of joined-up government, it would be logical to give a signal to the police that officers will be better looked after by the criminal justice system. The same signal must also be sent to personnel in the public services and emergency services.

I do not doubt for a moment that Ministers and hon. Members of all parties representing constituencies across the United Kingdom want us to support and work with those who carry out those key, front-line jobs. Sometimes, those people are attacked, assaulted, injured or even, in some tragic cases, killed while on duty. We must reduce the chances of that happening.

Dr. Ladyman: As I understand it, the new clause would exempt certain prisoners from the early release scheme not because of what they did, but because of who they did it to. That strikes me as a very illiberal concept. I believe that the hon. Gentleman accepts the principle of the early release scheme, but does he not agree that it should apply across the board, irrespective of whom a crime is committed against? That should not be the criterion that should inform a judgment.

Mr. Hughes: That is a perfectly proper consideration, and I understand the hon. Gentleman's point. In fact, two different types of criterion exist. The first has to do with the type of offence committed; the second with the risk associated with releasing people early, as the Minister set out very clearly. Liberal Democrat Members have been careful to refer to the scheme as the home detention curfew scheme. Under it, people are still detained, technically; they are not at liberty and they must meet certain requirements. The scheme means that a risk assessment has found it to be safe for the person involved to serve the final part of a sentence at home.

In fact, the scheme has proved to be safe in more than nine out of 10 cases. All we argue is that a third consideration should be that, for some people, the person against whom an offence was committed is relevant. That is why I and my colleagues have been careful to limit the new clause to people whose work requires them to be in uniform in places that are obvious, unarguable and logical to the public. It would be difficult to widen the scope of the proposal to include all public sector workers. Some public sector workers might not wear a uniform, for example, and there would be difficult debates about private sector employees who are contracted out to public bodies.

I understand the argument, but a severe problem exists, as Ministers from the Department of Health and others have made clear. There are assaults on NHS staff, on emergency workers in the fire service and, especially—as I have heard myself—on workers in the ambulance service and on police officers.

The present law contains offences against a police officer and defines an assault on a constable as a separate offence. There is no offence of assault on a Member of Parliament, and I am not arguing that there should be. However, I merely want to show that the law already contains a provision similar to the one contained in the new clause. It is not new in law, and the public policy requirement makes it proper to introduce the proposed measure now.

[Mr. Hughes]

As I indicated in Committee, Liberal Democrat Members are not minded to support the other new clauses in the group at the moment. I hope that I said straightforwardly then that we were reserving our position on the proposal that is now new clause 2 and the other proposals. We believe that it is better to wait for the review and a general debate about sentencing policy in the context of a debate about criminal justice policy. That debate can be reasonably held later in the year, whether or not a general election is held in the meantime.

6.15 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I wish to make a few remarks in relation to new clause 3. There is some confusion about what the Government think goes on in the courts, and what in fact goes on there. The same confusion is evident also within the Government.

I discussed this matter with the Minister of State when we met at a criminal counsel consultative committee reception in Lancaster house before Christmas. He candidly admitted that the Government had failed to implement many of the intentions expressed in the 1997 general election manifesto and in other public pronouncements since the election.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), I am a Crown court recorder. I sit in court and sentence defendants who have been found guilty by juries of criminal offences. From time to time, I sentence them to prison, but I also deploy sentences involving a community penalty. However, at no time in the several years that I have been a recorder have I ever mentioned in my sentencing remarks the home detention curfew scheme.

I made some inquiries of the Judicial Studies Board, which is located just above Labour party headquarters in Millbank, to see whether I was in error in that regard. I telephoned and asked whether, since January 1999—when the Government's amendment to the criminal law came into force—I should have made mention of the scheme in my sentencing remarks. However, the JSB staff to whom I spoke were unable to tell me anything at all about the need for sentencers to mention the HDC scheme in their sentencing remarks.

I wrote to the JSB, either just before or just after Christmas—I cannot remember exactly when—but have yet to receive a substantive reply. However, I am reasonably sure that, were I required as a recorder to mention in my sentencing remarks the effect of the HDC scheme, the JSB would have issued amended sentencing guidance. That has not happened, and the board is usually very good at keeping us up to date with procedure and the law.

I comply with the practice direction of January 1998, as do full-time judges and other recorders. That direction was issued by the then Lord Chief Justice, Lord Bingham. Last autumn, I attempted to give some young offenders a non-custodial sentence that involved being tagged and kept at home. That sentence was within the law, but those people in the Home Office or the Prison Service who administer the home detention curfew system were unable to carry out the sentence. They did not have the required bits of equipment, nor any ability to monitor the young offenders whom I had sentenced. In the case that I was dealing with, it seemed sensible not to send the teenage offenders into custody. That would not have done the public much good, and I came to the conclusion that custody would have done the offenders a great deal of harm.

A month or so later, in my capacity as the recorder with the carriage of that particular case, I received a letter telling me that, unfortunately, I could not hand out the sentence that I proposed as the relevant department lacked the necessary equipment. I therefore had to reconstitute the court and call back to it, at some public expense, the lawyers involved—both solicitors and counsel—and the defendants. In essence, I had to set them free, because there was nothing that could be done that lay within the competence of the prison service, the Home Office or the police, or for which those bodies had the appropriate equipment.

I was told—either in the letter that I received, or in some other way that I cannot now recall—by the relevant administrator or civil servant that, given the absence of any monitoring equipment, the home detention curfew system would have worked only if the police had, by chance, picked up the defendants for some other offence. If that had happened, I was told, it was possible that the police would have discovered that the defendants should have been in doors at the times specified by the sentence—say between 7 pm and 7 am.

I was not very happy with that, and neither, I think, was the Minister when I told him about it at Lancaster house last year. He made an excellent speech at Lancaster house, on the occasion of the funeral of Donald Dewar—the hon. Gentleman can check the date. He spoke about his work and the Government's intentions in this sector of public policy. Unfortunately, the Government have failed to implement the promises that they made in their manifesto and in their other public pronouncements.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for his generous remarks. I draw his attention to document CJ2010, which we published a few weeks ago. It attempted to put flesh on the bones of my remarks to the criminal justice organisation group about trying to get the whole of the criminal justice system working together, an aim that I know the hon. and learned Gentleman supports.

Mr. Garnier: I am glad to hear of this document. I hope that, after four years, the Government manage to achieve that objective. However, my example of the sentencing exercise that I went through in the Crown court last autumn demonstrates that a little before the hon. Gentleman made his speech, that was not the case.

I appeared on a television programme in the midlands with my constituency neighbour, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), whose name has recently come to wider public attention. I drew to the hon. Gentleman's attention the fact that the Government had failed to implement the policy in any practical form. I think that he undertook to telephone the Home Office to see what was happening.

The television programme was shown on the last Sunday of November last year. Shortly afterwards, Carlton Television was rung up by the Home Office for a transcript or a video of the programme, so that it could

find out precisely what I had alleged. I said on the programme more or less what I have told the House this evening with regard to the sentencing dilemma that I faced and the Government's failure to implement their promise. The matter can and should be dealt with.

Another matter that needs to be sorted out is referred to in new clause 3. We have the practice direction of January 1998. We have the remarks of the Attorney-General in the other place on 31 October last year when he said that it would be wrong for sentencers to mention the home detention curfew. I am not quite sure why he said that it was wrong—were I to study all that he said on that occasion, I might understand. However, I gather that that is the import of what he said. In addition, in his written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) on 22 January, the Minister said that the implication of any sentence was explained in open court to the defendant and the public. If that means that the home detention curfew early release scheme is mentioned in sentencing, that is not the case.

Mr. Heald: We have seen the Minister of State's written answer of 22 January. The view of the Home Office is that the courts are expected to explain the possible effects of the home detention curfew scheme on the offender. That fits in with Labour's manifesto commitment to honest sentencing. Does my hon. and learned Friend think that the Lord Chancellor's Department is obstructing what the Home Office and the Home Secretary want to achieve in terms of honest sentencing? What does he think is happening?

Mr. Garnier: I do not think that anyone is doing anything on purpose. That is the problem. I think that one Department is not talking to another. We have two Ministers from two different Departments sitting on the Front Bench, and they may well have discussed how best to approach the new clauses. However, it would be more helpful to me as a sentencer—let alone as a member of the Conservative parliamentary party—if the Government could provide certainty for sentencers.

Judges come under a lot of criticism from all politicians, largely because there are so few practising lawyers in the House of Commons now. The Minister laughs—all Ministers laugh at lawyers and it is a pity. Indeed, the Lord Chancellor is outright rude to them, as is the Home Secretary, for no great purpose other than to poison the public climate against legal aid lawyers. It is a matter of huge regret.

The problem is that judges and the courts will do what Parliament requires of them when Parliament passes criminal justice legislation. They may have private views about the good sense of some of the implications of the criminal justice legislation that seems to get passed year in, year out. This is not a party political point; I think that the previous Government was responsible for far too much criminal justice legislation, and this Government are in danger of doing the same.

Just as the courts are getting used to the new sentencing framework, along comes a smart new Home Secretary who says, "We must jig it all up again. I must make a name for myself—I have a party conference coming up." We then have to go through the whole process of research and learning all over again. It does not, by and large, improve the state of our criminal justice system, but simply causes confusion. The politicians themselves may be becoming confused by their own over-activity in this area of public policy.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am conscious that we are in danger of having a seminar as much as a debate, but I have two brief points. Does the hon. and learned Gentleman share my view that it would be a good thing to have a much clearer statement of the sentence implications by the judge at the end of the trial if that were possible? Secondly, if I have understood it correctly, the Conservatives call for that to happen, which they will be arguing for at the coming election, is not backed up by a call by them for a longer sentence regime. The Conservatives want "honesty in sentencing", but they are not calling for something that would make sentences longer. They have rejected that for all sorts of reasons that we could argue about elsewhere.

Mr. Garnier: On the hon. Gentleman's first point, I accept what he says as a matter of natural justice and probably also in compliance with the European convention on human rights, now introduced under the Human Rights Act 1998. However, as a matter of general good sense, when a defendant is sentenced, he and the public should know precisely what that sentence means. At the moment, when a judge sentences a defendant to a given period in custody, he then says, in compliance with the January 1998 practice direction, "This will mean that you will serve 50 per cent. of your sentence in custody and the balance will be served on licence." Judges do not say, "And by the way, you will get a bit more off because you may be released early under a home detention curfew scheme."

The philosophy behind new clause 3 is that to make sure that honesty in sentencing means what it says, if the Government want there to be earlier release under a home detention curfew scheme the sentencer should make that clear at the outset. It should be a matter of sentencing, not of administrative order by the Prison Service or whomever at a later stage.

On the hon. Gentleman's second point about sentencing, we want honesty in sentencing, so that when a judge says that a defendant will be sentenced to five years, the sentenced, the public and the victim in particular know that that individual will serve five years, unless other factors which were not contemplated at the time come into play. It does not mean that when a judge sentences a man to five years and he is released after two and a half, we want the five-year sentence doubled to 10 so that he serves five. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire agrees that the arrangement ensures that although some of the tariff sentences will be cut in half, they will mean what they say. I hope also that I have explained that point to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey.

6.30 pm

I have made a simple point and I hope that the Government will sort it out. Judges are annoyed only by being told to do one thing on Monday, another thing on Tuesday and then a third thing on Wednesday—let alone being told on Thursday to return to Monday's orders. That is a recipe for order, counter-order and then disorder, and it does nobody any good. I do not want to ruin the

[Mr. Garnier]

Minister of State's career by flattering him too much, but I urge him to apply his considerable intelligence and political acumen to this matter, which is easily soluble. It merely requires those in the Departments that are responsible for the criminal justice system to speak to one another, to read one briefing paper rather than half a dozen of them, and occasionally to tell the House what they have decided.

I suspect that the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department has not had the experience of sentencing people. Although he is a civil practitioner, he may have appeared in the courts from time to time, perhaps in the early part of his career at the Bar, and I suspect that the story that I have told today might resonate with him.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): This has been a good and interesting debate. As the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) said, new clauses 1, 2 and 4 would add prisoners who have committed specific offences, or those who could have attracted long sentences but did not do so, to the class that renders them ineligible for a home detention curfew.

In the Government's view, home detention curfews do not work like that and Parliament did not intend them to do so. The groups of currently disbarred prisoners fall into five categories, whose common thread is risk to the public or the danger of breaching the curfew. The first category are those who have previously breached trust, perhaps because they failed to return from temporary release, were recalled to prison while on licence, or breached previous home detention curfew. Secondly, those subject to immigration enforcement action are excluded. I do not think that I need say any more about that category, on which the House agrees. Thirdly, the provisions exclude those who are required to register with the police as sex offenders on their release. Fourthly, they exclude those whom the court considers pose a serious risk of reoffending with regard to violent offences, and whom it has therefore sentenced to imprisonment with extended supervision. The final category covers offenders whose offending was brought about by mental illness that has prompted the court to make a hospital order or similar provision on the basis of risk to the public.

No class of prisoner is excluded from home detention curfew simply to demonstrate society's disapproval of an offence. To be fair to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), I point out that he accepted that that is what he was seeking to do by supporting the new clause. The length of a sentence is a matter for the court to decide. Parliament's involvement rightly consists of setting the maximum duration for any offence, but individual sentences are for the court.

The hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) referred to manslaughter, which can vary in degree enormously. It can be an attack that is just short of murder, a mercy killing, or an assault by a victim of domestic violence who has exceeded self-defence in an attempt to protect herself. The risk to the public would be low in such cases. In some tragic cases—especially mercy killings—such offences are committed by somebody who was previously of entirely blameless character.

The court would mark such cases with a breach of the law or perhaps a custodial sentence, but would recognise that it would be inappropriate to mark them with an extended sentence. As a matter of principle, it would not be right to remove the possibility of home detention curfews merely because offences that fall into the category of manslaughter, but which were committed in far more serious circumstances, ensure that other people receive far longer sentences. That is why listing exclusions from home detention curfew in accordance with offence is not right in principle. Such exclusions must be made in terms of risk.

Mr. Heald: That point used to be made about the proposed exclusions, but we pressed the case hard in respect of sex offenders and the Government gave way because of the nature of the offence, not because of risk. Does the Parliamentary Secretary agree that assaulting a police officer is a serious offence that demonstrates a wanton contempt for law and order? Is not that another example of grounds for an offence-based exception?

Mr. Lock: The home detention curfew legislation excludes people who are required to register as sex offenders because a judge has decided that they pose a serious risk of reoffending, perhaps during the curfew period. That is why it is right to exclude them from the scheme. With regard to assaults on police officers and ambulance workers, the hon. Gentleman is a lawyer, so he will know that assault can vary from slight interference with the person to a serious attack. The range is very wide. He referred to serious assault on a police officer, but such an offence might be deemed a substantive assault under sections 18 or 20 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. In respect of serious offences, I do not disagree with his analysis, but it does not apply to every case of assaulting a police officer. The only criteria should be the risk to the public and the risk of breaching trust. It must be borne in mind that those who receive sentences of four years or more are not eligible for the home detention curfew in any event.

Mr. Heald: The point is that police officers are among the guardians of law and order—there are, of course, other such guardians—and that those who work in the emergency services are trying to help others. I find it unacceptable that yobbos are pushing such people around and that others should be interfering with the way they do their job. I object to such interference, whether it constitutes a small infringement—I am speaking in the Parliamentary Secretary's terms—or a serious incident. That is why we would like the change to be made. Does the Minister accept that logic?

Mr. Lock: I entirely accept that it is appropriate for courts to mark seriously those who assault employees or officers who are carrying out public service duties. However, they are not the only ones who provide public services. For example, other such people include those who work on the railways late at night, and cab drivers, who are isolated in their cabs and need protection. We could carry on saying that there are a number of people who serve the public and that their assault deserves to be marked by the court when it determines the sentence that should be given. That is different from the question whether there is a risk of reoffending, and from arguing

that the best way of reintegrating offenders back in society so that they pose a lesser risk to the public in future is to keep them in prison.

Mr. Heald: Will the Parliamentary Secretary give way?

Mr. Lock: I should like to make some progress.

The proposed exclusion of all who have committed certain offences against children again misses the point. The home detention curfew legislation excludes those who are required to register because they have been judged to pose a serious risk of reoffending. The offences listed in schedule 4 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Services Act 2000 disqualify the offender from working with children. The list was never intended to be applied to anything else, and it is not an appropriate guide to who may or may not be at risk of reoffending while subject to a home detention curfew.

Many of the offences dealt with in schedule 4 appear also in the list in schedule 1 of the Sex Offenders Act 1997. People who are guilty of those offences—those whom Parliament deemed to carry the greatest general risk of reoffending—are already ineligible for home detention curfews.

Mr. Hawkins: Will the Minister accept that we are concerned not only about what he has just said about other groups that might need protection, such as cab drivers working late? Not only is that a reason to repeal the whole scheme, as the incoming Conservative Government will do, but the risk assessment process clearly is not working—so many people who have been on home detention curfews have reoffended during the period when they have been on the curfew. The risk assessment that the Minister is talking about just is not working.

Mr. Lock: I shall deal with risk assessment in a moment. If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I am sure that I shall be able to answer those points.

The proposal to exclude prisoners whose offence attracts a maximum term of 10 years, even though the prisoner received a much lower sentence, is illogical. It is a matter for the judge or magistrate to decide the gravity of the offence, and to pass sentence. The right approach to the concerns of Opposition Members is to ensure that every eligible prisoner who is considered for release on a home detention curfew is subjected to a most rigorous risk assessment, which will take into account the prisoner's dangerousness, propensity to reoffend and propensity to breach the curfew. That is precisely what the present arrangements are due to achieve.

Only about 30 per cent. of eligible prisoners have been released on home detention curfew, which shows that the risk assessment is a serious business. Of those, around 95 per cent. of those subject to curfew have successfully completed the curfew, and of those who have not, a very small number have been found to have reoffended while on curfew. As at 31 December last year, 533 of the 30,409 prisoners released on home detention curfew were in that last category, or less than 2 per cent.

New clause 3 would require judges to state the potential effect of home detention curfew on a sentence when passing judgment. I am grateful to the hon. and learned Member for Harborough for raising that issue. The Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), will respond to him about the individual circumstances of the case, but I appreciate the wider point that he made. It is very important that there should be clarity for judges.

A similar amendment was tabled to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 in another place. In rejecting it, the Attorney-General said:

> "That means that the court would have to be asked to determine whether a given offender should be eligible for consideration for release on such a scheme . . . The sentencing court has no basis at all for determining whether a given offender will be eligible because it does not know what will happen in prison. Behaviour in prison, response to therapeutic regimes, response to probation guidance, and how the sentence plan is fulfilled in prison are critical criteria for the determination of eligibility."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 31 October 2000; Vol. 618, c. 915.]

The practice direction to which the hon. and learned Gentleman referred does not require the judges to explain the possibility of a home detention curfew, and the Government's view is that no judge is at present required to do so.

Mr. Garnier *rose—*

Mr. Heald *rose—*

Mr. Lock: Can I just finish this point?

The majority of prisoners eligible for home detention curfew do not get it: only about 30 per cent. do. So it would be misleading of the court to suggest to the prisoner at the time of sentence—and misleading for the public, who have come to hear how long the offender will spend in prison—that he was likely to be released early.

Mr. Garnier: In order to keep the transparency of the sentencing system alive, and to allow sentences to be altered by the courts rather than by prison governors, would it not be an idea, if a prison governor wished to release someone on early release—for good behaviour, perhaps—that some public announcement could be made in a court so that the public could be informed? Failing that, the defendants would be released early, without anyone's knowing about it except the hapless victim of their next offence.

6.45 pm

Mr. Lock: I hear the hon. and learned Gentleman's point. However, it contrasts with what he said previously about his experience on the case to which he referred. He spoke of all the cost, time and trouble of bringing everyone concerned in a case back to court on a subsequent occasion, unless it was really necessary, and, clearly, there would be no point in making such an announcement to a court if no one in court had personal knowledge of the case.

Another point that is important for the hon. and learned Gentleman is that new clause 3 refers to the release, but as the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire said, this is not a release in the traditional sense of the word. It is not a release on licence, but a home detention curfew with very strict conditions that will be appropriate to the individual circumstances. Thus to suggest to the public that an individual might be released would represent only a small part of the picture, because this really concerns a

[Mr. Lock]

transition—for someone who is going to be released in any event—back into society in a way that will minimise the risk of reoffending.

Mr. Heald: The whole purpose of this honest sentencing, as the Home Secretary described it and as set out in the Labour party manifesto, is that the victims will know exactly what is to happen to the person who committed the crime. How can the Minister give the answer that he has just given, when the Minister of State, Home Office told me on 22 January:

"Courts are . . . already expected to explain the possible effect of home detention curfew on the offender."—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2001; Vol. 361, c. 485W.]?

How can those two views be reconciled?

Mr. Lock: I am going to do something that the hon. Gentleman will find extraordinary: I am going to recognise that there is a contradiction here. I accept that the view expressed by the Attorney-General and the expectation—although not, in the practice direction, a possibility—referred to by my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Home Office are not entirely on all fours. However, I think that the experience of the hon. and learned Member for Harborough as a sentencer is correct. My experience of the courts is that home detention curfews are not explained by judges, and that is also the view of the Attorney-General.

I hope that I have made it clear that the Government support the Attorney-General's position, which is that it would not be right for anyone to explain, at the time of sentencing, the possibility of a transition to final release that would include a home detention curfew over a period of a few months, because that will not become a reality for 70 per cent. of defendants, according to the present risk assessment.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Does the Minister accept that all the arguments about explaining home detention curfews and the nature of how they should be arrived at do not necessarily or logically preclude a certain view? It is that one could say to a defendant on sentencing, "You have committed this kind of offence, and you have this kind of victim. One of the implications of this is that you will not be eligible for certain advantages available to other good prisoners. That is part of the punishment for this kind of offence." That would be a perfectly logical position to take.

Mr. Lock: I understand the hon. Gentleman's view, but that is implicit in an offence for which the sentence is more than four years. Also a home detention curfew is not about punishment, but about risk assessment and transfer back into society, so that would not be an appropriate issue for the judge to determine at the time of sentencing.

I understand hon. Members' concerns. These matters are being considered by the Auld review and by the Halliday review of sentencing. The present position is that a judge is not expected to explain home detention curfews. I hope that that is now clear and that any confusion has been cleared up by this helpful series of exchanges.

The amendments demonstrate an attitude to home detention curfews fundamentally different from the one the Government take. I understand why the Opposition are pushing the idea that they should be part of the punishment, but the Government's view is that they form part of the rehabilitation, to reduce the risk of reoffending. Of the 30,000 individuals who have been through this system, less than 2 per cent. have reoffended. The evidence therefore exists that the public are being protected in the long run. Such offenders have to be released, as they have been sentenced to less than four years.

There are two different views on the purpose of the measure and we cannot reconcile them. None the less, given how the system is working, I encourage the Opposition to withdraw the new clause.

Mr. Heald: We shall not do so. As the Parliamentary Secretary knows, Conservative Members often say to the Government, "All talk and no delivery." Here is an example of that. The Labour party manifesto says:

"The courts will have to spell out what each sentence really means in practice."

The Minister of State says:

"Courts are therefore already expected to explain the possible effect of home detention curfew on the offender."—[*Official Report*, 22 January 2001; Vol. 361, c. 485W.]

Then tonight, the Parliamentary Secretary tells us, "Well, no judge does that and—my goodness!—judges should not." He also says, "We have these marvellous risk assessments in place, so we are all safe." Then we find out that 1,000 offences have been committed by people released on home detention curfew.

Mr. Lock: I was careful when giving the hon. Gentleman the figures. I am not sure how he has turned 533 into 1,000. The figure is 2 per cent.

Mr. Heald: I understand that the figure is 1,000. The Parliamentary Secretary probably gave his for the end of last year, but a number of parliamentary answers have been made since, including one last week from the Minister of State, Home Office, the right hon. Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng). The Parliamentary Secretary may be a bit behind the times.

Released offenders have committed 246 offences of assaulting a police officer in the execution of his duty. That is unacceptable to Conservative Members, and it is also unacceptable that the Parliamentary Secretary should say, "Oh well, an assault on the police could just be a nudge or a push. It doesn't necessarily have to be serious." To us, police officers going about their duties are the guardians of law and order. For some yobbo to push them or interfere with the execution of their duty is always serious.

I feel sorry for nurses and doctors in accident and emergency departments who have to put up with people's unacceptable behaviour towards them, which is why I support what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said in Committee. We have addressed the matter in the new clause, which we shall press to a Division, and over the next few weeks, while the matter proceeds in the other place, I hope that Ministers will think again, as they did over our amendments on sex offenders. I also hope that we get the measure we need. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey having changed his mind, I say, "Come on Ministers, it's your turn."

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House proceeded to a Division.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When we tried to come here from our offices to vote, we found that the door between Norman Shaw South and Portcullis House was still locked. We managed to arrange for it to be opened, but can steps be taken to ensure that it is open in future when votes are taking place, and at other times?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I thank the hon. Gentleman for informing the House of that. I will certainly ensure that the matter is inquired into, so that the incident is not repeated.

The House having divided: Ayes 183, Noes 286.

Division No. 154] **[6.53 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Baldry, Tony
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCrea, Dr William
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maginnis, Ken
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Waller, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Peter Luff and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Gordon *(Dunfermline E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross

Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hanson, David
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Rt Hon Tom
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Willis, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Mike Hall and
Mr. Don Touhig.

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 5

ENTICING A CHILD TO ENGAGE IN INDECENT CONDUCT: AMENDMENT OF SECTION 1 OF THE INDECENCY WITH CHILDREN ACT 1960

'In section 1(1) of the Indecency with Children Act 1960, after "incites" there is inserted "or entices".'.—*[Miss Widdecombe.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take the following: New clause 10—*Encrypted information—*

'.—At the end of section 53(5) Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 there is added—

"(c) on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment of a term not exceeding ten years or to a fine, or to both, where the encrypted material has been seized under section IV of the Protection of Children Act 1978.

(d) on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum or both where the encrypted material has been seized under section IV of the Protection of Children Act 1978".'.

New clause 11—*Unduly lenient sentences*—

'.—For section 35(3) of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Scope of Part IV), there is substituted—

"(3) This Part of the Act applies to any case in which sentence is passed on a person—

(a) for an offence triable only on indictment; or

(b) for an offence of a description specified in an order under this section; or

(c) for an offence under the Protection of Children Act 1978; or

(d) for an offence under section 160 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988".'.

Miss Widdecombe: The Opposition first raised this issue in an amendment to the Criminal Justice and Court Services Bill, which was considered by the House nine months ago. On four occasions the Government rejected our amendments to that Bill, and they were also rejected at the Committee stage of this Bill.

The new clause is designed to close a loophole in the current law, in order to tackle paedophiles who lure or entice young children using internet chat rooms into meeting them offline for sex. I pay tribute to the work of the charity Childnet International, which has campaigned on the issue for some time and which first suggested the wording of the new clause to us.

Internet chat rooms can be a positive way to bring children together, but there are obvious dangers to children who use them unsupervised. Paedophiles across the world have recognised the opportunity that the internet has given them to contact children anonymously and at a safe distance, and then to build up an online, and subsequently an offline, relationship with the sole purpose of persuading the children to meet them in order to engage in sexual activity. The techniques that paedophiles use to entice children into sexual activity are known as "grooming".

It is, at the very least, unclear whether the current law affords children the protection they need from online grooming. I believe that the addition of the words "or entices" to the 1960 Act could offer them a degree of certain protection that at present is not available.

Internet chat rooms allow the predatory paedophile invisible access to impressionable younger teenagers from a safe distance, allowing contact to be made while the child is using the internet in the secure surroundings of its own home, or even possibly its own bedroom. Once contact has been made, the process of grooming proceeds with e-mail messages, and also, perhaps, use of the child's mobile phone.

The paedophile might easily represent himself as an older teenager or as someone in his very early 20s. Particularly for young teenage girls, the attentions of someone whom they believe to be an older boy or a young man is especially flattering. They are immediately lulled into a false sense of security, although the process of grooming can go on for weeks and indeed months, as it may take that long to make the child feel comfortable and at ease. At the end of that process, the paedophile proposes an offline meeting.

The results of that meeting can be devastating to the young person concerned. Innumerable cases of sexual abuse as a result of such meetings have been reported in the press. This month, for example, we heard of the case of Mark Stephens, a 45-year-old van driver who seduced a 14-year-old girl whom he met in a chat room. In that chat room, he had told her that he was 26. Eventually, they met and had sexual intercourse in the van that he used for work. He pleaded guilty to indecent assault and unlawful sex. The girl's story was published in a newspaper this weekend. She said:

"I knew something was wrong when I got in his van but after chatting to him so much on the Internet he seemed like a friend.

Speaking about the grooming process, she said:

"He was nice and always asked me how my day was and what I did at school. He said he liked skiing and would take me skiing. He asked me for my mobile number so I gave it to him."

Eventually, the girl agreed to a meeting. She said:

"He told me how pretty I was, then opened the passenger door of his van and I got in. I would never have got into a van with a stranger normally but I felt I knew Mark well."

The second time that they met, he forced her to have sex with him in his van. That is what can happen. When there is a sexual assault, the paedophile can be charged and convicted—but by way of example, to illustrate why our new clauses are necessary, I shall describe two well known cases in this country in which the paedophile was not charged.

The first is that of the girl known as "Georgie". At the age of 13, she began to use internet chat rooms, and she became infatuated with an online "friend" who told her that he was an older teenager. They began talking on the phone, and gradually the relationship took on a sexual aspect. They arranged to meet, without her knowing what this supposed teenage boy even looked like. Luckily, however, her mother went along as well. It was clear at the meeting that the man was not a teenager but was middle-aged. The mother's presence stopped anything from happening, but—this is the crucial point—police could take no action against the man because no physical assault had occurred. Charges of conspiracy to commit an act of gross indecency were dropped.

The second case is that of the convicted paedophile Patrick Green. Last year, he was sentenced at Aylesbury Crown court to five years' imprisonment for sexually assaulting a 13-year-old girl whom he had lured into meeting him using an internet chat room. However, before his conviction, he was released on bail and began to communicate with another teenage girl using a chat room. He arranged to meet that girl, but he was caught by police while travelling to meet her for sex. Again, however, as no assault had occurred, and regardless of his record, no action could be taken against him in relation to the second girl.

It would seem from those cases and others like them that the law offers too little protection for children, as a sexual assault has actually to be committed before charges can be brought. However, an offence of enticement such as we are proposing would enable charges to be brought in those cases, which at the very least would have removed for a while the threat of the men involved contacting, grooming and approaching children online.

When police are able to intervene after a paedophile has turned up for a meeting, but before a sexual assault has occurred, the offence of enticement could be proved relatively quickly and easily with e-mail or other documentary evidence. We believe that that would be a strong preventive measure and send a clear signal to those who try to entice children online.

7.15 pm

The Minister will undoubtedly say that the amendment is unnecessary and that current law is adequate. Indeed, I believe that to be the Government's position. In a letter to me of 8 November 2000, the Home Secretary said that the law did not need amending at all. He wrote:

"We believe that, with respect to the particular concerns . . . raised, the law already makes this particular misuse of the internet illegal."

That was what the Government reiterated last year on many occasions. However, if that is so, why could police take no action in the cases that I have just described?

Our previous amendments, including the new clause moved in Committee, were criticised because they applied only to online activity. The Minister and his colleagues argued that the law should cover both online and offline activity. We accepted that, and new clause 5 meets that test.

It has been argued that such provision would create "thought crime", but I do not think that it would. The amendment would focus on the actions of the predatory paedophile enticing a child for the purposes of sex. There would have to be real and available documentary evidence. I am told that the experience of other countries has shown that the creation of such an offence has allowed adults who are a danger to children to be convicted, rather than their getting away scot-free, as happened in the cases that I have just described.

In Committee, the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), said:

"I acknowledge that we have not yet squared the circle in this area . . . A great deal remains to be done . . .

I conclude my comments by acknowledging the seriousness of the matter. We are giving it serious consideration".—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 6 March 2001; c. 533.]

I welcome that statement because it is certainly much less dismissive than the Home Secretary's comments last year. However, the Opposition have been pressing the matter for more than nine months. It is important that the law gives the maximum possible protection to our children. I cannot believe that there is any dispute about that on either side of the House. Paedophiles such as Patrick Green have to be stopped in their tracks.

I therefore hope that the Minister will be able to give a constructive response to our proposals. I commend the new clause to the House.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): I am speaking to support not only my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on new clause 5, but new clauses 10 and 11 as well.

It is nice to see the Minister of State in the Chamber, as we have already gone two rounds on the proposals now contained in new clause 10. On both those occasions, my view on those proposals received support from both sides of the Chamber. The proposals deal generally with encrypted information and the failure to disclose encryption keys. In the form of new clause 10, however, they specifically target paedophiles.

As the Minister—and, I suspect, all hon. Members—knows, later this year, when the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 comes into force, the maximum penalty for failure to provide an encryption key will be two years' imprisonment and/or a fine on conviction on indictment, and six months' imprisonment or a fine on summary conviction. However, I believe that we have to re-examine some of the Act's provisions even before it comes into force, especially in the light of some of our debates during the passage of that legislation. In those debates, hon. Members on both sides of the House agreed that we needed stronger provision, especially to deal with paedophiles.

I am sure that the Minister will recall that in those debates, to illustrate my point, I asked him to put himself in the rather elevated shoes of a paedophile whom we called "Gary". If Gary and his colleagues made available to police encrypted information on paedophile activity, they could face a life sentence. The sentence that they would receive for such activity would certainly be considerably more than the two years that they might face by refusing to provide a key. Gary and his colleagues would therefore certainly opt for the lower sentence, or perhaps the fine. Therefore, during passage of the 2000 Act, strongly backed by child protection agencies, Opposition Front Benchers and Back Benchers, and at least one Government Back Bencher, expressed concern about the situation.

The Minister may know that in two recent police investigations, suspected paedophiles who were schoolmasters refused to give the key to encrypted information that they had, or were suspected to have, on their computers. The implication is that those individuals had something to hide, and that, given that the law provides a two-year maximum, it would be worth their while to plead guilty to failing to release the key rather than incriminating themselves as regards the alleged paedophiliac activity by them and their friends.

My new clause would move us forward. We should target not just computers, but CD-ROMs and DVDs, which can be circulated with encrypted information on them, unlike the pornographic videos that I understand—not from personal experience—are available at present.

Earlier, the Minister was plainly concerned that in attempting to target paedophiles, we were throwing our net too wide. The point of the new clause would be to use existing legislation to target paedophiles with encrypted information seized under section 4 of the Protection of Children Act 1978. That would close a further loophole in that a conviction for failing to give up a key, which attracts the two-year penalty, does not require the offender to be placed on the sex offenders register, although that would be appropriate. That is an area of great concern to the public and to Members, as well as to the media, as exemplified by the "Wonderland" cases—the like of which, one sometimes feels, turn up every day.

Let me turn to new clause 11. The Criminal Justice Act 1988, part IV, introduced a right to appeal against over-lenient sentences. It allows the Attorney-General to refer certain cases to the Court of Appeal, with the leave of that court, where it considers that the sentence imposed by a Crown court has been unduly lenient. That applied only to cases triable only on indictment. The Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Reviews of Sentencing) Order 1994 extended the range of offences to include certain others, such as indecent assault on a man, threats to kill and actions of cruelty to persons under 16. A 1995 order extended the provision further, to include fraud cases tried in the Crown courts, and others.

The Minister may be aware of a recent case involving a highly unpleasant paedophile who was convicted of virtually everything possible under the Protection of Children Act 1978. For various reasons, I will not name the individual, but he was found guilty and sentenced to 18 months. It was a first offence, which means that he is likely to have his sentence reduced to nine months. With good behaviour and a lenient governor, it is likely that he will be out in four. I think that that is horrific. So did the prosecution and the police, who examined legislation to see whether it would be possible to appeal against that diminutive sentence. They concluded that they could not.

My new clause is intended to probe, and to nudge the Minister. I appreciate that such a change should be made through secondary legislation, but it would be helpful to me, to the prosecuting authorities, to the police and to those who look after and protect children, if the Minister would take the hint and say that he will return with secondary legislation.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I now have to announce the results of the Divisions deferred from a previous day.

On the motion on Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism, the Ayes were 396, the Noes were 17, so the motion was agreed to.

On the motion on Business of the House, the Ayes were 341, the Noes were 122, so the motion was agreed to.

On the motion on Animal By-Products, the Ayes were 348, the Noes were 10, so the motion was agreed to.

[The Division Lists are published at the end of today's debates.]

Criminal Justice and Police Bill

Question again proposed, That the clause be read a Second time.

7.24 pm

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): I apologise for being less audible than usual, but that has the advantage that I shall be briefer than usual.

New clause 5, tabled by the Liberal Democrats as well as the Conservatives, would criminalise the activities of paedophiles who seek to entice children to a meeting in order to engage in sexual activities. The common term for such behaviour is "grooming". I do not approve of that term since it seems too friendly and nice, but it is the term that has come into common usage.

A survey last year in the United States said that approximately one in five young people aged between 10 and 17 had received an unwanted sexual solicitation or approach on the internet. I understand that a report to be published later this year by the internet crime forum will show similar figures for the United Kingdom. It is a growing problem that affects many young people. The internet is giving paedophiles an opportunity, away from prying eyes, to indulge in persuading children to trust them and to meet them offline.

As the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) said, there is evidence to suggest that the current law does not protect children adequately against online grooming. Adding "or entices" to the Bill would give greater protection than is available at present. The right hon. Lady mentioned a couple of recent cases. In the Milton Keynes case, the mother went to the meeting, and there was a similar case in Crewe last year, in which the parents were alerted. In both cases, the children had been groomed online and the police intercepted and arrested the adults who had attempted to meet the children. However, no charges were pressed, and we can only assume that a sexual offence must take place before a charge can be proved. If the new clause is accepted, a new offence of enticement would allow charges in such cases by covering the process of grooming rather than the final offence.

It is not always easy to prove that a sexual assault has occurred if there are no witnesses other than the child and the perpetrator. If the new clause is accepted, however, documentation such as e-mails could be used to show the intent of the perpetrator if a charge of enticement were brought. Adding an offence of enticement would also bring our law closer to that of some states in the USA, and to federal law there. The USA has had more success in accusing people of online grooming than we have had.

As the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald said, the new clause would also provide a strong preventive measure that would send a clear signal to paedophiles who are trying to use the internet for sexual purposes, which is not acceptable and is a criminal offence. It would be better to prevent crimes taking place than to prosecute after the event, when even greater damage has been done.

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I support new clause 5 from a constituency perspective. There is a strong case for examining the existing law critically and for erring on the side of caution. Acceptance of the new clause, or a commitment that an equivalent provision will be introduced at a later stage of proceedings on the Bill, would close a loophole in the law on child protection. In particular, it would protect children against predatory paedophiles who use the internet, particularly chat rooms, to gain access to vulnerable children.

7.30 pm

The Minister will know of my interest in the subject because of his meetings with me and with constituents of mine. Last year, as hon. Members have said, a 12-year-old girl in my constituency was approached in an internet chat room by Patrick Green. Online contact was established, which eventually led to an offline meeting, where sexual abuse took place.

Patrick Green used online contact to develop a relationship with the girl. He flattered her and made her feel special; he made her a confidante. The aim of all that was to form a bond between him and the girl, while at the same time breaking the bond between the girl and her family, so that he could ensnare and lure her into activities away from the home. Such grooming—it is an ugly term but it encapsulates the activity—went on for many weeks and months. There were exchanges of private e-mails; 55 messages, if not more, were exchanged. The ultimate purpose was to arrange offline meetings, with sexual relations as the intended outcome.

We must recognise that new clause 5 is technologically neutral. It is about an offence that can be committed online and offline. However, the internet gives paedophiles the

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

opportunity to groom much more easily. They can hide behind pseudonyms and cultivate more than one child at a time. Indeed, it is clear that Patrick Green was doing exactly that, because no sooner had he been let out on bail than he was arranging a meeting with a girl in Cumbria. That did not happen in a matter of days. There was a process of entrapment, which he had been using in much the same way as he entrapped the daughter of my constituent.

Chat rooms offer predators invisible access to children from a safe distance, and allow contact to be made even while children are using the internet in a secure surrounding in their home—often in their bedroom. It has been suggested that the law already covers grooming. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) outlined some of the issues that have been put to Ministers by many hon. Members in correspondence and in other ways. I have certainly exchanged such correspondence with both the Prime Minister and the Minister, but I am still not satisfied—and nor is Childline, to which I pay tribute for its work in highlighting the issue and in drawing it to the attention of hon. Members of all parties.

Childline has amassed detailed evidence, which I was pleased to pass to the Home Office. It is concerned that the definition of incitement to commit a sexual offence under the Indecency with Children Act 1960 is too narrowly drawn. To secure evidence of that incitement requires the police to put the child at risk. The act must have happened for the police to acquire the evidence to prosecute. Another possible charge is that of attempting to commit a sexual offence against a child. Again, however, in pursuit of evidence to prove a case, a child must be put at risk.

The case of Kenneth Lockley illustrates why present legislation is not satisfactory. Following a tip-off by the Californian police that Lockley was searching for a six-year-old girl with whom to have sex, Scotland Yard set up a sting by arranging to meet Lockley in a London hotel. Lockley thought that he would be meeting a nine-year-old girl, but he actually met a fairly burly under-cover inspector, who arrested him.

Unfortunately, the charge of attempted unlawful sex with a girl under the age of 16 had to be dropped, as the defence argued that there was no actual attempt to have sex because no child was involved. The intent was clear: Lockley, not the police, had been the instigator of the meeting. The judge presiding over the case concluded:

"The law clearly does not deal with this type of conduct perpetrated by this defendant. It is time, in the light of the pernicious influence of a large number of web sites, that Parliament should consider dealing with this lacuna in the law."

The Green case demonstrates that the police do not believe that they have a legal basis to act in such matters. I ask the Minister to tell us why in the Green case the police were wrong to think that they did not have the powers to act prior to an assault. Clarity on that issue would go some way to reassuring my constituents that the issue was being dealt with, and that evidence of e-mails and electronic communication could have been used to arrest the gentleman in advance of his actions. That would have protected the child, and other children. I hope that the Minister can say something about that tonight.

I really hope that the new clause is accepted, because enticement is not covered by our law. There is a loophole that paedophiles are using, and abusing children as a result. One in five children is contacted in chat rooms by paedophiles. We should do something that will give the police the means of stopping that before abuse takes place.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I was pleased to see the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) speaking on this matter. She made a sincere and effective speech. I look forward to seeing her on Monday evening, although, unfortunately, she cannot speak then. I gather that, when it comes to debating her position, the Opposition Chief Whip will speak for her. However, I am delighted that she has participated in this evening's debate. She put her points well and correctly. I want to emphasise that there is no difference across the Floor of the House on motivation. The right hon. Lady was right to say that we need to focus on action. She certainly will not hear from me any remarks about thought crime. As she correctly said, action is the issue.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) mentioned the meeting that I had with him and his constituents, the parents of the young woman who was assaulted by Patrick Green. As I said to the hon. Gentleman subsequently, the meeting was exceptionally interesting, moving and powerful. A substantial number of my officials were present, and they found the hon. Gentleman's account, which he gave in more detail than, rightly, he has been able to in the Chamber, exceptionally illuminating and motivating. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to him for bringing the delegation to see me and for discussing the matter in the way that he did.

The case to which the hon. Gentleman referred and all the issues that have been discussed raise a very wide number of points. They raise issues about the law. Members have referred to the changes that have been made already, and there is a question about whether the law should be changed further. The issues raise points about the conduct of internet service providers, whose operations we are addressing by another route. Questions are raised about the quality and strength of guidance given to parents of young children who use the internet. When I was an Education Minister, I was involved in establishing a working party and guidance on that matter, which can give a certain degree of reassurance. Important issues of police practice are raised. The hon. Gentleman will recall mentioning some of the cross-boundary, police training, guidance and other issues.

The central point is that, across the Floor of the House, there is no difference in motivation or in the need for a proper programme to address these issues. We must ensure that it is right. That is the spirit in which I shall deal with each of the new clauses.

The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) spoke powerfully to new clause 11. We very much share his concerns and we are determined to ensure that the courts have adequate powers to sentence those convicted of producing, distributing and possessing child pornography. Every pornographic picture of a child is by definition a picture of child abuse. The House must try to find a means of dealing with that. The sex offences review, consultation on which ended a few days ago, focused on child protection in order to find a better legal framework for addressing the issues.

As the hon. Gentleman said, under the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000, we raised the maximum sentence from three years to 10 years' imprisonment for

offences under the Protection of Children Act 1978. We also raised from six months to five years' imprisonment the maximum penalty for an offence of possessing an indecent photograph or pseudo photograph of a child under section 160 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988.

We consider that we acted quickly to implement those changes on 11 January so that the higher maximum penalties came into effect for offences committed after that date. We believe that it is important to change the sentencing practices of the courts. That is what this is all about. Having only recently increased the maximum penalty, it is important to establish properly the effect that that change has had on sentencing practice in the court—that brings us back to the point made by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald about action—before we decide whether we should increase the penalties yet again.

As the hon. Member for Mole Valley said, in addition to setting out the maximum sentences available to the courts, in specified offences the Attorney-General has powers to refer cases to the Court of Appeal for review if he considers that an unduly lenient sentence has been imposed. The powers are limited to offences triable on indictment only and certain triable either way offences specified in an order, which is subject to the negative resolution procedure.

The Attorney-General does not have power to refer offences of distributing or possessing child pornography. Although last August we extended the Attorney-General's powers to include trafficking in child pornography, at that time we undertook to keep his powers under review, with a view to considering whether additional offences should be added.

The new clause seeks to extend those powers to include offences of distributing and possessing child pornography by amending section 35 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988. As I have already said, and as the hon. Member for Mole Valley made clear, there is already power to extend the offences by means of an order. We have used that power on various occasions. I give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that, as we have already undertaken to keep the powers under review, in the light of the concerns expressed we are actively considering whether we should use secondary legislation to extend the Attorney-General's powers to include offences under the Protection of Children Act 1978 and section 160 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988.

We believe that extension of the powers by means of secondary legislation is the appropriate legal way to proceed. The hon. Member for Mole Valley said that new clause 10 was a probing measure and I hope that he will be prepared to consider withdrawing the motion. I give him the assurance that we are actively considering the proposal and are doing so positively with a view to achieving the extension to which he seeks to draw attention. The case that he makes is convincing and I assure him that we will consider it sympathetically.

As the hon. Member for Mole Valley said, we debated the subject matter of new clause 10 at great length both in the Committee that considered the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill and on the Floor of the House. It was also debated in the other place. The hon. Gentleman participated in the debates in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Ms Moran) participated actively in the debates in the Chamber. I recall Baroness Thornton playing an active role in promoting the arguments in the other place.

7.45 pm

A range of children's charitable organisations argue that those who have committed appalling crimes should not be able to avoid the sentencing consequences of those crimes by refusing to give the encryption information that is necessary to convict them. I have great sympathy with that powerful and true point. We had to make a balanced judgment. As I said during proceedings on the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill, the need to tackle the activities of people who utilise new technologies was a strong driver behind part III of the Bill. We resisted calls to increase the sentences for a section 53 offence along the lines suggested in the new clause because we could honestly say that the non-compliance offence was difficult to formulate. As with the rest of the Act, it was all about striking a balance.

The overriding concern in setting offences must be the seriousness of the offending. In our view, there is no parity between the crimes that we are talking about and the offence of not providing the encryption that would enable those crimes to be identified. We took the view that the penalty for that offence did not and should not depend on or vary according to the nature of the material that may be protected by that key.

Opposition Members criticised us last year on the grounds that part III amounted to a return to key escrow by intimidation. They expressed that genuine and legitimate point on behalf of the industry. We did not accept that argument. I hope that the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) will concede that we had a balanced debate throughout the Committee stage on the need not to attack the industry too much in the regulation that we were establishing. We had to balance that with the key public law enforcement issues. That was a constant theme of our debates. We took the view that we should keep a hierarchy of offences and not confuse the offence with the decryption offences. That was why we came to the view that we did.

Of the three new clauses in the group, new clause 10 gives me most difficulty. There is a real case for what the hon. Member for Mole Valley is advocating. I said that directly to the children's organisations and to my colleagues in this place and the other place who argued the case that the hon. Gentleman articulately put this evening. We came to the judgment that I have set out, and I ask the hon. Gentleman to consider withdrawing the motion on those grounds.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald spoke to the substantive new clause, new clause 5. I was considering making a number of points about the cases that she mentioned, but I shall deal with the arguments of substance first. New clause 5 is well intentioned, and I accept the sincerity with which it was tabled, but our assessment is that the introduction of the word "entice" would not achieve the changes that the right hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam argued it would.

The 1960 Act provides that it is an offence to commit an act of gross indecency with a child. It also makes it an offence to incite an act of gross indecency. We amended

[Mr. Charles Clarke]

the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 so that now "child" refers to a child under 16 and the maximum penalty is 10 years.

It would appear that to add "entice" to "incite" would widen the scope of the offence, but my advice is that it would not. The courts have held that "incite" involves some form of persuasion or encouragement. It does not matter that the incitement is unsuccessful. As there is no definition in the amendment of "entice", the courts would be bound to give it its ordinary natural meaning.

According to the "Concise Oxford English Dictionary", "entice" means to

"persuade by the offer of pleasure or reward".

This is expanded in the full version of the dictionary to

"stir up, incite, instigate (to a course of action) or provoke".

It also means

"allure, attract by the offer of pleasure or advantage".

On my reading, it does not appear—I have been advised on this, and this is my view—that the word significantly or obviously extends the ambit of the offence. Our concern is that it does not extend the ambit, but would add confusion about the meaning of "incite" in the 1960 Act.

Dr. Ladyman: The hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) made an interesting comment that the United States has had more success in dealing with such crimes than we have. Has my hon. Friend given any thought to that, and will he comment on the wording of the law in the United States?

Mr. Clarke: My hon. Friend is right. The most famous example was the intervention by the FBI in the chat room in California. That was a positive use of its powers to have precisely the positive effect that hon. Members have mentioned. We have not compared the exact wording of the legislation because the legislative arrangements are not comparable, but I put it on record that the legislation that we have in place allows the police in the United Kingdom to play the role in relation to chat rooms that the FBI in California played. The development of police procedures and approaches, to which I referred in commenting on the meeting with the constituents of the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam, is a serious issue for us.

Jackie Ballard: The Minister quoted the definition of "entice". I cannot quote that definition precisely but I believe that he used the term to allure with the offer of pleasure or reward. I think that that extends the definition beyond "incite". The purpose of online grooming is that the offer of pleasure or reward is trust in someone who will be understanding. It is an offer of friendship, not of sex.

Mr. Clarke: That is an interesting insight. The full definition in the "Oxford English Dictionary" is to

"stir up, incite, instigate (to a course of action) or provoke."

It also means

"allure, attract by the offer of pleasure or advantage."

We may have to agree to disagree. I do not think that the meaning or ambit of the offence is extended. I am ready to reflect on the point that the hon. Lady makes because I understand how the argument could be advanced. However, it is not obvious to me that what she says is the case.

Sir Paul Beresford: I can conclude only that the Minister has never sat, as some of us have, with a Metropolitan police officer who spends his time watching and tracking paedophile activities on a computer. Perhaps he has not seen the way in which officers work on computers and in chat rooms, doing exactly what my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) have described. If he has not had that experience, and while he reflects, will he go to Charing Cross police station to see what takes place? Will he sit behind the computer with a police officer?

Mr. Clarke: I have not performed the precise act that the hon. Gentleman suggests. I give the commitment that I shall do so while I am reflecting on the situation that we are discussing. However, I do not think that even that would change my overall view a great deal.

Miss Widdecombe: In America, there is an offence of enticement, and that is the word that is used. Is the American dictionary different?

Mr. Clarke: American spelling is different in many instances. The dictionary and the meaning of words are different too, both the common meaning of words and words in a legal context. The argument that the right hon. Lady is advancing is precisely why "entices" appears in the new clause. It is crucial to understand that the enticement that we are talking about must be in the context of an act of gross indecency, and not just to a meeting, even in the terms of the new clause. When we use "entice" in this context, that is not enticement to a meeting and the exchange of a friendly approach. It is enticement to an act of gross indecency. It is important to take that into account.

That is why it is not obvious to me that the proposed word extends the ambit of the offence in the way that the right hon. Lady suggests. I am trying to emphasise throughout that I do not dismiss what she is saying. It is a serious point and it is being made seriously. I am prepared to reflect on it, but it is not obvious that the new clause does what she reasonably wants to achieve.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): The burden of the Minister's argument seems to be that he does not believe, given the benefit of the advice that he has received, that "entice" extends the offence. It is the belief of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and other Opposition Members that it does.

Miss Widdecombe: Including lawyers.

Mr. Blunt: Yes, including the legal advice that is available to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench.

"Entice" will not do any harm if it appears in the Bill but does not extend the offence. Why does the Minister not accept the new clause?

Mr. Clarke: I do not accept it because I am not in favour of inserting words in a Bill—this is the danger—

that could add confusion rather than clarity to court judgments. At the risk of slightly tweaking the hon. Gentleman's tail, the fact that lawyers are present to comment on the new clause does not necessarily convince me absolutely of the merit of the argument. I am advised, as is my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

The key point is that the new clause would not catch a person who was arranging to meet a child. It would have to be shown that the purpose of the enticement was to commit an act of gross indecency with that person or another. Enticing a child to a meeting would not be enough to commit the offence. It would still be necessary to prove that the immediate purpose of the enticement was for the child

"to commit an act of gross indecency"

with the defendant or with someone else. There would have to be evidence of that to persuade a jury beyond reasonable doubt.

I have reflected on the merits of going into the detail of the Green case and of the other cases that have been mentioned, but that would not help the debate this evening.

Mr. Burstow: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Clarke: Yes, and then I shall set out my conclusions for the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald to consider.

Mr. Burstow: I am still concerned—I believe that many others will similarly be concerned—that if the new clause is not accepted, the police will feel that they must wait for offline evidence of an assault having taken place before they can act to protect the child. Perhaps the Minister will say a little more about what will be done to ensure that the police are confident that they can use online evidence to take action to protect the child. That would be a move forward.

Mr. Clarke: I am prepared to give a strong assurance to the hon. Gentleman on that precise point. I am also prepared on behalf of the Government to accept criticism—the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald may similarly accept criticism on behalf of the previous Government—that we have not moved as energetically as we should to improve police practices in the areas that we are discussing. We have moved relatively energetically to change the law. The right hon. Lady said earlier from a sedentary position that the new clause reflects an amendment that was moved in relation to other legislation. I acknowledge that and there is no disagreement between us, as I have said throughout.

I think that there is a cross-party approach, and it is a matter of finding the right approach. I acknowledge that we have not been as effective as we need to be; that much was clearly apparent to me clearly during my meeting with the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam and his constituents. We must ensure that police forces throughout the country, including cross-border forces, have the same clear understanding of what they can and cannot do. In the current climate, there must be doubts for police officers, and for others, about what they can and cannot do. That is why I emphasised the need to develop police training and practices in these areas. I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman assurances that we are working energetically and that we will address his points about the ability of the police to intervene online.

There are many issues that we must take on board in changing the present situation, and a change in the law is only one of them. I have already asked the hon. Member for Mole Valley to consider not pressing new clauses 10 and 11. I saw him indicate that he probably would do so in respect of one but not the other. I think that I heard him say that.

I say to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald that it is important to have a cross-party approach on these matters. She is obviously entitled to make the case that we have not been energetic enough in dealing with the situation, if that is what she feels. I put it to her and the House that getting the precise wording right and offering clarity rather than confusion to courts when they come to resolve these issues is extremely important. That is why we had the sex offences review. That is why we are redrawing the law and why we are taking the various approaches of which the House will be aware. With that, I hope that the right hon. Lady will give full consideration to withdrawing new clause 5. I think that we all want to work together on these matters.

Miss Widdecombe: I listened carefully to the Minister in exactly the same spirit that he listened to me. I agree that in an ideal world there should be a cross-party approach. However, having listened to him, I genuinely do not understand why he will not accept new clause 5. He talked about reflecting on the points raised by the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) and other hon. Members. However, this is not the first time that we have brought the issue before the House, and it was raised in Committee. On four previous occasions, he has refused to accept the arguments that we have advanced. His reflections have not produced any substitute action.

If the Minister had suggested a different way of tackling the matter this evening, we would have been very interested. He says that the current state of the law is adequate. If so, why was it not used in the three cases that I have mentioned? I think that he will accept that those cases are the three best-known examples. They do not form an exhaustive list.

What do the Government intend to do? Effectively, they seem to be saying that they want to do nothing. They have not proposed an alternative. They want to reflect on a matter on which they have reflected for a long time. As the Minister acknowledged, the sentence to which he referred was increased to 10 years because of an amendment that we tabled.

8 pm

Mr. Charles Clarke: I did not accept that the increase in the sentence was entirely due to the Opposition. The right hon. Lady wants to score a party political point, but I believed that she would agree that there was a consensus between political parties and in the media that we had to act. As the Government, we acted.

Miss Widdecombe: The Government acted by accepting our amendment. I ask the Minister either to accept our new clause or to propose an alternative course of action. He will do neither. If doubt exists about

[Miss Widdecombe]

"entice", at least it can be interpreted in the way in which the hon. Member for Taunton suggested. There is therefore no harm in including it in the Bill.

There are no alternative proposals; I am not convinced that the existing law is adequate, neither is Childnet nor are the police. I fear that I must therefore press the new clause to a Division.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 162, Noes 282.

Division No. 155] **[8.1 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gidley, Sandra
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McCrea, Dr William
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Malins, Humfrey
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Portillo, Rt Hon Michael
Prior, David
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Waller, Robert
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. James Gray and
Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Cabom, Rt Hon Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike

George, Rt Hon Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Healey, John
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Rt Hon Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Rt Hon Ms Tessa
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
O'Neill, Martin
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Ian Pearson and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 6

INDEPENDENT COUNSEL TO BE PRESENT DURING SEARCHES TO ASSESS WHETHER SEIZED MATERIAL IS LEGALLY PRIVILEGED

'Where a constable or other person is exercising or proposing to exercise any lawful power of search, and he has reasonable grounds to believe that material which is legally privileged may be seized as a result, he shall ensure that independent counsel is present throughout the search to assist in the determination of whether such material is legally privileged or not.'.—*[Mr. Hawkins.]*

Brought up, and read the First time.

8.15 pm

Mr. Hawkins: I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Amendment No. 19, in clause 52, page 46, line 17, at end insert—

'and

(f) in the case of material held in electronic form, whether it would be reasonably practicable for the material to be copied on those premises.'.

Amendment No. 20, in page 46, leave out lines 18 to 22.

Amendment No. 21, in clause 53, page 47, leave out lines 34 to 38.

Amendment No. 22, in clause 54, page 48, line 22, leave out "to" and insert "within".

Amendment No. 23, in page 48, line 22, leave out "to" and insert—

'within, or on the exterior of,'.

Amendment No. 24, in clause 55, page 49, line 28, leave out—

'due regard shall be had to the desirability of allowing'

and insert—

'all reasonable steps shall be taken to ensure that'.

Amendment No. 25, in page 49, line 30, after "property,", insert "has".

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

Amendment No. 26, in page 49, line 31, at end insert—

(b) where the initial examination of the seized property has been conducted without the presence of—

(i) the person from whom it was seized (or his representative), or

(ii) a person with an interest in that property (or his representative),

the person for the time being in possession of the property shall give written notice of the reasons why the examination was conducted without the presence of that person or his representative, unless that person has declined the opportunity to be present at the examination.'.

Amendment No. 27, in clause 61, page 54, line 3, at end insert—

'(2A) An application made under subsection (2) shall be heard by the appropriate judicial authority within 48 hours of it being made.'.

Amendment No. 28, in page 54, line 24, after "return", insert—

'within such reasonable period of time as the authority shall specify'.

Amendment No. 29, in clause 63, page 57, line 37, at end insert—

'(1A) The duty to secure that arises under this section is also a duty of the person for the time being having possession, in consequence of the seizure, of the seized property to secure that arrangements are in force that ensure that any material (including any documents, photographs and material in electronic form) in the possession of any person that has been created as a consequence of the seizure of the seized property prior to the giving of the notice of the application under section 59(1) is not at any time—

(a) further examined or copied, or

(b) put to any other use,

except with the consent of the applicant or in accordance with the direction of the appropriate judicial authority.'.

Amendment No. 30, in page 57, line 38, leave out "subsection (1)" and insert "subsections (1) and (1A)".

Government amendment No. 44.

Mr. Hawkins: New clause 6 and the various amendments that are grouped with it deal with matters that were not discussed at all in Standing Committee. It is again an example of where the Government have been quite ridiculous in respect of the limited amount of time that they have provided for debate. I said that the time allowed would prove inadequate, and it has proved inadequate. We are still not anywhere near halfway down the list of new clauses and amendments. Again, there is a negation of the proper scrutiny of the legislation—a negation of parliamentary democracy.

New clause 6 is important. The Government are seeking through measures on the search of premises to close a loophole in the law that emerged in a case last year, which was dealt with by the Court of Appeal: the case of the Queen *v.* Chesterfield Justices and the chief constable of Derbyshire ex parte Bramley, reported in 2000 in the first volume of the all-England law reports at page 412. Although there is no doubt that there was a need for some fresh legislation—indeed, the Court of Appeal made it clear that, if Parliament wished to regulate the matter further, it needed to have fresh, clear legislation—the Government have, in our view, slipped up because their proposals create some further problems. We seek to solve those problems in new clause 6 and in the amendments.

New clause 6 would require that, where a search is being conducted and it is likely that legally privileged material may be seized during the search, independent counsel should be present at the time of the search to help in the identification of that legally privileged material.

I declare an interest as a member of the Bar and as someone who sat for a number of years on the Bar Council. The Criminal Bar Association of England and Wales has made a detailed submission, but the matter is of concern not just to members of the association but to the whole legal profession, including the Law Society: everyone who deals with that area of law.

I was the subject of some criticism from the Minister of State in Committee for referring with approval to the views of the Criminal Bar Association of England and Wales in relation to another matter. I made no apology for doing so, and I make no apology now. Again, we think that the work of the representatives of the association has been important. There is a clear precedent for what the association is proposing. Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue already regularly apply the procedure of having independent counsel present. It will be for the Minister to explain why, in the area of the law where the Government are putting forward new proposals, we should not have exactly the same arrangement for independent counsel to be present to identify material that is legally privileged.

It already happens in cases involving Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue. The proposal is on all fours with that. The procedure has the advantage of providing a check on the exercise of powers on site. In addition, independent counsel will be able to assist the relevant authorities in justifying whether it was reasonably practicable to undertake the sifting exercise on site.

Amendment No. 19 would require the person seizing material to look at whether, in the case of material held on computers and in other electronic form, it was practicable to copy the material on the premises, rather than necessitating the removal of whole computers or hard discs. Amendments Nos. 20 and 21 would stop these new sifting powers applying to the material that is legally privileged. We raise this matter because of the great concern in the legal profession about the seizure of such material. The amendments are probing and seek an explanation from the Government of why the exception in respect of such material in other areas of the law is not maintained here.

Amendments Nos. 22 and 23 are drafting amendments, which relate to the requirement to put a notice on the premises being searched if no one is present at the time. The Bill refers to

"in a prominent place to the premises",

which is unusual English. We seek to replace that so the Bill reads

"in a prominent place within the premises"

or

"in a prominent place within, or on the exterior of, the premises".

What happens if the notice is fixed on the outside and is taken down? Does a prominent place "to the premises" mean other than within or on the exterior of the premises? Could it mean a lamp post outside the premises?

Amendments Nos. 24 and 25 seek to raise the test for conducting an examination of seized property from "due regard" to the desirability of having the owner present to

"all reasonable steps". What does the due regard test mean? How high a test is it? We think that that is a serious point and that "all reasonable steps" is a far greater safeguard and is more usual in relation to law concerning infringements on civil liberties.

Amendment No. 26 would require that where the examination of the seized property was conducted without the presence of the person from whom the property was seized or his representatives, written reasons should be given. Again, that is reasonable.

Amendment No. 27 would require a hearing on whether to return a seized property to be held within 48 hours of an application. It is a modification of the habeas corpus principle in relation to the detention of a person. We think—as do lawyers in the field—that the 48-hour proposal is reasonable.

Amendment No. 28 would require the return within a reasonable period of seized property that a judge had ruled should be returned. We feel strongly that it should not be left open to the prosecuting authority to return the property whenever it likes.

Amendments Nos. 29 and 30 would require that when an application to return the property was made, the duty to secure the property under clause 63 should include not only a duty not further to use the property until the judicial hearing had taken place, but a duty not further to use any material that had been created as a result of examining or copying the property. In other words, the amendments draw a line on a matter that is not covered by clause 63. At the moment, if the prosecuting authorities had taken a photocopy of a document, they would have to secure the document itself. As the Bill stands, the copy could still be used by the prosecution, even though an application to return it had been made.

What does Government amendment No. 44 do? We recognise that the Government are seeking to make a small amendment to the Terrorism Act 2000, but we are not clear what the significance is of the change from 28 to 22. I would be grateful for an explanation of that.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Liberal Democrats are co-signatories to and supporters of the new clause. We are sympathetic to the proposal, and we argued for a similar case in relation to the part of the Bill that is covered by the other amendments. I hope that in the short time available the Minister can respond to our concerns and either accommodate the new clause in total or indicate that the Government will respond to the proposed requirement that there should be an independent verification of the seizure by somebody who is not acting on behalf of the authority, but can be there on behalf of the person whose properties are seized.

Mr. Lock: If I do not manage to cover the sensible and valid points made by the hon. Members for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), I will write to them.

The hon. Member for Surrey Heath is right to say that the measure arises from the Bramley judgment. To take new clause 6 first, I recognise that it might be sensible to strengthen the procedures covering expert input to searches where decisions need to be made about whether particular material is legally privileged or not. However, suitable guidance is more appropriate to the relevant code of practice than putting words—which are, of themselves, restrictive—in the Bill.

Requiring the presence of independent counsel on every occasion—rather than using best endeavours, or requiring counsel where the finding of such material had not been anticipated—would be excessive. Investigators must have scope to judge the circumstances of individual cases. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath makes a good point about the desirability of having independent counsel available to determine the validity of legally privileged material. However, the right way to deal with this is by guidance—which can be adapted in the light of experience to test the balance between the two competing interests—rather than by fixing it for all time in the Bill.

As I am sure that the hon. Gentleman appreciates, legally privileged material can lawfully be seized under the new powers in clauses 52 and 53 only if it is not reasonably practicable to separate it—

Miss Widdecombe: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We have just two minutes left and seven groups of amendments have not been reached. At least two of those groups cover ground that we did not cover in Committee. In your view, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is this adequate parliamentary scrutiny?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I think that the right hon. Lady knows that the Chair does not have a view on these matters and simply presides over the business on the Order Paper.

Mr. Lock: I am grateful, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I find it astonishing that Opposition Members raise serious points, ask for responses that I am quite happy to give and then use the time raising points of order.

In all other circumstances, material that is accepted by an investigator as being legally privileged cannot be seized. However, consideration can be given to using the code of practice to extend the circumstances in which seized material which the occupier considers to be privileged should be secured pending judicial arbitration, and that could provide a strong backstop where contentious issues arose in the absence of expert advisers such as independent counsel.

I turn next to amendment No. 19. I cannot see how the issue of whether or not electronically held material can be copied on premises is relevant to deciding whether that material should be removed from the premises for sifting or analysis. I suppose that the argument might be based on the suggestion that if a copy can be taken, it is not necessary to remove the originals. In some investigations that may be true and the code of practice that will support these provisions will emphasise that investigators should always give careful consideration to whether removing copies or images of relevant material would be a satisfactory alternative to taking the originals, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman can put himself in the position of investigating police officers who realise that in order to make sense of the material—

It being half-past Eight o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER, *pursuant to Orders [7 November and 29 January], put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair.*

Question accordingly negatived.

Remaining Government amendments agreed to.

Order for Third reading read.

8.31 pm

Mr. Charles Clarke: This has been an extraordinary process. I am a relatively new Minister with less experience than many of those present. I have had responsibility for a number of Bills, including the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill and the Terrorism Bill in the last Session, working with many Opposition Front Benchers from both the official Opposition and the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Blunt: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I sat on Standing Committee F and have been in the Chamber throughout the proceedings on Report. We are now considering the Bill on Third Reading with a view to sending to the other place a substantial number of provisions that have received no consideration by the House. It is surely a matter of the gravest concern to the Chair that this can happen. Can you advise me on what can be done to ensure that we as legislators can do our job properly and not destroy the reputation of the House?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Essentially the same point of order has been put to the Chair by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and my answer cannot be any different. This is a matter not for the Chair, but for debate, however contentious hon. Members may feel it is. It is a matter for debate and not a matter of order.

Mr. Clarke: I was just saying that I thought that it had been an extraordinary process of debate. It has been characterised by extraordinary anti-parliamentary activity by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe). Before she leaves the Chamber, I hope that she will take the opportunity to apologise publicly to the House and to the people of this country for her behaviour, which was a total outrage.

Miss Widdecombe *rose—*

Mr. Blunt *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Can I establish whether the Minister intends to give way?

Mr. Clarke: I was giving way to the right hon. Lady.

Mr. Blunt: We never know what the Minister is doing.

Miss Widdecombe: Indeed. The Minister has criticised my conduct. I have tried to uphold the rights of the House to debate and scrutinise legislation. The Government should apologise—not us—for one of the biggest ever affronts to democracy. We have not even opposed the Bill and now a whole section of it—part II—which was not scrutinised in Committee or today will not be scrutinised at all, yet the people of this country will be governed by it.

Mr. Clarke: I only wish that the right hon. Lady had had the courage to say that in the debate on Monday evening when she had the chance to wind up the debate and address the issues in very great detail.

Mr. Heald: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Did you hear what the Minister just said, namely, that on Monday, when the business of the House was discussed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) had an opportunity to wind up the debate? I do not know whether you have had the opportunity to look at *Hansard*, but you will be aware that on that occasion the Government closed debate on the motion, therefore it was quite impossible for my right hon. Friend to put her case, much as she wanted to do so. Is it in order, and is it parliamentary, for an allegation to be made which is obviously factually incorrect?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I cannot permit a rerun of Monday's debate. Any hon. Member who sought to catch the eye of the Chair would have had an opportunity to be called.

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am concerned by what has just been said. There was a closure motion, so some Members who were rising may not have been able to speak.

Mr. Blunt: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was one of those Members who were rising constantly throughout the debate seeking to catch the eye of the Chair, but I was not able to speak because of the closure motion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Nothing that I said in my previous ruling excludes the fact that in any debate it is possible that the Chair may accept a closure motion. Up to that point, it is open to any hon. Member to catch the eye of the Chair. There is nothing inconsistent in the two positions.

Mr. Clarke: I shall respect your judgment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that that debate should not be rerun, but the point is simple. Before the closure motion was moved, an offer was made through the usual channels for wind-up speeches to be made by both Front-Bench spokesmen, which was rejected. That is the fact, and it is a great shame that it did not happen.

Let us come to the substance of the debate. Some clauses have been exceptionally well debated. As with some of the other Bills that I have mentioned, we have had some extremely positive and constructive debates, including the debates that we have just had on the new clauses on paedophile crime moved by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and the debates on DNA. But we also had a large number of other debates where that was not the case.

Miss Widdecombe: The Minister has just said that we had constructive debates, and we did. The reason for that was that we were allowed to reach them. Has he any reason to suppose that, had we reached part II, the debates would not have been equally constructive, and might they not have contributed substantially? Why on earth could that not happen?

Mr. Clarke: Quite simply, for the reasons that I set out on Monday evening, which Mr. Deputy Speaker has asked me not to go through again now. There was a series of issues about the amount of time that was wasted when other matters were discussed. *[Interruption.]* I know that my assertions are contested, and that was the debate that we had last Monday evening.

I am trying to say, in a constructive spirit, that during our consideration we had a range of positive debates, including those on the many important issues of principle which the Bill addresses.

The Bill has a simple aim, and that is to aid the police and the courts in further reducing crime and the fear of crime. It contains a wide range of measures which will provide the police and others in the criminal justice system with improved powers to enforce the law and protect the public.

Mr. McLoughlin: Does the Minister believe that the Bill has been properly scrutinised?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is time to get on with the Third Reading debate, which is about the contents of the Bill.

Mr. Clarke: That is what I am trying to do, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, the short answer to the hon. Gentleman is yes, I do think that.

Mr. Blunt: Would the Minister say that his statement that the Bill has been properly scrutinised is as accurate as the statement that he made to the House during points of order on Friday? He said that he would be

"tabling a motion on Monday to the effect that has been indicated for the House to consider at that time."—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2001; Vol. 364, c. 527.]

Mr. Clarke: That is another return to the Monday debate, but, yes, I do believe that the Bill has been fully and thoroughly scrutinised.

In Committee and on Report we introduced a number of additional clauses which the Government believe significantly improve the protection of the public, and because my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary by definition was not in a position to refer to those on Second Reading, I should like to go through them quickly.

The first group of measures will provide additional protection for those who conduct important and essential research using animals or those who have a financial interest in the companies undertaking such research. We are all aware of the appalling intimidation of people working in the medical and pharmaceutical industries by so-called animal rights protesters.

The Bill aims to tackle that in three ways. Clause 43 gives powers to the police to direct protesters who harass people by waiting around outside their homes. Clause 44 tightens up the law on malicious communications, and clause 45 amends company law requirements in respect of directors' home addresses. Clause 45 will not provide an instant solution, because existing records cannot be expunged. Over time, however, it will provide additional protection to those directors who, unhappily, have found themselves targeted by protesters and who, as a result, have been subject to intimidation and, in some cases, violence.

Finally, at today's Report stage we have just added a further safeguard against harassment and intimidation. We have amended the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 to ensure that it will apply to those who plan a co-ordinated campaign of harassment against another person. Quite rightly, these matters have been the subject of very full debate and close scrutiny, both in Committee and on Report. The protection that they provide extends further than everybody's right to go about their lawful business without having to fear intimidation and violence.

I want to emphasise that this is not about stopping people protesting publicly and peacefully about things in which they believe. Rather, the clauses are designed to deal with those malevolent and sinister protests that create a feeling of fear through an implicit threat of violence. These clauses will enable the police to protect people who are doing legitimate and very valuable work in medical and pharmaceutical research, and those who support them through finance and other services.

Important political and philosophical debates were held when we considered these matters. What I believe to be an important assertion was made—with which I believe the whole House agreed—about the importance of science. It was determined that decisions about the future of our society, even where they concern difficult and complicated matters such as genetic modification and so on, should be taken on the basis of scientific research and knowledge, rather than on the basis of bullying by people with particular prejudices. Another assertion concerned the importance of the right that everyone enjoys to lead a quiet life in their homes, and not to be harassed and abused in unacceptable ways. I think that that was important.

Important, too, was the establishment of the primacy in a democracy of politics and the parliamentary process in deciding how matters are dealt with. That principle stands in opposition to the contention that an individual protester—or even an individual journalist, as was discussed in Committee—has the right to overcome and overrule the rights of Parliament and of society in general in that respect. Those important principles were fully debated, and I hope that that will set the tone for the debate of these questions in future Parliaments, and thereafter.

The next group of measures seeks to safeguard children and other vulnerable groups by giving the Criminal Records Bureau extra powers to exclude unsuitable people from becoming registered. We went through those proposals in detail.

Other important new provisions relate to juveniles. They will enable courts to deal more effectively with medium-level persistent juvenile offenders by providing a number of options for dealing with young people who defy the courts and commit repeated offences while on bail or in non-secure accommodation. In addition to these new clauses, we have made a number of technical and drafting amendments; for example, to ensure that the provisions on search and seizure will work properly in Scotland.

I cannot say that it was universally the case we had extremely good debates in Committee, for the reasons that I have given. However, I believe that there were important and positive debates. We debated at length the proposals to extend the fixed penalty system to offences of disorder. There was a great deal of interest in the offences to be covered by the new scheme, which is set out in clause 1, and in the power to add new offences to the list in the future.

We engaged in all the debates with a constructive spirit and accepted a number of Opposition suggestions. For example, we accepted their suggestion that the power that I have just described should be subject to the affirmative,

[Mr. Clarke]

rather than the negative, resolution procedure. That will mean that Parliament has the opportunity to debate all proposals to amend the list of penalty offences, and it will thus help to ensure the continuing integrity of the scheme. We also agreed to the Opposition's proposal that the Secretary of State's power to set the level of penalty for each penalty offence should be subject to tighter restrictions than were contained in the Bill as published.

Another idea within the fixed penalty system which received very close scrutiny was our proposal to provide the police with a special fast-track procedure for dealing with penalty offences committed at large public gatherings, such as festivals or demonstrations. We have also introduced an amendment to the transitional period specified in clause 17, relating to the replacement of existing public drinking byelaws with the national framework to address the problem of antisocial public drinking, which is set out in the preceding clauses.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Minister is retailing the very good and useful work that the Committee achieved in the time available. On the matters to which he is now coming, does he accept that no hon. Member who was not a member of the Committee has had no chance to debate in detail the fixed penalty notice provisions? They were very controversial in Committee: there was considerable argument about which provisions should be included and which should not.

Does the Minister accept also that no hon. Member who was not in the Committee has had a chance to debate the merit of imposing curfews, let alone of retaining DNA samples from innocent people without their consent? The Minister accepted in Committee that the latter was a question of major national interest that should be the subject of a major national debate. There will be no debate about that in detail tonight. The Minister cannot possibly argue that there has been adequate debate on any of those matters because all but a handful of Members of the House of Commons have been excluded from debating them.

Mr. Clarke: I can argue that there has been a very full debate about these matters. I promised the House that in accordance with the guidance from the Deputy Speaker I would not seek to revisit Monday evening's debate on these matters. I do not accept, as I have said before, the premise of what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) and other colleagues have said. For large parts of this evening's debate there were almost no Members in the Chamber other than members of the Committee. That goes against some of the hon. Gentleman's points.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): Does the Minister recognise that the truncation of the procedures in the handling of this matter is a switch-off to democracy? It is extremely difficult, even for those of us who have been members of the Committee, to keep up to speed with the detail of the Bill when it is taken in this way. Will the Minister kindly report back to those to whom he is responsible so that it never happens again?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am glad to allow the Minister to respond briefly to that intervention, but after that I must insist that we return to the contents of the Bill.

Mr. Simon Hughes: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can we be clear about what your indications imply? The debate on Monday was about whether the Bill should go back into Committee or whether there should be a foreshortened Committee stage. There was no debate on Monday about Report, tonight's guillotine or the Bill's remaining stages. I ask you to permit, and to make it clear that you are permitting, debate about today's procedure, which was not the subject of Monday night's debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have already permitted hon. Members to comment on matters that are nothing to do with Third Reading. We are now on Third Reading. I understand the feelings on both sides of the House, but I think that we have dealt in sufficient detail with the matters surrounding the Bill and that we should return to the Third Reading and stick to it.

Mr. Clarke: Following your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will not respond to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), save to say that I think that we have had a very full consideration of the issues.

During the course of our considerations, I did not accept a number of amendments which, in the Government's view, would have significantly diluted the powers we intend to give the police to close down disorderly or excessively noisy pubs for up to 24 hours. I understand the anxieties expressed in the licensed trade, and I have had widespread discussions with its members on a range of issues. However, I have given the Committee the assurance that we shall issue guidance to the police to ensure that the powers are deployed fairly and responsibly in the interests of public safety and nuisance and that every licensee is given an opportunity to put his house in order before action is taken to close any pub.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald said that we did not debate part II, but we debated many parts of it—an ironic contradiction. Part II deals with information disclosure. In Committee, at the request of the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald), I agreed to meet the Confederation of British Industry to discuss its concerns about the disclosure of confidential business information for overseas criminal anti-trust investigations.

I met a delegation from the CBI to discuss the situation in some detail. The hon. Gentleman was right that this is a matter of concern. Although, as I said in Committee, there had been meetings with officials and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, there had been no meetings with me as the Minister dealing with those matters in the Bill. I thought that the hon. Gentleman's point was fair and that I should meet it, as I always try to do.

We see the information disclosure provisions as a key way to improve international co-operation in the fight against anti-competitive behaviour. I am glad to tell the House that through my meeting with the CBI and subsequent meetings with officials, we have managed to

agree common ground. For example, the CBI recognises the importance of the disclosure provisions in the fight against crime and is generally supportive of these measures. When I put that to members of the delegation, they were more than supportive—they were enthusiastic. They thought that it was important for the CBI to associate itself with such measures.

The CBI also agreed with the Government on the need to tackle international cartels, but it opposes allowing the disclosure of confidential business information for overseas criminal anti-trust investigations. Those worries relate to a small number of competition cases that involve activities such as price fixing and bid rigging. We have listened to its concerns and have sought to ensure that it understands the way in which the new powers will be used by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

All overseas requests for information will be considered on a case-by-case basis. We will protect UK companies when we believe that the United States or any other country is seeking to assert its jurisdiction extra-territorially. For example, we would prohibit disclosure if the alleged offences were carried out by a UK company operating solely in the UK. Furthermore, nothing in the disclosure provisions would permit a breach of the Data Protection Act 1998, the Human Rights Act 1998 or European Community obligations.

The Director General of Fair Trading is also aware of the CBI's concerns. He said that he would not generally disclose information collected in relation to a merger other than with the consent of the companies involved. We will continue to reflect on the CBI's concerns, but we cannot accept the overall approach of not acting at all, because it would mean that no information could be disclosed to a foreign competition authority in respect of the most serious breaches of competition law, and because we believe that it is important to fight international cartels.

There has been widespread discussion about DNA and fingerprint issues. As the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey implied, they will be a significant aspect of debate when the Bill is considered in the public arena. We had to take into account the need for a balance between individual rights and society's right to be crime free. I do not think that murderers and rapists should walk free when the evidence to convict is available to us. Development of DNA techniques now often allows us to solve crimes 10, 15 or 20 years after they have been committed. That sends a powerful message that those who commit awful crimes will be penalised and punished. I accept that there were genuine debates on these matters in Committee and elsewhere, and I am sure that such discussion will continue.

I believe that I can claim that the Bill is a measure of the Government's commitment to reducing crime and the fear of crime. I hope that opposition parties will consider carefully where they stand on the various issues that are involved. As the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire has pointed out at various stages, the official Opposition did not oppose the Bill on Second Reading. He told us that he would consider the situation in detail after that stage of its passage, and no doubt he will tell us in a moment how the official Opposition intend to deal with the Bill tonight.

I know that the hon. Gentleman also has many procedural anxieties, although they have been expressed rather extraordinarily through the actions that have been taken. It is important to understand that the people of this country will consider the Bill and make their judgments. Many of the measures are straightforward and cover common ground, but some are controversial. Everybody in politics has to make choices, which is why I was surprised by the no-votes on a range of measures. The House and the country will be interested to hear what the hon. Gentleman has to say about those abstentions and to find out how his party will vote on Third Reading.

The Liberal Democrats raised similar issues, but their tone was different. The Government and the Opposition disagreed on some points of detail, but I found extraordinary some of their abstentions and votes against measures such as clause 1. In general, those decisions were a question of the need for the official Opposition to explain themselves. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey and the Liberal Democrats, however, voted clearly against a whole string of measures for reasons that they articulated and which were consistent with the judgments that they have made.

Being the sort of man that he is, the hon. Gentleman will take the following challenge in the spirit in which it is meant. When he and other Liberal Democrat candidates for Parliament stand in front of their electorates, they must be confident that they are prepared to deal with serious crime and disorder issues. Whether it is in respect of alcohol crime, fixed penalty notices, DNA, murders, rapes or a range of other issues, he must be prepared to put his hand on his heart and say that he is confident that, without introducing the measures in the Bill, the Liberal Democrats are doing their best to ensure that the people of this country get a secure and safe community. That is what the Government are committed to, and that is the choice that he will have to make. He will advance his arguments in his characteristic way, but he should not be under any illusion. We will be putting forward our arguments about the substance of the issues publicly and clearly from now until polling day, because they are right for the people of this country.

8.54 pm

Mr. Heald: The Minister is right to say that, in shadowing him, I have worked on Committees and in other proceedings with him. We have rubbed along pretty well and been able to debate matters in a serious way. On many occasions, he has listened and been prepared to change his position on the basis of debate.

You will not want me to go into any detail about the Standing Committee, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, I feel that democracy was betrayed and that huge parts of the Bill were not discussed. I feel sorry for organisations such as the Police Federation, which went to the trouble of preparing long briefs for the Opposition, and of raising issues of concern—for example, about disciplinary matters.

The 11th group of amendments on Report concern

"Police regulation, organisation and conduct".

Those matters form a substantial part of the Bill, and the Police Federation and others wanted to raise important issues on them, such as whether there should be an inference drawn from silence in police conduct proceedings. They were unable to hear those matters

[Mr. Heald]

debated. They also wanted to raise issues about the Secretary of State and his designation of functions, and qualifications for the police service. They have not had the opportunity to have those matters aired either. We also tabled an amendment in Committee and on Report to delete what is now clause 127, but that will not be debated. I do not just feel sorry for those organisations; the Minister should be aware that they feel dismayed that it has not been possible for their concerns to be aired in the way they should have been.

My concern is not only about police matters, although they form an important part of the Bill. It also relates to issues such as the disclosure of information. As the Minister said, we debated the CBI concerns on clause 45, as it then was. However, the CBI is still not satisfied. I spoke to its representatives this morning, and they said that they were pleased to have had a meeting with the Minister, but they were dissatisfied with its outcome. No doubt that matter will have to be discussed further in the other place. I am also concerned that the disclosure of tax records, which is a civil liberties issue, was not discussed.

The reason these matters were not discussed is not because there was any unnecessary time wasting by the Opposition. There was not. The Minister said that we wasted time on the first, important clauses of the Bill. He has made that accusation time and again. In fact, after we had dealt with those clauses, the Committee Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale), with the authority of his co-Chairman, said:

"My view, and that of my co-Chairman, is that, to date, there has been no untoward or over-lengthy debate . . . we are dealing with intricate issues."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee F*, 15 February 2001; c. 199.]

The Minister feels able, in his position, to challenge that, and to say that the Chairman may have said that, but he got it wrong. However, I do not think that it is right for a Minister to behave like that. If we have a ruling of that sort, we should accept it.

Mr. Charles Clarke *rose—*

Mr. Heald: I should be happy to give way to the Minister.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am most anxious that we should not revisit arguments that have been gone over many times before. Before anyone responds to those comments, I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman now moved on to the subject of the Third Reading of the Bill.

Mr. Heald: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I was offered the opportunity to take an intervention, but I shall not do so in the light of your ruling.

We had the opportunity tonight to debate various issues on Report. We were not able to reach more than half of them. That is a pity for parliamentary democracy, but I shall not go on about that any further. The Opposition do not oppose the Bill in principle; we never have. However, we have made it clear from the outset that we feel that elements of it are over-bureaucratic, and that safeguards are required in a number of areas. We also made it clear that fixed penalty notices should be issued only for a range of minor offences, and in a way that does not involve major paperwork for the police. That point was put to us by the Police Federation and the Police Superintendents Association, and we still do not think that the measure is right.

Although we voted against the provision on fixed penalty notices in Committee, I made it clear that we were happy to table a new clause setting out what we wanted and, had we won the vote, we would have done so on Report. Criminal damage is our main concern over fixed penalty notices, because compensation is payable to a victim only on conviction. If a fixed penalty notice is issued, there is a risk that people who want compensation will not be able to get it.

The Minister gave us assurances on that in Committee, but they were not adequate. There are corporate businesses and others that should not be subject to a measure that means that they cannot claim compensation, and there should be a definite commitment in law on that. The Association of Chief Police Officers suggested that criminal damage is not suitable for the process. That is our view and we continue to hold it, here and in the other place.

The Minister referred to no-votes as if they are shocking, but if an attempt to amend a measure is voted down by the Government, it is hard to give wholehearted support to that measure. My view is that, after being voted down by the Government, our proper approach in Committee is to abstain. That is what we did when we were not satisfied with the detail.

Mr. Clarke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heald: Well, no. The Minister can intervene in a moment if he wants to.

It is important to acknowledge that we had serious debates on the Huntingdon Life Sciences issues—I agree with the Minister about that. We made significant changes as a result of those debates, for which I give him full credit, but he should further consider issues relating to conspiracy. He also needs to go further on the child protection measures which we debated on Report. I welcome the commitment that he gave in correspondence to the effect that the full council will make the decision on a non-drinking zone. The Opposition have made that point throughout.

We must ensure that a stop order is served and a rowdy pub closed only when a clear connection can be made between it and the incident about which the senior police officer is concerned. The Minister made concessions, or points of amplification, in correspondence about our concerns on noise. If a pub is noisy and a senior officer wants to close it for that reason, it is now accepted that a closure order will be issued only when warnings and opportunities have been given to reduce that noise. That is a welcome assurance.

Although I could go on at great length about which points we want to be considered by the other place, I tell the Minister that we do not oppose the principle of the Bill. The debates that we had were good and amendments were made that we are pleased about, some of which he mentioned. Although we shall not oppose the Bill, I am sad, as he should be, that it is going from the elected

House to the other place, which is unelected, when half of it has not been considered by hon. Members. To me, that is deeply shaming for the elected House.

Mr. Charles Clarke: The hon. Gentleman has explained that there will be another no-vote tonight and gave an interesting constitutional explanation, which I found novel, of previous no-votes. Nevertheless, that explanation can be used by Conservative Members if it is appropriate. However, it is not unreasonable of me to say to him, given that he took a certain view in Committee and no-voted on certain clauses, that he should tell us whether he is for or against those clauses as they now stand. It would help the House and the country to know exactly where the Conservatives stand on the DNA issues, fixed penalties and so on. Will he provide some illumination?

Mr. Heald: There is a clear answer to the Minister's question. Report stage is there for that purpose, and we were given a third of a Report stage because of the cruel guillotine that was imposed. I do not mean that it was cruel to me; the victims of this guillotine are organisations that wanted certain issues to be raised, and individuals who would also have liked to hear the explanations for which the Minister now calls. It is not appropriate to give such explanations on Third Reading, which must deal with the Bill as amended—I see you nodding, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am not prepared to be told by the Minister how to do my job, or to be told by him what is or is not in order. I am of course prepared to listen to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but surely the victims are not just organisations and others whose representations they believed might be debated. Are not the main victims the citizens on whom legislation is being forced by the Government—legislation that the Government know has not been, and cannot be, properly considered? Does that not constitute a criticism in the case of every clause that we have been unable to reach?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I do not want to keep interrupting, but I am sure the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) appreciates that he is being led back down a certain road, and I would be grateful if he did not go down it.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Could you clarify the rule on Third Reading debates, in the context of the Government's conduct in forcing a Bill on the House when they know that the House has not considered one third of it?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is an experienced Member of Parliament. He knows very well that the purpose of Third Reading is to debate the content of a Bill as it then stands.

Sir Nicholas Lyell *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am not prepared to return to the matter.

Mr. Heald: As the Minister will appreciate, I travel around the country, and I meet police officers. I have to ask myself what I am to tell them when they say, "Why did you not do something about that provision on disciplinary proceedings?" The answer is that there was no time, because the Government had introduced this arrangement. When chartered accountants who have written a long paper on disclosure of records for tax purposes say, "We told you that the Bill contained some daft points with which we disagreed; why were they not debated?", I shall have to reply, "Well, there was this guillotine, and the Government would not let us debate them"—and so it goes on.

The same applies to all the individuals involved. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) pointed out, our citizens sometimes find that the law is daft, or does not work properly. But whole clauses—42 last Thursday, and more than 20 on Tuesday—were never debated in Committee, and we then find that we cannot debate them on Report. Of course, one should never exaggerate—*[Interruption.]* The Minister laughs; he should not.

The problem with the Bill has been that it was not up to this Minister to determine how much time we had, or when the Bill left Committee: he had his orders. I know that the Minister likes to debate, to examine points that are made and to listen; but he himself was not allowed to do those things. He knows that. He knows that whenever we asked for extra time, he was allowed to provide only a certain amount.

Mr. Charles Clarke: Further to the point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You have been very clear about the fact that we should not revisit last Monday's debate. I would respond to the hon. Gentleman, but I am trying to stay in order. Will you clarify whether what is being said is in order, in the light of your earlier remarks?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am trying hard not to intervene continually. I think the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire is aware that the points he is making have been made many times. I understand how he feels and how others on both sides of the House feel, but I earnestly ask him again to return to the debate on Third Reading.

Mr. Heald: I remember hearing the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) say that when one no longer feels the anger, one should get out of politics. On this occasion, I feel the anger, as do other Conservative Members.

9.10 pm

Dr. Ladyman: This is an important Bill, and I assure my hon. Friend the Minister that I shall address my comments to its content. It will provide greater powers to control drunkenness in public places, protect a quality of life that has been threatened for many of our constituents, and address issues of crime and disorder on the streets that our constituents have raised with us.

My main interest in the Bill has been the provision of powers to protect scientists, and I make no apology for returning to that theme. Earlier, I thanked the Minister for keeping an open mind on the subject, for being prepared to listen to advice that he was being given by hon. Members on both sides of the House, and for introducing new clauses that have now been incorporated into the Bill. As a consequence of his openness and willingness to

[Dr. Ladyman]

accept advice, the Bill is immeasurably better. For the first time, scientists can look forward to being protected by the law and to being able to continue their work. I congratulate not only the Minister but Opposition Members who made a constructive contribution to our debates on the subject.

Mr. Blunt: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that, because of the timetable, we would never have had a debate on the subject if the Opposition had not agreed to consider the relevant new clauses after we had considered only one third of the clauses?

Dr. Ladyman: I have no doubt that there were discussions via the usual channels that allowed us to raise issues that hon. Members on both sides of the Committee believed were important. However, as the hon. Gentleman wants to get into party political banter, and if Conservative Members have opened their minds to the needs of scientists, perhaps they will say whether they will address the issue of scientists with the same openness as the Minister has demonstrated in the Bill. Perhaps they will also re-examine the policy which they have just proposed, of extending the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 to animal experiments. Such an extension would close down the United Kingdom's pharmaceutical companies and put terrorism back on to the doorsteps of scientists.

Mr. Hawkins: I think that the hon. Gentleman may have been very badly misled by an article that appeared on the front page of *The Times* today. He should be aware that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo), who is the shadow Cabinet member responsible for agriculture, has written a letter for publication in *The Times*, we hope tomorrow, in which he comprehensively demolishes that article. He makes it clear that both the author of the article and the professor who is quoted in it had been told the true position before the article's publication in today's edition of *The Times*. Both gentlemen, however, decided to ignore that information. I would not want the hon. Gentleman—with whose views on these issues I agree—to be misled by a wholly inaccurate and perhaps even malicious article in today's press.

Dr. Ladyman: I was not misled by that article, which I read only briefly before entering the Chamber. I was informed on the subject by a much longer article written by the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) that appeared, several weeks ago, in *The Daily Telegraph*. I responded to that article with press releases of my own. The response that I received from *The Daily Telegraph* was that the article was so unimportant that they would not follow it up with my reply, and other media were not interested in the article at all. The article was, however, very detailed. The hon. Gentleman made it very clear that he intended the Conservative party's policy to be to force all animal experiments into the public domain so that they, and the scientists who do them, can be subjected to a critique before proceeding. I can see that you are becoming a little uneasy, Mr. Deputy Speaker, about my taking a route that I should not pursue on Third Reading. I shall therefore return to the protection of scientists.

In my first job, I worked with an eminent scientist who was reaching the end of his professional career. In the latter part of that career, he had conducted a series of experiments in which he had exposed mice to radiation to see what effects it had. One effect was that it killed their bone marrow. After repeating the experiments to see that that effect was consistent, he took some bone marrow out of the animals before they were irradiated. After the remaining bone marrow had been killed, he returned the removed marrow to the mouse, and discovered that it flourished and grew.

The scientist next went a step further. He took bone marrow from certain mice, and then put it into different, irradiated mice. That bone marrow also flourished. The first point of that story is that he would not be allowed licences to do that work under today's legislation. His targets were too nebulous to allow for licences under the current regime. Secondly, if he were alive today, that scientist would be the target of terrorists, who would not accept that he should do such work.

Thirdly, the principles that that scientist discovered were later transposed into human beings. They now provide the primary treatment for some forms of childhood leukaemia. The hundreds of parents who must have cried themselves to sleep over the years after discovering that their new-born child or toddler had leukaemia have been given relief because of that man's work on mice. Their children are well and whole and happy and growing.

If we do not protect scientists and allow them the freedom to do such work, there will be no new cures for the diseases that we suffer from today. There will be no advances on Parkinson's disease or Alzheimer's. We must protect our scientists, not just for our health but for the economic well-being of our nation. If we do not do that, they will go elsewhere to do their work, to a standard lower than that on which we insist.

We have done good work in Committee and on Report in improving the Bill by including provisions that protect scientists. I hope that the Minister will continue to consider ideas as people feed them to him at the later stages of the Bill. I hope that it may be further improved as it passes through the other place, perhaps even on the basis of ideas on conspiracy advanced by the Opposition and professional organisations. Perhaps we can improve it further, but we have, at least, produced a Bill that offers scientists real protection for the first time. The House and the Government should be congratulated on that.

9.18 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes: On Third Reading, we are going round a course that those of us who deal with Home Office matters have followed frequently in recent months. In the previous Session, there were 12 Home Office Bills, and in this Session there have been six so far. In both Sessions, the Home Office has produced far more legislation than any other Department. In addition, it is a matter of record that there have been Criminal Justice Bills almost every year under every Government in recent years. As I reflect on all that, it seems that there is something about our process that we are not getting right.

Governments are given authority by the electorate to produce proposals for Parliament. They are entitled to do that, and are given the advantage of our procedures to enable them to do so. The initiative lies with them. Yet we often end up with legislation that has not been tested against the views and experience of people both in and out of Parliament in such a way as to produce good law.

One of my persistent themes—the Minister and other colleagues on the Committee will have heard it often—is that we need to improve our procedures so that when we get something on the statute book, we know that it ought to be there, and that wherever possible, it is done deliberatively. Only very exceptionally should we rush into something as a result of the requirement for an immediate response to an immediate set of events. It is a bit like the Budget. Wednesday's Budget looks very different the following Tuesday. Legislation conceived to deal with a problem in 2000 might not be thought to be such a good idea by 2002.

I enjoyed serving on the Committee. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) and I both contributed to and benefited from its proceedings. We had an intelligent exchange on all the issues that we had the opportunity to debate. I pay tribute to colleagues in the other two parties in that respect. We none the less ought to have a process that allows, first, consultation on proposals; secondly, as a matter of normal practice, a draft Bill; and thirdly, the sending of that draft Bill to a Special Standing Committee, Select Committee or other forum, in which things can be checked and evidence taken.

If we did that, by the time we dealt with controversial matters—I shall come to the substance of my speech in a second—we would know properly not only what people thought, but how we could benefit from experience not just in this country but abroad. In this country we are very bad at looking at comparable examples of measures that have been tried and tested in other countries. We are insular in that respect, and it is often to our detriment that we do not draw on the considered experience of people in other legislatures and democracies around the world.

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am attracted to the idea of Special Standing Committees and so on; I always have been. However, I ask in all seriousness—I do not know what his answer is—how the hon. Gentleman would deal with repetitiveness in some of the debates. I have sat opposite him on many Standing Committees, and we have no doubt found each other repetitive on various occasions. How do we achieve the scrutiny that he wants without simply providing a succession of forums in which we re-run identical and increasingly sterile discussions?

Mr. Hughes: That is a proper question. I think that the Minister knows that I am as open as he is to trying to deal with that issue. I shall not go down that road in detail now; suffice it to say that we should agree a series of steps leading to legislation. I have said what I think they ought to be, in general terms. Indeed, with the Joint Committee on Human Rights, we have built in another step. It produced its first report—on this Bill—as a holding operation the other day. If we agreed such steps, we could negotiate and—depending on the length of the Bill, and as long as there was representation across the parties from Front and Back Benchers—there could be agreement, other than for exceptional measures, for timetables throughout the year.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): There is a far more effective way of achieving the hon. Gentleman's aim. It is to expose all Bills to the Special Standing Committee procedure, whereby, whatever their nature, they are subject to scrutiny and the taking of evidence prior to consideration in Standing Committee. That is the answer; it would deal with all his problems.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) responds, I should point out that I have allowed him a certain latitude because other hon. Members have dwelt on the same point. However, this debate is not about our legislative processes in this House—however interesting those may be. This is Third Reading, and I should be grateful if the hon Gentleman would turn his attention to that.

Mr. Hughes: I made those introductory remarks because of the nature of the substance of the issues before us. I shall move on, but in order not to be discourteous, I shall first say to the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell–Savours) that I have always taken the view that he has just expressed. In my experience, legislatures that do their job well follow a process very similar to the one that he proposes.

My final conclusion about our proceedings on the Bill is that when we legislate in haste, we often repent at leisure. We suffer far too much from trying to legislate when alternatives would be better. We should legislate only when we really must, rather than just when we think that it would be a good idea. The fundamental point about the Bill is that we should give more power to the authorities only when we are absolutely persuaded that that is necessary to deal with the problem.

One of the evils of the parts of the Bill of which I and my hon. Friend disapprove is that whenever Governments are not sure how to react to a problem, they come up with a proposal to give the authorities more power. That is the wrong conclusion in periods of uncertainty when the case is not made. It tilts the balance between the liberty of the citizen and the power of the state. It is another ratchet in the direction of the state, and I regret it because in this country the state still has considerable power, and the citizen is losing power relative to the state all the time because of technology, globalisation and other things.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): It may be true in general that there is always an argument for spending more time on legislation. The hon. Gentleman made a point about legislating in haste and repenting at leisure. How does he reconcile that with the comments made by the hon. Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) about the urgent need for action to deal with internet-related offences against children? The argument has been advanced that the technology is moving so rapidly that we must think carefully about what legislation is appropriate to deal with the concerns.

Mr. Hughes: The ideas expressed by my hon. Friend and others have been around in that specific form for almost a year. I have said on other occasions that in the context of changing technology, it is necessary to review the law regularly—but, as the hon. Member for Workington said, we must first check out the facts and the evidence.

Ministers know that the Government have the support of the Liberal Democrats on some parts of the Bill, where we have no argument with them. Measures concerning drink and drugs are important, because unless we can

[Mr. Hughes]

significantly reduce alcohol and drug abuse, we will not significantly reduce crime. We will certainly not reduce violent crime, which is often fuelled by one or the other, or both. It is a good thing that we shall have alcohol-free zones by law as opposed to byelaw. That is a sensible streamlining of the procedure. It is appropriate in certain circumstances that the police be given additional powers to close disorderly licensed premises. The old procedure was often too cumbersome. It is certainly proper to give the authorities power to act where owners of unlicensed premises are acting illegally and exploiting the licensing laws.

If we say that it is against the law to sell alcohol to the under-18s, we must have a law that works and is not so widely abused as the current one is, whether by off-licences, supermarkets or public houses. It is certainly appropriate to be able to give people working in the licensed trade additional power to deal with people who are clearly drunk either when they come in or when they remain on the premises. On all those matters, Ministers know that we are going in the same direction as they are.

Ministers also know that we share their view that people who have trafficked in drugs—international traffic in drugs is the most common serious form of trafficking—can reasonably be penalised by being prevented from travelling. That will have a great effect on their trafficking—although I know that it is naive to assume that much of the large-scale import and export of drugs is done by the people who carry them, and that if we clip their wings we will have a great effect on some of the problems.

The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) made an important addition to the debate this evening. He spoke about protecting people who have suffered excess harassment and intimidation, especially from so-called animal rights activists. As colleagues will know, we broadly support moving down that road. There was a debate about the definition, and a difference between us, but in general terms we accept that it is right to take further action.

A measure that is good, but does not go far enough, is the provision to protect witnesses and victims from intimidation. The matter is addressed in the Bill, but not in a way that will work in practice. I am sick to death—or rather, I am sick of it and other people are sometimes sick to injury or death—of the fact that people who have been intimidated or harassed cannot be moved quickly enough for their protection. We do not yet have a system that delivers that, and people often pay the price in unacceptable ways. As a last postscript, may I add that some of the new arrestable offences were perfectly reasonable?

We have said throughout that there are some provisions that we do not support. For example, we have not supported the excessively wide powers of transferring information or of being able to access information that is held by the private citizen.

Some extremely controversial, and in my view unacceptable, powers will allow people to be detained for longer periods by the authorities, who will be able to judge the appropriateness of that detention by doing no more than speaking to the individual on the phone, or using a remote video link. That seems far too broad a power, which is potentially dangerous and capable of abuse.

Of the three most controversial areas of the Bill, we have debated two to a significant degree, but certainly not the third. The proposed fixed-penalty notice system is no less nonsensical now than it was when it started. Consideration in Committee showed that it was more nonsensical than previously thought, and exposed the folly of the system.

We either have one type of justice system that applies across the range of offences, or we go to a two-type justice system. There would be an on-the-spot system to deal with what the Government of the day think should be dealt with in that way, with other matters going through the courts. We resist that. Someone might want a licence to drive, to fly or to do something else. Those things come within the definition of ordinary activities of the citizen. However, if individuals abuse their freedoms and break the law, they should be dealt with by due process.

Consideration in Committee provided evidence that if the Government had thought matters through, they would have at least come to the conclusion that on arrest, someone should be taken to the police and charged. He or she could then be offered the opportunity of a fixed-penalty reduction and immediate disposal. That would have been a far better approach.

I promise the House that with the fixed-penalty notice we are increasingly seeing the rich and the advantaged getting a better deal out of the criminal justice system. The people at the bottom end of the scale are becoming more vulnerable and more at risk from instant justice, which is not what we have traditionally guaranteed for our citizens.

I was not persuaded by anything that the Minister of State said about extending curfews—which have not even been used for under-10s—to those under 16. I am not persuaded that that is the right way to proceed. We should deal with individuals, not areas. We should identify individual culprits, and not seek to identify and define areas that are more liable to have within them criminal communities.

I shall give a practical example: the continuing investigation into the tragic death of Damilola Taylor, in the borough that I represent. In reality, the area where most of the criminals come from is not the area where most of the crimes are committed. Where should the curfew be imposed? Should it be where the offenders live or where the crimes are committed? It cannot be argued logically that curfews should be imposed in both areas unless we are prepared to take in a huge area in which a huge number of the liberties of a huge number of young people will be affected.

Mr. Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich, West): Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge and recognise that there are certain defined areas that for special reasons accommodate the antisocial behaviour of young people far more readily than others? For example, a couple of derelict buildings in an estate may attract that sort of behaviour. Another example is a shop that is open late at night. A range of locations, given their design and structure, lend themselves far more readily to antisocial behaviour and cause a nuisance to local residents. Does

the hon. Gentleman agree that in such circumstances it should be possible to have a limited child curfew within the area?

Mr. Hughes: The experience and advice of the police suggest that that would not be especially helpful. I have talked to the most senior police officers as well as those on the beat. Crime can be displaced quickly. A trouble area one week is not a trouble area the next; trouble moves around. That happens in our part of the world, which is no different from anywhere else. The problems can be tackled in other ways.

If we want to tackle youth crime, we should start not by imposing more curfews, but by dealing with bullying in schools, and ensuring that there are enough detached youth workers, out-of-school activities, police on the beat and community police. Many measures are far more effective than the proposed tokenistic, shop-window, pre-election gimmick, which has added nothing to the debate and will contribute nothing to the solution to crime in any part of the country.

We have held no major debate on DNA, and people do not realise what the Government propose. People who are under investigation may be required to give a DNA sample. Even if proceedings are dropped, or someone is subsequently tried and acquitted, and affirmed to be innocent, they will be included on the list of those about whom the state holds information.

Of course, such a measure enables the powers that be to know more about defendants and to consult a larger database when crimes are committed. However, if we take that argument to its logical conclusion, we should all be on the database. At birth, our names, parents and birthplace should be registered and a DNA sample taken. That would be a disgracefully large leap in the interests of beefing up the powers that be. We could convict people more readily, and lock up many more people, if we simply gave the state more power. But is that the sort of society we want?

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): Yes.

Mr. Hughes: Yes, says the junior Whip. Thank you very much. Authoritarian Labour people in councils such as his symbolise centralisation and the corruption that often accompanied it. I take no lessons from Doncaster or from old Labour fiefdoms such as Southwark, where power went to the centre and corrupted, which meant that the citizen was less free.

Mr. Lock: Does the hon. Gentleman believe that people who have committed an offence should be convicted of it? If the police have evidence, does he believe that it assists justice, or victims, if they are prevented from using it?

Mr. Hughes: Evidence that police have accumulated from innocent people, against their will and under duress, should not be held to facilitate the police's power to do their job. We cannot suddenly claim that society consists of two tiers of people—those who happen to be picked up by the police, irrespective of the merits of the case, and everyone else. I am sure that the Minister does not support that. Home Office Ministers are trying to persuade themselves that they want to give the police more power whenever they ask for it, irrespective of individuals' rights.

The Minister says that we should stand by our beliefs. We shall do that. The Bill has so much merit that we shall not try to prevent its passage to another place. The Government have a majority, so it will go through anyway. However, in another place, we shall try to remove the provisions that we do not like. If there is an early election, we will insist that those aspects are not retained. Liberal Democrats will not agree to a measure that provides for curfews for the under-16s, a range of fixed-penalty notices or DNA samples. Those provisions will not appear in the Bill if an election is held in May.

It may not be popular to stand up for defendants, protesters, suspects or young people, but a Parliament in which people do their job properly will defend the victims of crime, as we have done consistently, and those who may, for various reasons, be imprisoned, or addicted to drugs or alcohol, for a while. We must have a balanced view in this place. Unfortunately, some good Government ideas have been mixed with some poor ideas, some ill-thought out ideas and some illiberal ideas, which should be resisted. I am confident that the House of Lords will resist them, and that if there is an early election, they will not be on the statute book before the election.

9.40 pm

Mrs. Brinton: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak.

I was glad to be a member of the Committee that considered the Bill, which should, if passed—I know that it will be tonight—enable the police and others to deal more effectively with a range of disorderly and criminal behaviour. I was grateful to be a member of the Committee because it enabled me to pursue some particular concerns that I had raised on Second Reading, which partly related to constituency matters.

I had planned to range over a large number of issues, but aware that time is tight and that we want to hear the Minister's full considerations, I shall concentrate on a couple of specific issues that affect my constituency and, indeed, Cambridgeshire.

The first issue is DNA samples and fingerprinting. As we know, forensic science is, rightly, growing in importance in the fight against crime: in convicting or, it should be stressed, in exonerating an individual accused of a crime. The advance in the science and technology of DNA will make it more useful to the police, provided they have the powers to make optimum use of it. I should like the House to pay tribute to Ben Gunn, chief constable of my local force, Cambridgeshire, who has worked closely with others at national level in considering the present proposals and has given great help.

I have been told by my local force that the police are grateful for the support that the Government have given them on those issues. I should also mention the £208 million of extra funding that the Government have invested in DNA over the next three years, which will underpin police powers to make maximum use of it.

Mr. McCabe: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs. Brinton: No. I am taking no interventions at this stage.

I make a point that I alluded to on Second Reading. Whatever powers or instructions are given to the police, there should be adequate resources to enable them to carry them out.

[Mrs. Brinton]

I was concerned to hear from my local constabulary, where I have spent some time on useful secondment under the parliamentary police scheme, about the national automated fingerprints identification system—NAFIS—due to be completed this May. Considerable funding has been spent, rightly, on state-of-the-art equipment. I hear that it has produced excellent results so far, but that there may not be enough skilled operatives to use it properly, particularly in smaller forces such as Cambridgeshire.

The new system means the devolution of record keeping, which was previously maintained by New Scotland Yard. Unless that extra responsibility is backed by appropriate funding, the result is likely to be a lower rate of successful identification, rather than a higher one. Indeed, I am told that there is already evidence of that in certain areas.

Finally—it is the key point of my comments—I was extremely glad to support the Government's new clauses in response to concerns that were expressed in the Chamber and outside about unacceptable levels and kinds of protest and their intimidating effects on individuals and groups. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) for his moving and effective comments on the issue.

The new clauses propose to give the police new directions to stop harassment of a person in the person's home and to amend the Malicious Communications Act 1988 in a number of ways, making it more appropriate to the present day of electronic communication, so that it is no defence for a perpetrator to state that he or she believes that his or her threat to another is reasonable. Rather, the issue will be whether it is reasonable according to agreed and shared definitions.

On Second Reading, I voiced my concerns about the level and nature of protests by animal rights activists against employees and others associated with Huntingdon Life Sciences, some of whose employees or associates are my constituents.

I have examples of the tactics used that have constituted the harassment and victimisation of individuals. I pay tribute to Opposition Members who raised those issues effectively in Committee, in the Chamber this evening and on other occasions. We are talking about demonstrations outside people's homes; verbal abuse using a loud hailer; graffiti on homes and cars; and abusive telephone calls to relatives, friends and children's schools. In Committee, I read some of the letters that I have received that detail the abuses. I welcome the amendments on this subject. I do not believe that anyone in this House or outside would support such abuses of individual rights.

I am convinced that this is a vital Bill, which must and will achieve its Third Reading today. I commend it to the House.

Mr. Blunt: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. No Opposition Back Bencher has had a chance to speak in this Third Reading debate. Would you take back to the Speaker the concern—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is rehearsing arguments that we have had earlier this evening. I have to say to him that many of the points of order raised earlier took quite a lot of time and probably partly explain why some Members have not been able to speak on Third Reading.

9.46 pm

Mr. Hawkins: As the Minister said, this Bill has had a most extraordinary passage; one might more properly say, a lack of a passage. Those outside who follow these proceedings will find it extraordinary that the parts of the Bill referring to police training—an issue of huge public concern—police organisation, the National Criminal Intelligence Service and the National Crime Squad have not received any scrutiny by the elected House of Commons in Committee or on Report and Third Reading. The Minister seemed completely to dismiss the importance of that.

Such rubber-stamping and a negation of democracy is reminiscent only of Stalinist Russia in the 20th century. *[Laughter.]* Government Back Benchers, who seem to think that this is funny, will find that they must justify to their constituents the fact that they have been part of this negation of democracy, by pushing through a Bill that contains important issues that have not been debated.

The Government—particularly Government Back Benchers—believe that debate does not matter and that one can assume that what the Government are doing is right. They believe that the world started in year zero in May 1997, which is similar to what the Pol Pot regime insisted on in Cambodia.

Mr. Blunt: There is an assumption among those on the Treasury Bench that any debate is out of order. The Advocate-General for Scotland, with the Minister sitting alongside her, said

"If there were less filibustering and more focused argument, the provisions could be considered."—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2001; Vol. 364, c. 140.]

That is wholly at odds with the proper and sensible consideration of the issues by the Committee.

Mr. Hawkins: My hon. Friend is right, but it goes further than that. The Advocate-General for Scotland had no basis for suggesting that because all three Chairmen of the Committee had specifically ruled that at no stage had there been any filibustering.

This has undoubtedly been an unsatisfactory matter. As my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald) said, it all resulted from a wholly artificial timetable. Ministers—particularly the Minister of State—were clearly operating under orders. They were told by their lords and masters that they had to clear the decks in case the Prime Minister wished to call a general election for April, so these wholly artificial timetables were imposed on us.

In the brief time that remains, I want to touch on a couple of points that were raised in the debate. The hon. Member for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) spoke about the importance of the protection of scientists. As the son of two research scientists, I thoroughly agree. I think that the best part of our consideration of the Bill in Committee and on Report has been our discussion of the best bit of the Bill—the protection from harassment provisions. If the predictions of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) come true, that part,

and only that part, might end up on the statute book. That would be appropriate, as those are the only provisions that have been debated properly.

I was delighted that the hon. Member for South Thanet reiterated his support for our proposals. The hon. Member for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) also made a helpful contribution tonight, as she did in Committee. Both hon. Members spoke passionately and well in support of their constituents and scientists. The hon. Member for South Thanet is still saying to the Minister, as we are, that further steps are required. We have already welcomed the Government's acceptance of our suggestion in Committee that the Bill needs to be amended further. They repeated their acceptance in respect of clause 13 tonight, but yet further work on the law of conspiracy might be carried out in another place. There is no doubt at all that we need to keep that in mind. We hope very much that when the Minister replies to the debate he will confirm that he is still listening to the hon. Members for South Thanet and for Peterborough, and to us.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey spoke about the defects in the procedures for scrutinising these issues. There is no question but that we need to keep the way in which such Bills are scrutinised always in mind. There may be better ways of scrutinising them. There is certainly a much better way of dealing with important criminal justice measures, particular in relation to significant bodies such as police authorities and the National Criminal Intelligence Service and the NCS. There has been a bypassing of democracy. While we do not dissent from some of its underlying principles, the Bill is an example of legislation that attempts to implement what the Prime Minister said when he asked for eye-catching initiatives on crime with which he could be associated.

9.52 pm

Mr. Lock: This has been an interesting Third Reading debate, but let us focus first on the Bill. It contains a wide range of measures that will provide the police and others in the criminal justice system with the powers that they need to tackle disorder, to beat crime and to improve the position of victims in our society. It is an important Bill and it is a disgrace to the scrutiny and the importance of those measures that we have heard so much today about the procedure and so little about the substance.

Those outside this place who read our debates will find it extraordinary that we have spent so long talking about how many sittings there were and how many hours were spent in Committee and so little about when it is right for the police to close down a disorderly public house that is causing trouble to a neighbourhood and whether it right for the police to retain DNA samples and about all the other important issues in the Bill. However, we have discussed an important issue of principle between the Government and the Liberal Democrats: when the police have the ability to convict criminals and, when there is evidence, should the power of the state be used to maximise the number of criminals who are convicted for their crimes, or should there be artificial rules to weigh the system in favour of the defendant and against the power of the state? It is used to bring those who commit crimes to justice. The DNA provisions in the Bill are designed to ensure that where there is proper evidence and where there are proper issues they should be placed before a court—but evidence should be used and those who commit crimes should not have loopholes which they can use to escape conviction.

Whereas the Liberal Democrats have at least set out their principles—we disagree with them, but we understand them—the Conservatives voted against measures in Committee, they were not prepared to say whether they were in favour of the Bill or against it and they were not prepared to commit themselves to supporting either the defendant or the victim. However, we are grateful for sinners who repent and we welcome their support now, albeit at the last moment.

Mr. Heald: Does the Minister agree that the first moment was Second Reading, when we supported the principle of the Bill?

Mr. Lock: The Conservatives supported the principle of the Bill to the extent of not voting against it, but when we came to the detail they were not prepared to support the provisions, and it is only today that they are prepared to say that they will not vote against it. That is hardly a ringing endorsement on behalf of the victims who need those powers.

Other issues have attracted good debates. I commend my hon. Friends the Members for South Thanet (Dr. Ladyman) and for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton) on their sterling work on behalf of the scientific community. My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet made an excellent speech describing the benefits of scientific experience and experiments, and the importance of giving scientists the freedom to be able to work without intimidation and harassment. I am sure that his speech will commend itself to the scientific community, and he will know that he has their support in bringing these issues before the House. He has done an extremely good job on behalf of the scientific community. It should be grateful to him, as it should be grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough.

We have had good debates on other issues. It is difficult to get the balance right on fixed-penalty notices and to know which offences should be included, but I am grateful to those hon. Members who contributed to that debate. It was a good debate and we think that we now have the balance about right.

The Bill will be best known for procedural issues and the Opposition's adoption of student sit-in politics. What makes the way in which they have behaved even more extraordinary is the fact that they sought to hold up the progress of a Bill giving powers to the police and strengthening the position of victims, with which they agreed.

It may have been correct that, in Committee, there was no technical filibustering, but it cannot be said that there was focused debate at all points. Much time was spent discussing procedure and a vast amount of time discussing the fact that the Opposition did not feel that they had enough time.

On Monday, the shadow Leader of the House said in high dudgeon that 16 sittings should mean 16 sittings. That is the debate. Sixteen sittings amount to 36 hours, but, as the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), said in the same debate, the Bill was debated for 40 hours, which is substantially more than 16 sittings. The "Dangerfield"

[Mr. Lock]

series may have been entertaining on television, but when the details were relayed at length to the Committee by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins), it lost its edge. Numerous pressure groups have responded, but the Criminal Bar Association's brief, which I regret was not so brief, added little to parliamentary scrutiny when read out at enormous length by the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Heald: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will have heard the Minister say that we had 16 sittings. Is that in order when, according to the *Official Report*, the final sitting was the 15th sitting?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is certainly not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Lock: It is certainly not a matter for the Chair, but it is typical of the points that have been taken.

This is a good Bill and it has been properly scrutinised. Its powers are needed for the police and for the victims of crime and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 15 (Exempted business),

'That, at this day's sitting, the Motion relating to Weights and Measures (Metrication Amendments) Regulations may be proceeded with, though opposed, until half-past Eleven o'clock.—*[Mr. Kevin Hughes.]*

Question agreed to.

Weights and Measures

10 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): I beg to move,

That the Weights and Measures (Metrication Amendments) Regulations 2001 (S.I., 2001, No. 85), dated 16th January 2001, a copy of which was laid before this House on 17th January, be revoked.

The House now proceeds to scrutiny of an important regulation touching on the subject of metrication. Our objection to the regulations—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. Would hon. Members leaving the Chamber please do so quietly?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Our objection is that the regulations mark another stage in the Government's determination to drive out pounds, ounces and other familiar imperial units of measurement, and to replace them with an enforced metrication policy, even when that is unnecessary and unwanted.

The background to the regulations is that in 1999 the Government ended the permitted sale of loose goods—fruit and vegetables, meat, fish and so on—in pounds and ounces. From 31 December 1999, it became a criminal offence to sell those loose goods in the familiar units that we had used for so long. That has led to the absurd prosecution of a market trader, Mr. Thoburn, in Sunderland. His only crime, it is alleged, is that he is selling fruit in pounds and ounces.

The court case is costing tens of thousands of pounds. It is still under way, and we await the verdict.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): Does my right hon. Friend share my perplexity about the matter? Some people might consider it a modern thing to use système internationale d'unité measures, but the United States uses pounds and ounces in NASA space probes, as well as miles, feet, inches and square yards in other circumstances. Can my right hon. Friend understand what the Government's motive could be for abandoning historical units of measurement such as pounds and ounces in favour of metrication? Metrication is popular in Europe, but it is not understood here.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend is right to give the United States as an example of a country that uses imperial measurements. However, I do not think that they are called imperial units there; rather, they are known as non-metric, or even English, units. Indeed, in some cases in the US, there has been a reversion to such units and away from metrication.

My hon. Friend asks why the Government are so intent on metrication, and I confess my bafflement on that point.

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): The Government have had to address the issue because, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows, the previous Government signed up to metrication time and again, and reconfirmed as much in this Chamber, time and again.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: That is not quite the case, as my remarks will show. Doubtless the Government will try to blame everything on everyone but themselves, but in this case it will not work.

The point that I was developing leads on from the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant). It is that the metrication process has nothing to do with consumer rights or the protection of consumer interests. In the case of Mr. Thoburn and his sale of fruit and vegetables in pounds and ounces, it is neither suggested nor alleged that he was in any way misleading his customers. Quite the reverse—he was serving his customers in the units they asked for; he was not short-changing them in any way. In the market in Sunderland, there were many other outlets. There is choice in a market, by definition. If he was doing something that his customers disapproved of, they could easily buy their produce from somebody else. He would lose business if he was thought to be imposing his values on an unwilling public. He and his customers were simply exercising choice, and the Government are now denying them that choice.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): The right hon. Gentleman refers to the Thoburn case. Am I right in thinking that the genesis of the regulations can be traced back to 1989 and the European Council of Ministers, whose United Kingdom representative was the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), now foreign affairs spokesperson for the Conservative party?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is getting this slightly wrong. My right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) obtained for this country an extension of the rights of traders to continue to use imperial measurements. This Government failed to do that in 1999, so the guilt lies on the Government Benches rather than ours.

Dr. Howells: I would not want the right hon. Gentleman to mislead the House. Why does he not simply admit that the Government of whom he and the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) were members signed up to metrication and then managed to obtain a 10-year extension which would enable traders to put supplementary measurements on each weighing scale? That is precisely what we did the year before last.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am afraid that the Minister cannot avoid responsibility in that way. These prosecutions are proceeding because in 1999 the Government failed to extend the right to use imperial units in trade in loose goods. We obtained that extension in 1989—that is a matter of record.

The Government did not even try to obtain an extension in 1999. I have a helpful written answer from the Minister to my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb), who is in his place. The hon. Gentleman said:

> "The Government have not discussed the derogation for goods sold loose with Members of the European Commission."—[*Official Report*, 8 July 1999; Vol. 334, c. 583W.]

The Government did not even discuss the matter, let alone ask or insist.

An extension of this right could easily have been obtained. The original directive was negotiated by the Labour Government in 1979. It includes the following lines:

> "Whereas the laws which regulate the use of units of measurement in the Member States differ from one Member State to another and as a result hinder trade; whereas, in these circumstances, it is necessary to harmonize laws, regulations and administrative provisions in order to overcome such obstacles".

It is clear from that preamble that the entire rationale was built on the premise that the use of imperial measurement hindered trade. However, Mr. Thoburn and his market trader colleagues in Sunderland are not engaging in international trade. How can it possibly be said that the sale by a market trader in some way infringes the rules and regulations of international trade? It is preposterous.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Does it not go even further than that? If it was a question of concern for international trade, and a trader insisted on using a unit of measurement that was not acceptable to potential customers on the continent, he would not be able to trade. People trade in the measurements that their customers want.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend is right. Trade exists by satisfying customers. Someone who supplies goods in units that are inconvenient or are not understood will not sell them. People do not need bureaucrats or central Government to tell them that. It is much better to leave such matters to normal commercial intercourse at market level.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley) *rose*—

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I hope that the hon. Gentlemen will forgive me, but I want to make progress.

The domestic sale of loose goods has no single market implications and does not affect other member states in any way. It is a purely domestic matter and therefore falls under the subsidiarity requirement, which is now written into the treaty of Rome, as amended. Respect for subsidiarity is insisted upon, so if the Government had asked in 1999 whether United Kingdom traders should continue to use pounds and ounces for domestic trade, no case whatever would have been made against the proposition, which would have been allowed. As has been mentioned, my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham succeeded in obtaining a further derogation when he applied for one. The same would apply in respect of many units of measurement.

It may interest the House to be reminded that some imperial measurements have indefinite extensions. They include the mile and the acre, and pints of milk can still be sold in returnable bottles. The use of such measurements is still permitted because the Government and the European Union know perfectly well that if they insisted on abolishing them in favour of metric measurements, the public would not accept their decision. The principle is already established. When it is convenient for the public to continue to use traditional imperial measurements, they are allowed to do so. Will the

[Mr. Heathcoat-Amory]

Minister clarify, however, whether those extensions are indefinite? Could we be required by majority voting to abolish the mile, the acre and the pint in due course?

Mr. Leslie *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I give way to the jack-in-the-box on the Government Benches.

Mr. Leslie: How cruel; I am not sure that I can recover from that remark.

The right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) was responsible for pushing through approval of European Community document No. 4102/89 in April 1989. During debate on the document, which welcomed metrication proposals, he said that pounds and ounces would be able to continue only

"until the end of the century."—[*Official Report*, 11 April 1989; Vol.150, c. 839.]

Does that sound like an indefinite period to the right hon. Gentleman?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: If the hon. Gentleman investigates the matter slightly more carefully, he will see that the derogation negotiated by my right hon. Friend applied until the end of the century. He probably anticipated that a less feeble Government would be in power when it ran out and that they would listen to what the public wanted and have the determination to do what he had done and obtain a further extension.

Mr. Fabricant: Many five-year derogations have been renewed by Conservative Governments. On another matter, is my right hon. Friend aware that 74 per cent. of the British public said in a recent survey that they wanted to keep imperial units? Is not that the motivation of Mr. Thoburn and others who want to provide what their customers want?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend is right. Politicians and Governments have previously been ahead of the public in their insistence on replacement of some measurements. It has become apparent to everyone—or at least to Opposition Members—that the public do not want the regulations. We live not only in a democracy but in a society in which consumers should be consulted and listened to. If affection remains for a familiar unit of measurement, the House should listen to people's concerns and withdraw a forced and artificial switch that is simply not required. The United States has done that, and we are asking the Government to listen in exactly the same way.

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): Does the right hon. Gentleman think that the gentleman whom he mentioned earlier, Mr. Thoburn, is breaking the law?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: It is not for me to assume the role of a judge. Moreover, as the matter is sub judice, it would be highly improper of me to do so. However, if the hon. Gentleman wants to pre-judge the case, that could be an extension of Labour policy whereby we hear the verdict first and the evidence afterwards. I thought that we might confine that sort of legal procedure to "Alice in Wonderland". The law is oppressive, and the responsibility for that entire prosecution and its attendant expense lies firmly with the Government, for failing to obtain that extension of the permitted use of imperial measures in 1999, as I have already described.

Ms Bridget Prentice (Lewisham, East) *rose—*

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: It is perfectly true—

Mr. Fabricant: Give way to Metric Mary.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Lady is so charming, I shall give way.

Ms Prentice: The right hon. Gentleman voted for the provision in April 1989 on the basis that it was

"providing adequate transitional periods to enable businesses and consumers to adapt".—[*Official Report*, 11 April 1989; Vol. 150, c. 837.]

Why is he doing a U-turn now?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Because we are listening to what the public want. We obtained a 10-year derogation, and it was never envisaged that that would necessarily be the end of the matter. Is the hon. Lady seriously advancing the proposition that one Parliament can bind its successor? Is she supposing that a decision taken 10 years ago was valid for all time, even when it was deliberately time-limited? Is she advancing that extraordinary proposition? If so, she should make her position clear.

I turn now to the details of the present regulation.

Mr. Stewart: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I gave way to the hon. Gentleman earlier. I hope that he will catch your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so that we can hear his views at greater length, because I think that Labour Members have some explaining to do on this matter.

Under the regulation before the House, to which I shall now turn in some detail, the Government are seeking to go further than the provision that I have just described, by bringing to an end the permitted dual pricing. At present, imperial measurement can be used in what the directive calls "supplementary indicators". That is, imperial equivalents to metric units can be shown, provided that they are less prominent and used secondarily to the metric units. That is the established law. The Government are now announcing an end to that, in the regulation. As well as ending sales in imperial units in 1999, the Government are now going further by removing the right to show imperial units at all.

It might be asked—this is a matter for the Minister to answer—why anyone needs permission to display helpful additional information in this way. The answer could be that, under the system of law that governs these directives, we now need positive permission to do something. Under the traditional legal system that has been in place for centuries, we have always taken the view that we could do what we liked—it was assumed that we had total freedom—unless something was expressly prohibited.

However, it now appears, instead, that it is assumed that we can do nothing unless it is expressly allowed. That is the continental legal tradition, and it is now being incorporated into these metric regulations. Thus it will be forbidden for a trader to put any helpful additional information about imperial measures under the metric sign. That will become illegal, which is a most extraordinary proposition as well as a serious infringement of liberty. I ask the Minister to address the point.

The other interesting fact about the regulation is that supplementary indications—the term describes permission to show imperial units as well—are permitted under EU law, not to help shoppers, which has never been a consideration, but so as not to damage EU exports.

I return to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield. America has not gone metric in the way originally predicted and willed by the EU Commission, but it has reversed the mandatory use of metric measurements in federal contracts, revoking that law. Indeed, many states are moving away from metric altogether. I am advised, for example, that Louisiana, Missouri and Illinois scrapped kilometres on road signs in 1998, bringing to 18 the number of states that have reverted to using miles. Through great swathes of the United States, there is movement away from using metric measurements.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): May I point out to my right hon. Friend that that more open-minded attitude to weights and measures, which are a matter that should be left entirely to the choice of the client and the supplier, also extends to certain European countries? Is he aware that the leather trade in Italy uses three square feet—the Lombard foot, the Tuscan foot and the Neapolitan foot? Many Italian suppliers use square metres, but in export markets they leave the matter entirely to the choice of the customer.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Exactly. Even countries that have used metric measurements for many years sensibly permit the use of other units of measurement where that is convenient for industry, trade and customers. I am afraid that, throughout history, Governments and politicians have pressed metrication on others, even if it is not wanted and even if it takes away choice.

That has been recognised in the United States, which is moving away from that system. Significantly, EU firms that export goods to America are not allowed to sell in that market in metric-only markings. They must show imperial and metric markings. To acknowledge that fact and the concerns about the damage that will be caused to industry by having to run two production systems—one metric only, the other using dual markings—the EU has responded by permitting sellers of pre-packed goods to continue to use dual markings, even when they sell in the EU. That has also been extended to loose goods and, indeed, every other good.

Even though dual-use markings were not introduced for the convenience of shoppers and traders, they are still permitted and will continue to be so. Even more bizarrely, although that permission was extended to the end of the previous century by an EU derogation, the Government did not even apply for a parallel derogation for domestically traded loose goods when that was clearly required by our own people.

In other words, international organisations and companies in the EU obtained a derogation because that was convenient for them and important to their marketing to the United States, but the Government sat on their hands and did not even ask for an equivalent derogation for the permitted use of imperial-only measurements for loose goods traded in markets such as that in Sunderland. That shows the feebleness and illogicality of the Government's position.

I want the Minister to say why the derogation and the regulation apply only up to 2009. The explanatory notes describe that as a final date. Why, having banned the use of imperial measures for the pricing and selling of loose goods, are the Government still so intent on banning supplementary labelling as well? Why are they so sure that the United States will fall into line? We can easily imagine circumstances in which, as we approach 2009, the United States persists in its use of imperial measures. We shall have to go through all this again. Perhaps the Minister can enlighten us: did he argue for a longer period? Did he, indeed, argue for an indefinite extension? If not, why not?

Cannot we all now see that the public are attached to the continuing use of imperial units? Why, then, should it be made illegal to display such information from a certain finite date, which the regulations call a final date? Why are the Government so intent on taking away this freedom? We all know that they are an interfering, regulatory Government, and that they are extremely reluctant to challenge any proposal from the European Union—

Mr. Ian Stewart: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: No.

We also know that the Government are in a complete muddle over their metrication programme. That is clear from the ludicrous persecution of a market trader in Sunderland.

Why do the Government not do something right for a change? Why do they not at least permit the indefinite use of imperial units alongside their metric equivalents? Why do they not put a stop to this metric madness, start listening to the public and start standing up for freedom? Unless we get some very good answers to those questions, we will certainly oppose the regulations.

10.27 pm

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): I welcome the opportunity to explain the regulations—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh no you don't!"] Oh yes I do.

The regulations were made under powers conferred by the Weights and Measures Act 1985, formulated and signed up to by a Government led by a Conservative Prime Minister—although, of course, the schizophrenia of the Conservative party knows no bounds. Conservative Members forget all this, but it is here in *Hansard*. The hon. Member for Stafford fought it tooth and nail at the time—

Mr. William Cash (Stone) *rose*—

Dr. Howells: No, I will not give way.

Mr. Cash: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Even if the Minister cannot get metric measures right,

[Mr. Cash]

and even if he cannot get pounds, shillings and pence or any other imperial measures right, he should at least know that I am the Member for Stone.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I do not think that that is a matter for the Chair.

Dr. Howells: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman for that, but I was paying him a tribute by saying that he stood up against that lot on the Conservative Front Bench.

Tonight's debate is really about the Conservative party's paranoia in regard to the United Kingdom Independence party. The Conservatives fear that the UKIP will take votes away from what they call their key seats in what is left of their heartlands: that is why they have jumped on the ludicrous case of a so-called metric market. It is total nonsense.

The intention of the directive that the Conservatives now criticise, but to which they signed up, is to establish harmonised use of the international system of metric units for economic, public health, public safety and administrative purposes in European Union member states, of which we are one. The directive originally set 31 December 1989 as the date after which non-metric units would no longer be authorised for use as supplementary indications. The Conservatives did not negotiate a never-ending derogation; they signed up for 10 years. The right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) has forgotten that, as he has forgotten many other facts, but I now remind him of it.

The current Government recognised that a further extension for supplementary indications would be necessary for two reasons. First, with the change to the gram and the kilogram for goods sold loose after 1999, it was clear that consumers would welcome a further period in which trade measuring instruments could display indications in metric and imperial weights.

Secondly, under United States legislation, consumer packages—including imports from the United Kingdom and other European Union member states—must be labelled in metric and US imperial units. Packing in metric-only for the EU market and in metric-US imperial for the US market would clearly add to costs for UK exporters. However, Conservative Members are so fixated with jumping on to the tawdry bandwagon of their big rival, the United Kingdom Independence party, that they will say anything. That is what they do these days.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Howells: I shall in a moment—I have not finished yet.

Conservative Members will jump on any bandwagon that is rolling along. This bandwagon is not moving very fast, but it is better than none at all. It is what Conservative Members do these days. I shall certainly give way to the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb). I had always considered him to be intelligent, but I am amazed to see him sitting on the Opposition Front Bench for this debate.

Mr. Gibb: If I understand the hon. Gentleman correctly, the Government sought an extension to the derogation for dual measurement, but not one for the directive on loose sales from bulk. Why did he seek a derogation in one case but not the other?

Dr. Howells: We did not need one. We negotiated a further 10-year extension for supplementary indications, until 31 December 2009. It is also important to recognise that a directive was passed by the European Parliament. If United Kingdom Members of the European Parliament, including Tory ones—there are Tory MEPs; the Tories did very well in the most recent European elections—considered that to be such a dastardly act, why did they not table an amendment to the directive? Not one amendment to the directive was tabled. That is very strange.

I know, however, why there was not an amendment. It was because that old United Kingdom Independence party had not found a metric martyr and the bandwagon had not yet started scraping along the ground. It was therefore not necessary for a Tory MEP to table an amendment. Then again, perhaps Tory MEPs simply forgot to table one, just as the right hon. Member for Wells has forgotten that it was a Conservative Government who signed up to all this and set themselves a 10-year target to end imperial measurements and convert entirely to metric.

Various regulations have been made, under the Weights and Measures Acts of 1963 and 1985, to set out constructional requirements and limits of error for different classes of weighing or measuring equipment. That has been done to ensure that when that equipment is used for trade, it will act as a fair arbiter between buyers and sellers. That applies not only to everyday foodstuffs such as fruit and vegetables and fish and meat, regardless of whether they are sold loose or pre-packed, but to other goods used in commerce and industry. It also applies to central heating oils and to supplies of petrol and diesel fuel.

It is an important task of trading standards officers to check that that equipment stays within the allowed limits of error. The equipment may drift into inaccuracy with the passage of time, it may be damaged through misuse, or it may be used fraudulently. TSOs have an important task on behalf of all of us in ensuring that weighing and measuring equipment stays within the bounds and continues to play its role of fair arbiter.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): The hon. Gentleman is telling us about the regulations implications, but would he mind sparing a thought for the housewife who now has to read recipes in metric measurements? The other evening, for example, I had to make some mashed potatoes. The instructions told me to take 628 cl of water, 235 g of potato and a knob of butter approximately 5 cm by 5 cm. By the time that I had looked all that up, worked it out and discovered that it was about 1 pint of water, half a pound of flakes and a knob of butter about an inch square, I was bored to death with trying to work it all out and opened a package of instant rice. The fact remains, however, that recipes are now all printed in what is gobbledegook to most people. There should be, if nothing else, a derogation allowing manufacturers of food products that require measurements to use good old imperial measurements.

Dr. Howells: As the hon. Lady knows, I always appreciate her analysis. However, I must tell her that

since 1974—long after both she and I were in school, I fear—our children have been taught metric measurements. It may be that we find them gobbledegook, but I had a look at the best-selling cookery books today and found that they all contain metric measurements. Some of them have imperial equivalents alongside the metric, which is very helpful for an old-timer like me—though not, of course, for the hon. Lady, who is ageless. It is wrong to assume that our children have not learned about metric measurements. Even those who were educated way back in 1974 may well be able to boil an egg these days.

Let me return to the regulations before us, rather than the United Kingdom Independence party. The regulations are listed in the schedule to the present regulations and in regulation 3(2). They cover such equipment as, at No. 1 on the schedule, industrial beltweighers used for sand and gravel and for loading grain on to ships, and, at No. 8, petrol pumps, which are shown as measuring equipment for liquid fuel. There can be no competition on the basis of price if such equipment does not act as the fair arbiter of quantities bought and sold so that buyers of those goods can be confident that they are getting what they pay for. That is the point of the directive.

Mr. Fabricant: On that very point, is the Minister not aware that people still think about the cost of petrol as being £4 a gallon? They do not think about litres. That is how they know that petrol is so expensive. The Minister is being unfair to himself in saying that only old fogies like him still understand imperial units. If that were the case, it would not be that only 7 per cent. of the population said, in a recent survey, that they preferred metric to imperial units.

Dr. Howells: I would love to see that survey and to know where it was carried out. I suspect that it was conducted in the bar of the hon. Gentleman's club.

Let me go back to the 1999 directive. We sought and achieved agreement at EU level for the use of supplementary indications for a further 10 years. As the right hon. Member for Wells knows, that is precisely what the previous Government did during the previous 10 years and in the eight years before that. It was the right thing to do, and we did it. It provides the opportunity for traders to display supplementary indications alongside metric indications, if traders decide that that would be helpful to their customers. There are about 160,000 weighing machines in this country for measuring loose goods. Some 130,000 of them have been converted. Those figures speak for themselves.

Mr. John Austin (Erith and Thamesmead): Though I am, perhaps, an even older fogey than my hon. Friend, does he agree that if the Conservatives are still working on the basis that there are 240 pennies in the pound, we can see why their economic policy is in such a mess?

Dr. Howells: I cannot improve on that. When the great Seb Coe—I found out only yesterday that he is in the other place now—ran the 1500 m in the Olympic games, why did the Conservatives not ask that he should be allowed to run his own bit extra to win a gold medal for a mile? Linford Christie could have finished half a yard ahead of everyone else by running 100 yd instead of 100 m. The Conservative position is nonsense, of course. The Opposition are raising their objection only because they are frightened of losing seats. There is nothing else to it. I know that some of the hon. Members sitting on the Tory Front Bench are highly intelligent human beings, and I cannot believe that they agree with the nonsense that we have heard tonight.

10.39 pm

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): Although we Liberal Democrats recognise the advantage of using common units of measurement for scientific, technological and professional activities, we believe that attempts to implement what is seen by ourselves and the public as heavy-handed measures to impose metrication by compulsion are counter-productive. I fully accept that, as the Minister said, it was the previous Tory Government who started us on this road. It is clearly owing to them that we find ourselves in this situation. However, I do not approve of the way in which this Government are handling the matter.

The European Community directive that the order seeks to impose was originally designed with the intention of harmonising the use by member states of the international system. According to the regulatory impact assessment, that was done for economic, public health, public safety and administrative purposes.

Before the 2009 deadline, after which complete metrication will be a legal requirement, traders are able to make use, as has been said, of supplementary indications. That means that we can make use of dual markings of products, which is quite acceptable. When the original deadline for metrication was announced, it was believed that member states would quickly adapt to the new system, but, clearly, that has not been so. The use of supplementary indications makes life easier for consumers, who are able to work with whichever measurement they are most comfortable with. I am getting on a bit, but by 2009 I shall have got on a bit more, and I might be unable to understand the measurements as well as I would wish.

Mr. Cash: The problem will not arise.

Mr. Cotter: God willing, the problem will arise.

Under the regulations, the deadline of 31 December 2009 will be imposed and the use of imperial units will be illegal. The previous Government managed to get us into that situation.

Mr. Fabricant: Does the hon. Gentleman not think that the whole issue is down to freedom—freedom of choice of the consumer, freedom of choice of people who are in trade? Surely it should be up to them what they do. Does he not think that even a Liberal Democrat Government, for God's sake, would be going a bit too far in imposing a standard of measure that was unpopular among those who were forced to use it?

Mr. Cotter: I am delighted at that intervention. I can rip up half my speech; the hon. Gentleman has made my points, which is surprising from a member of a party that has not been notable for its libertarian approach or the way in which it consulted the general public while in government.

It is ridiculous to force metrication on the consumer when the system has not been truly accepted elsewhere. Indeed, part of the reason for making such progress was

[Mr. Cotter]

the hope that the United States would turn metrication into practice before 2009. In fact, the Fifth Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation recently voiced its concern that the United States might not adapt as quickly as had been hoped. When the deadline expires, those who wish to export their goods may face significant costs because they will have to produce one set of metric labels for Europe and very possibly another one for the United States.

It is not the principle of metrication that I oppose, but the way in which the system will be implemented, the speed of implementation and the fact that this Government, having been dropped in it by the previous one, have not fought harder for a lengthier derogation. Why try to force the hand of metrication when, as has been said, there are still a number of units in use, such as the pint of milk and of beer that we very much favour?

More than that, we have a long history when it comes to measures. As a matter of interest—I am sure that this will be of great interest to Members present—the acre of land has been in existence since 732, when it was introduced under the reign of King Ethelbert II, the King of Kent.

The furlong, with which many people, particularly in the racing fraternity, will be familiar, came from the Greeks and Romans. They inherited it as an ancient measure, apparently based on the optimal length of a plough. I could go on at great length about old measurements, but I will just pick out a few. There are many other historical examples of measures that are still referred to, but not used very often. All of us will be familiar with rods, poles and perches. There are many more, such as bushels, cloves, firkins and gills, not forgetting noggins and pecks and, most important for us as politicians, scruples. As we all know, we are extremely scrupulous people, yet a scruple is a measurement.

So the case is made that, as the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) said, it is a great lack of appreciation of the liberty of the British citizen that we should not be allowed, even if we have to accept metrication, a derogation beyond 2009. I hope that, as a result of the telling arguments made by me and others, the Government will consider renewing their efforts, even if they have failed at this point, to ensure that after 2009 we will be able to use what are called supplementary indications. People like myself will appreciate being able to see the pounds and ounces, even in small letters, on the product that they want to buy.

I sincerely hope that the Government will consider the matter seriously.

10.47 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): This issue basically relates to a form of xenophobia. There is an assumption these days that we always have to do what is prescribed by the European Union and its institutions. The fact remains that there is a powerful case for renegotiating the arrangements in line with the wishes of the British people. I was fascinated to hear the speech of the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter). After all, the Liberal party is above all else a federalist party. I suspect that Liberal Members are trying to make out that they have some form of resistance to the regulations when they are completely in favour of them, simply because they know that the Euroscepticism—Eurorealism, as I prefer to call it—that has developed over the past few years has put them on the rack in so many of their seats.

Mr. Cotter: I do not know whether I should bother to intervene, as I would expect the hon. Gentleman to make the sort of comments that he has made. As he well knows, we support the concept of metrication, but I am protesting about the lack of a libertarian approach, which means that after a certain date we will not be allowed to refer to the previous measurements. That is a key issue and it is the clear point that we are making.

Mr. Cash: The lame excuse that has just been given speaks for itself.

This is an unnecessary proposal. It would undoubtedly increase the damage to the economy that has already been caused by a number of factors, including dissatisfaction and confusion in domestic trade between suppliers compelled to use metric and customers who prefer imperial. Furthermore, it will create confusion in our trade with European and other countries, as a result of variations within the metric system.

There are powerful reasons why the regulations should be resisted. Simply to say that we have to go along with them until 2009 makes a point in itself. The idea of a derogation raises the question whether the Government are opposed to the issue in principle. Why not stop altogether, if that is what they want to do? Why go in for something that is time extended for a period? The Government, like the Liberal party, are giving way on the issue of how long the derogation should continue. They know that there is tremendous resistance to the process, and they want a fig leaf with which to cloak themselves for the time being.

It is astonishing that we in this Parliament—

Dr. Howells: I believe that we should move towards metrication. The use of measurements has never been an entirely stable regime; it has evolved over the years. We have until 2009. I give the House the reassurance that if, in 2009, it is clear that consumers would like a further derogation, we will negotiate one.

Mr. Cash: As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) said, the motion is no more than another piece in the jigsaw. There are so many other measurements and units that are not being turned into metric. The Government are clearly committed to the idea of a European superstate and to the sort of consolidation that obtained during the Roman empire or any of the other great empires. That is the way these things go. At present, however, they are picking and choosing: they do not have the courage of their convictions. That in itself condemns the pusillanimous manner in which they conduct themselves on so many issues.

The Government know that there are pressures under which they have to move, because they are prepared to accept the idea of going further and deeper into the process of European integration. However, they are not prepared to state that that is precisely what they want. That is why they vacillate so much over the single currency.

Why is it, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells asked, that the Government are not prepared—I would regard it as outrageous—to take the further step on all measurements and units? I invite the Minister to explain.

Dr. Howells: I thank the hon. Gentleman for asking me the question and giving me the opportunity to answer it. Like the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman), I would find it difficult to order some commodities in anything other than imperial. However, when I order a pint, I am determined that I will get a full pint. The hon. Gentleman's colleagues talked out the legislation that related to a full pint. They do not want fairness for consumers—they are ready to allow the breweries to continue cheating them.

Mr. Cash: It will come as no great surprise to the Minister to learn that I do not always agree with what my party has to say on the European issue.

We should bear in mind the fact that it is only in the United Kingdom and in Ireland that these sorts of proposals are enforced by criminal penalties. I put it to the House—we shall see how this plays—that the only referendum to be held on the Nice treaty, unless the Conservative party wins the general election, as it surely will, will be in Ireland. There are many in Ireland who are becoming increasingly concerned about the manner in which they are being taken over. The question for Ireland, as for the United Kingdom, is increasingly, "Who governs us?" The proposal is a further example of trends that should be resisted and opposed.

It was clear when the measure was first accepted that the Government did not expect any prosecutions. Mr. Thoburn has been prosecuted but we do not yet know the outcome, and it is apparent that many members of the Government regard the prosecution as a big mistake. Do they propose to prosecute others in the United Kingdom? They have already nodded and winked at the prosecution of Mr. Thoburn, and it would therefore be extraordinary if they were not prepared to take the matter further.

The proposal is objectionable. It also illustrates the Government's vacillation and pusillanimity, because they are not prepared to put their money where their mouth is. We can understand the reason for that: they are prepared to go so far to comply with European requirements, but they are not prepared to stand up for the British people. The Minister knows that that is true.

10.56 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). His words convince me that the remarks that I am about to make are right. The Minister's opening comments were interesting. It was predictable that he would try to blame the current position on the Conservative party. That is the Labour party's great mantra nowadays. When they change something for which we were responsible, they claim credit for it; when they decide not to change something, they blame us.

The Minister could have made a good point, but it eluded him. The Conservative party's record on the subject of our debate is not entirely pure. When we entered the Common Market, we were told that it was, indeed, a common market. The White Paper that preceded the Bill that took us into the European Union stated that there was no question of losing essential sovereignty. That was a splendid way of putting it: there was no question of losing sovereignty; we simply lost it. The people of this country were beguiled or conned into believing that they were entering a common market. It was never that; the European Union was a political objective with a political agenda. Recently, that agenda has been worked through. The items that we are considering tonight are part of that agenda, and of an inexorable political process of forming not "federal states of Europe" but a European state.

Let us go back many years, longer ago than when I was first a Member of Parliament. The Conservative party had something for which to answer then. It says much for our party that we are now capable of facing up to our actions and, as far as possible, to their consequences. If the Minister had made the criticism in that way, he would have made a valid point. However, he is not on such strong ground when considering the regulations.

The Government could have applied for derogations, but they chose not to do that. They allowed the lapse of a derogation that would have permitted the imperial pricing of loose goods. They did not even believe that that was worth doing; that says much about their attitude. If they find themselves in a position to consider whether to renew the derogation in 2008, their actions will again say much about their attitude.

Derogation means asking a foreign power for permission to continue to use our weights and measurements. It means going cap in hand to a foreign state and saying, "Do you mind terribly if we continue to adhere to our own laws, traditions and customs?" From time to time, a gracious foreign state will say, "Yes, you are entitled to do that." The mere fact that we have to go through that charade and consider applying for derogations so as to be allowed to continue our own customs says much about the European Union.

We are moving into a European state so quickly—it has no pretensions to be anything other than a European state. The only people who deny that it is a European state constitute a very small number, both in my party and in the Labour party. In Europe, this debate would not be understandable. If any European were listening to the debate, they would not understand what we were talking about. They would say, "What are they going on about? Surely, in a single state, the state has the right to make the law."

It would be difficult to explain in a few words how illiberal and unattractive this thing is, at best. The idea that it is necessary to protect traders or to further trade is simply untrue.

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent, North): I apologise for having come late to the debate, but I am looking at the record for 11 April 1989. I may be completely wrong, but I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman told me whether he voted in favour of European Community document No. 4102, on units of measurement? I feel that there is a bit of inconsistency here. Is there?

Mr. Nicholls: Even for the hon. Lady, that is a uniquely silly remark to make. To drift into the Chamber and to ask me to recall whether I voted for a particular statutory instrument in 1989 is, even by her standards, particularly silly.

[Mr. Nicholls]

If the hon. Lady had been here for the whole of the debate, let alone the whole of my speech, she would have heard me say that there was something unsatisfactory about derogations. There is something very unsatisfactory about having to ask for permission to be able to retain one's rights and customs. However, if that is the position we are in, it is worth exercising that right. The charge against the Government is that they did not even think it worth applying for a derogation in this case.

As I said before the hon. Lady made her ill-fated intervention, the idea that it is necessary to impose such legislation to protect trade is complete nonsense. The point is that units of measurement are there for the convenience of those who choose to trade in them. If someone aggressively says, "I intend to trade in imperial measurements," when what is wanted are metric measurements, either they will cease to trade in that form of measurement, or they will fail.

Obviously, if someone is trading with the continent and wants to make his goods attractive on the continent, he will ensure that the pricing is metric. There is nothing wrong with that. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with metric measurements, but the idea that they must be enforced on people with the full rigour of the criminal law to protect trade is nonsense.

We are dealing with a political agenda, plain and simple. We are dealing with a European state that arrogates to itself the right to ride roughshod over the domestic customs of a member state. This debate teaches us, more than anything else, that we cannot go on in this way. We cannot go on playing a part in Europe in a relationship in which we do not feel comfortable—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. I have given the hon. Gentleman considerable leeway, but I now need to remind him that this is not a general debate about Europe. We are dealing with the Weights and Measures (Metrication Amendments) Regulations 2001. The scope of the debate should concentrate on the desirability of continuing with two alternative systems of measurement in the given areas for the stated time, and on the nature and costs of the benefits involved.

Mr. Nicholls: I will not labour the point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but in trying to assess the advisability of going along with that, it was worth making the point that we have a responsibility to understand why we find ourselves in this position. We have the ability tonight to say that the regulations are simply unacceptable. Conservative Members should have sufficient confidence to say that we are not responsible for the regulations. We should vote against them in due course next week, on paper.

11.4 pm

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): This issue demonstrates the clear difference between our party and the Government. We believe in common sense. We believe in freedom. If ever there were an issue of common sense and freedom, this is it.

When 7 per cent. of the population say that they prefer the metric system and 93 per cent. say that they are happier working with the imperial system, what common sense is there in any Government imposing this measure on people's lives? There is no common sense in imposing this measure on people going to markets, corner shops and Safeway, and even when they measure out their mashed potato in the privacy of their own home.

The Minister asked where I got my information from, as he could not believe that 93 per cent. of the population rejected the metric system. I am surprised that a Minister, with all the resources of the state, does not have access to the information that I have. The information came in a survey conducted by RSL for Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO Ltd.; it is on the website members.aol.com/footrule/. There he will find the information, which is in the public domain. If the Minister takes my word for it—

Dr. Howells *indicated assent.*

Mr. Fabricant: I see that he does. Some 93 per cent. of the population reject this ridiculous and dishonourable motion.

This issue has been rejected, in effect, by the United States of America. As far back as the 1970s, the USA tried hard to introduce the metric standard. Members who have been to North America will know that when they drive on the I5 from Seattle to Vancouver, passing the Freedom bridge—which, interestingly enough, says along the top, "Two children born of a common mother"—they will see that on the south side miles are used, and on the north side kilometres are used, as Canada has adopted the metric system. Despite the fact that the US enjoys the longest unpoliced border in the world, it has rejected the system.

Britain has rejected it, too. In 1969, the then Labour Government introduced the Metrication Board. In 1980, the Metrication Board was abolished; it was a failure. The only success it had was the introduction of decimal currency. I believe that most people still think in terms of miles, feet and inches. In fact, it is to the Government's advantage that petrol prices are quoted in litres. As I have said, when people realise that petrol is now £4 a gallon—the most expensive in Europe—they will realise how expensive life has become under this Government.

The position is clear; people do not want this measure. The Government have demonstrated yet again that they are appeasers in Europe. They chose not to fight against regulations concerning water boards, which resulted in a firm in my constituency, Armitage Shanks, having to be sold. I oppose the motion, which is not common sense and does not represent freedom.

11.8 pm

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I did not intend to say anything in the debate but, having listened to the Minister—under whose politically correct socialist crust probably beats a heart with a degree of liberalism—I was upset to hear him make ageist comments about the 40 million or so people in our country who were not brought up with metric measurements and who still resort to the imperial measurements because they mean something to them.

I know that I am 5 ft 3 in tall and that I weigh between 9½ and 10 stone. If I tell that to people, they know what it means. I know what a pint means; I know how many yards of fabric I want; if I tell someone that I am going a mile up the road, they know what I mean. I know that I

take size 5 shoes and my husband takes size 10. I know what that means, but the metric measurement of 37 cm means nothing to me.

There is no shame in that, and there is no reason why a housewife should be forced to interpret her recipes in what is basically a foreign measurement. It is not a natural measurement; it has not evolved out of people's sizes and the distance that they travelled in a certain length of time. As hon. Members have said, all our imperial measurements have evolved out of elements that relate to people's daily lives, yet here we are forcing them to think in an entirely foreign system of measurements. In my view it is the equivalent of forcing them to think and calculate their orders in Chinese. The Government would do well to take that into account and not to pooh-pooh it. Making decisions involving shopping and measuring is an important element of women's daily lives. I should like the Minister to address that point.

Dr. Howells: May I attempt to convince the hon. Lady that I am certainly not pooh-poohing the idea? That is why we negotiated another 10 years of having imperial measurements on weighing scales—so that we can understand them.

Mrs. Gorman: The Government inspectors have insisted that people print their packets of food, and shopkeepers weigh their commodities, using a foreign system of measurement. Tonight we are debating the fact that anyone who does not do that will be prosecuted. I am trying to touch the heart that I hope the Minister has, in support of people whose daily lives involve having to handle commodities in what amounts to a foreign language. If for no other reason, the Minister and the Labour party would do themselves a power of good if they did not knock older people, some of whom will still be alive in 10 or 20 years' time, after the current derogation expires, and who would prefer to continue to use the language of measuring distance, weights and so on that they have been familiar with since childhood.

Mr. Fabricant: Does my hon. Friend agree with the powerful point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls)? Is it not almost humiliating that we are having to go cap in hand to what he correctly described as a foreign power, to ask for this derogation in the first place?

Mrs. Gorman: I quite agree with my hon. Friend. It does us all a power of good if, for a change, we take into consideration the concerns of the people whom we represent here. It has been said more than once this evening that the great majority of them would prefer to keep the forms of measurement with which they are familiar and in which they have been educated. If younger people feel comfortable with metric measures, by all means let them be printed on boxes and packets. I expect that young people mix up mashed potatoes late at night too, but there are a large number of people who do not want the metric system to be imposed on them, and they should not have to use it.

A long time ago I used to help small businesses with their problems. The regulations imposed by European directives were driving them up the pole, so we decided to go to Europe and talk to the people who drew up those regulations. They made it absolutely clear that the directives were not obligatory. They said, as has already been said tonight, that some countries, like ours, impose them on people, but that we do not need to do that.

There is no need to ram the directives down people's throats, but our civil servants gold-plate them and make them worse. They make demands that are entirely unnecessary. We are here to represent people's views, not to dictate to them. That is not why they send us here, and we should not be involved in doing that. As soon as the Government learn that and accept that the time is not right to do away with our imperial measurements, the sooner they will improve their proper role of representing what the great majority of people in this country feel about this matter.

11.14 pm

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman). Taking a leaf out of her book, I should like to tell the House that 140 lb of pigmeat makes 1 cwt of bacon. Many people in Britain today are familiar with such equations. I could not give the metric equivalent of that equation, but I make that point to show that I have been in business, which, regrettably, not too many hon. Members these days have.

I know from my experience in business that to foster trade one has to respond to what the customer wants. If the customer wants to buy in avoirdupois rather than in metric, that is what the customer should be allowed to do. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant), I belong to the party that believes in choice and diversity. The people who should exercise the choice are the customers, the British people. That choice must not be circumscribed by the people in Whitehall who think they know best.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) made the important point that, historically, we in Britain have been able to do anything and everything unless it was prohibited by the law, which is in complete contrast to the continental system under which something can be done only if it is expressly permitted. This is another example of how we are moving more and more towards a continental system, which, to many of us, is regrettable, and does not suit the country's nature and mood.

The point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) is apt. We go cap in hand all the time to ask Brussels whether we can keep systems that we have historically enjoyed for hundreds of years. Such systems have served us well and there is no reason to change them. When we get a derogation, we say that we have won a victory. What a victory, simply to have hung on for another five or 10 years to something that we have enjoyed for centuries.

I risk being ruled out of order in saying this, but my hon. Friend is right when he says that this is all driven by politics. It is all driven by the determination that nothing will stand in the way of creating a united states of Europe. Metrication is another step along that route, just as decimalisation was 20 or 30 years ago.

I return to the argument about trade. Our trade with the EU is important and amounts to a substantial sum, but it represents less than 11 per cent. of our gross GDP. In other words, 89 per cent. of our GDP is accounted for by trade within the UK and with the rest of the world.

[Mr. Christopher Gill]

Converting to metrication will bring no benefit to that. We are doing it simply to accommodate our trade with Europe, which represents 11 per cent. of our GDP.

We are in great danger of getting things completely out of proportion. As a business man, I would not rejig the whole of my production and accounting methods and the way in which I ran my business for customers who represented 11 per cent. of my business. I would be more inclined to ensure that my business was tailored towards the other 89 per cent. The same equation applies to our consideration of the single currency, which I appreciate is not the subject of tonight's discussion.

The Minister must understand that a serious desire to encourage trade and create the prosperity that flows from it requires that regulation be limited. The Government must stop telling people how they should do things, and allow the market to work. They must allow customers to exercise their right to choose what products to buy, at what standard and at what price. They must also be able to decide in what measurement they want to buy goods, and in what currency they will pay.

I implore the Government, in all their future dealings with the European Union, to avoid prescription and harmonisation and to leave scope for choice and diversity, which encourage markets and stimulate economic activity.

11.20 pm

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): I had not intended to speak in this debate, so I shall be brief. However, I was struck by the Minister's lack of international awareness, even though my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) hinted that he had a warm and golden heart.

I used to be abroad for about a third of the year, and my international experience is that there are no hang-ups in other countries about the unit of measure that is used. As I said earlier, three different types of square foot are used as measures in Italy: in descending order, they are the Lombard, the Tuscan and the Neapolitan square foot. Those measures are trusted in some countries, but others—especially Germany—insist that Italian products are bought in square metres. The choice is entirely up to customers and suppliers. Nearly all exports to Asian countries are measured in square feet, and no Italian supplier would think twice about that.

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (Mr. Cotter) listed a number of what he considered to be arcane measurements, including the bushel. However, when I visited the international corn exchange in Chicago—the largest such exchange in the world—with the Select Committee on Agriculture last year, I found that it dealt entirely in bushels. The choice is up to the traders there, and they are all relaxed about it. When they go home in the evening, I am sure that they are happy to deal in imperial measurements.

I do not see why British citizens cannot work in international business and deal in metric measurements one week, then go off the next week and deal in 3½ inch floppy disks. The matter is entirely one of individual choice. It is not for the state to be prescriptive and try to impose uniform units of measure.

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare mentioned the Saxons. The Old Testament states that it is an abomination in the eye of the Lord to give false measure, and I accept that it has long been the role of the state to ensure accurate measurement. However, it is not the role of the state to enforce a uniform unit of measurement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill) rightly said that a vast amount of trade in this country is carried out using imperial measurements. People are used to dealing in certain units, especially when buying common consumer goods and confectionery. They have suffered quite sharp product inflation because, although an item's packaging may look familiar, the actual measure sold in that packaging is considerably less than what people are used to.

The Government should look into that problem with some intensity. By uniformly imposing metric measure, we are not safeguarding consumers, many of whom, all unawares, are being ripped off quite sharply. For that reason, I oppose the regulations.

Question put:—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I think the Ayes have it.

Hon. Members: No.

Division deferred till Wednesday 21 March, pursuant to Order [7 November 2000].

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Partnerships

That the draft Limited Liability Partnerships Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 15th January, be approved.

Social Security

That the draft Social Security Commissioners (Procedure) (Amendment) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 14th February, be approved.

That the draft Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit (Decisions and Appeals) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 14th February, be approved.

Pensions

That the draft Pensions Appeals Tribunals (Additional Rights of Appeal) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

That the draft Pensions Appeals Tribunals (Late Appeals) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

Investigatory Powers

That the draft Regulation of Investigatory Powers (British Broadcasting Corporation) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

That the draft Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Designation of Public Authorities for the Purposes of Intrusive Surveillance) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE

That the draft European Parliamentary Elections (Franchise of Relevant Citizens of the Union) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Offshore Combustion Installations (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Regulations 2001, which were laid before this House on 26th February, be approved.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That—

(1) the proposals for a draft Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 and a draft Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order 2001, being legislative proposals relating exclusively to Northern Ireland, be referred to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee;

(2) the Committee shall meet at Westminster on Thursday 22nd March at 9.15 a.m. to consider the proposal for a draft Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001, referred to it under paragraph (1) above, and the Chairman shall interrupt proceedings at that meeting at 11.15 a.m.; and

(3) the Committee shall meet at Westminster on Thursday 22nd March at 2.30 p.m. to consider the proposal for a draft Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order 2001, referred to it under paragraph (1) above, and the Chairman shall interrupt proceedings at that meeting at 4.30 p.m.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

SCOTTISH GRAND COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That the Scottish Grand Committee shall meet at Westminster on Wednesday 28th March at half-past Ten o'clock to consider a substantive Motion for the adjournment of the Committee.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Betts.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Planning (Oxfordshire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

11.25 pm

Mr. Robert Jackson (Wantage): My purpose in seeking the Adjournment debate tonight is twofold. First, I want to draw attention once again to the rising tide of concrete, bricks and mortar that is flowing over Oxfordshire. Secondly, I want to draw attention to the Opposition's proposals for dealing with this problem and securing a measure of relief.

Lest it be thought that I am exaggerating when I speak of a rising tide of concrete, bricks and mortar, let me simply state the bald figures. Over the past decade, Oxfordshire has been the construction site for some 23,000 new houses, and over the period immediately ahead, until 2006, it will be required to accommodate a further 14,000, with another 11,700 to come by 2011. The two decades between 1990 and 2010, in other words, have seen the equivalent of the construction in Oxfordshire of a new city the size of Corby, with some 50,000 new inhabitants.

I said that I was seeking to draw attention once again to this problem, not only because I have been an active member of the parliamentary campaign against overdevelopment in the south-east led by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) and because I have supported my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) in this campaign, but because I raised this matter in the House only a month ago. That was when I undertook the delicate parliamentary task of presenting two contradictory petitions at the same time, without backing either. The two petitions neatly illustrate the very difficult situation facing Oxfordshire and, in particular, the town of Didcot in my constituency and its surrounding villages.

Over the years immediately ahead, Didcot faces a requirement to build another 3,200 houses, over and above the 5,000 that have been built there over the past decade. One of the petitions that I presented was from residents to the west of Didcot, urging the Deputy Prime Minister to call in for ministerial decision the proposals to build the new houses on Didcot's western fringe. The other was from residents to the north of Didcot urging the right hon. Gentleman to do no such thing, but to uphold the county council's decision to go west rather than north.

On both sides, strong passions have been generated, friendships sundered and once cohesive local communities sharply divided. Each side passionately believes that the development must go to the other side. Neither side seriously asks why there should be development on this scale. All regard it as a kind of visitation, and every eye is directed to Whitehall, some with trembling hope and others with frowning apprehension, to see which way the ministerial juju-man will jump. Perhaps the Minister will enlighten us. This will not be the end of the story, of course. Whatever the Deputy Prime Minister decides, we can be sure that a flurry of actions for judicial review will be unleashed.

I do not know what it would take to prove to the Under-Secretary that Oxfordshire, like many other areas in the south-east of England, faces a crisis of suburban overdevelopment. Certainly, that is what local people believe, but perhaps their subjective feelings will cut no ice in the eyries of Whitehall.

Let me suggest three objective reasons for believing that what is happening in my part of the world is excessive and unnecessary. First, there is the fact that Oxfordshire simply cannot meet both the Government's target for new housing and their target for new build on so-called "brown" land in built-up areas. The latter target is supposed to determine the location of at least 60 per cent. of new housing. However, between 1996 and 2000, only 48 per cent of new development in Oxfordshire was on brown sites. This was not, I assure the Under-Secretary, for want of trying on the part of local planning committees. The problem is simply that Oxfordshire is not a long-standing urban area, it has relatively little built-up brown land and over recent decades the pressures of development have been such that almost all the brown land that has been available has already been built over.

That is just one piece of evidence that shows that Oxfordshire is being overdeveloped. Let me suggest another. Between 1991 and 1999, the county's population increased by 45,000. Some 41 per cent. of that increase can be attributed to natural change, or the normal demographic development of the local population. However, a striking 59 per cent. of that additional population represented net civilian migration. Oxford city, which accounts for roughly two fifths of the county's population, cannot expand further because of its green belt, so the bulk of the substantial growth in the number of incomers is being channelled by the planning system into three or four primary areas of development, one of which is Didcot. The effects of overdevelopment are experienced not only by existing populations, but by new residents. Too much has been happening too quickly. The new developments are too crowded and too lacking in necessary infrastructure.

Where do the incomers come from? It is sometimes suggested that counties such as Oxfordshire and towns such as Didcot have a duty to expand as they are the new growth points of the national economy. Last year, however, no more than 12 per cent. of Oxfordshire's new residents came from what might be termed the declining industrial north. In contrast, some 42 per cent. came from elsewhere in the expanding, post-industrial south-east. The overdevelopment of Oxfordshire occurs only partially at the expense of draining away active workers and the stunting of growth prospects in the north and the midlands. It is occurring mainly to reduce the pressure for better housing in the inner cities and other areas in the south-east.

The Government are proposing to build thousands of houses in the wrong places. I should like to stress that point to the Under-Secretary. The Minister for Housing and Planning said last February that

"seven out of ten new households forming over the next 20 years are likely to be single person households".

He went on to say that

"many will be only too pleased to live in town centre locations, close to shops and entertainment as much as transport links".

In the light of those comments, will the Under-Secretary explain how building thousands of houses on green fields in my constituency will fulfil such needs?

The situation that I have been describing, which exists in Didcot and Oxfordshire, is, of course, not untypical of many other parts of the south-east. It suggests that there

is something fundamentally wrong with the processes and procedures that have brought it about. The Government carried out their own review of those procedures in their first couple of years in office. They decided to maintain and take forward, with some minor changes, the planning arrangements that are at the root of the problem. Radical new thought has come not from new Labour and its Liberal allies, but from those on the Opposition Front Bench. That development is creating for the people of my constituency a clear choice at the forthcoming general election. I hope that this debate will help to underline that choice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mr. Norman) is to be congratulated on his far-reaching proposals for the reform of our over-centralised planning system. On behalf of the Opposition, he proposes to act within a few months of the return of a Conservative Government to abolish the procedures that impose national housebuilding targets such as those that have driven the overdevelopment of Oxfordshire.

Discretion on local development will be given to local authorities, which will decide how much new housing there should be, where it should be located and what sort of houses should be built. They will be required to secure sufficient new accommodation for forecasted local population growth, but incremental building to support economic development will be a matter for local people to decide. The district councils will be in the lead, while the county councils will have a strategic co-ordinating role. At the same time, the views of town and parish councils will be given greater weight and local residents will be given a right of counter appeal when a proposed development breaches due process or a duly adopted comprehensive local plan.

I have no doubt that such a radical departure from the half century-long tradition of centralised planning, which goes back to the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, will attract some scepticism. Indeed, we may hear something of that from the Under-Secretary. Such scepticism about the radical decentralisation of the planning process expresses the conviction that local people and their local representatives cannot be trusted to make planning decisions from a perspective that transcends their own narrow self-interest. The underlying thought is that decentralisation will be a charter for nimbyism. My retort is that nimbyism is a product of the existing, over-centralised system, in which responsibility has been transferred from the local level to the distant centre.

In such a system, everyone feels that they must fight as hard as they possibly can for their own immediate interest—nimbyism—because that is what everyone else will do, but in the end the decision will be taken from on high. Nimbyism is an expression of powerlessness. If we learn once again to trust the people, we will, I believe, be surprised by the level of responsibility for wider interests that they will show when they have real power in relation to those interests.

Meanwhile, I hope it will not escape the notice of my constituents and electors in the Wantage constituency—at Didcot and its surrounding villages in particular—and in Banbury, represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry), who is in the Chamber with me tonight, that the Conservative party's policy will give an opportunity for a fundamental rethink of all large-scale planning proposals that have not yet been decided by the time my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) kisses hands at Buckingham palace.

11.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Beverley Hughes): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) for raising this subject, because this debate gives me the opportunity to reply to him, not only on the issues relating to Didcot and Oxfordshire but on issues that he has raised in relation to Conservative party policy on these matters.

The planning criteria in Oxfordshire are exactly the same as those applied to similar counties in the rest of England, although every planning case is considered on its merits. I am aware that the process of deciding on the location of new housing in Didcot, in particular, and the provision of new housing in Oxfordshire generally, has caused anxiety to some of the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

I am also aware that the hon. Gentleman was placed in the difficult position of having to present two opposing petitions at the same time, while representing the opposing views of his constituents. He was trying to face in two directions at once. In so doing, he has opted out of facing up to some of the challenges that face Oxfordshire and Didcot in relation to providing for people who need and want to live there. That is the issue at the heart of this debate.

I know that progress on the alteration to the Oxfordshire structure plan for Didcot has not been easy. In August 1998, the Oxfordshire structure plan for the period from 1996 to 2001 was adopted. The county council was unable to agree a housing distribution figure around Didcot, which the hon. Gentleman will know is on the boundary of the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district council areas. The Oxfordshire structure plan was, therefore, published with a separate figure for Didcot of 5,500 dwellings, but stated that an early alteration to the plan would settle the housing allocation round the town.

Following the adoption of the structure plan, South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse district councils carried out public consultation and technical work, but reached different conclusions on the direction of growth at Didcot. That is germane to some more general points that I shall make later. In December 1998, Oxfordshire county council resolved to recommend growth to the north of the town, in South Oxfordshire district. The decision was finely balanced, and I understand that the committee voted by a majority of only one to recommend the north of the town.

In November 1999, as the hon. Gentleman said, an examination in public took place over four days to consider the Didcot housing issue. Representatives of the Government office of the south-east attended all the sessions, but made it clear from the outset that it was not the role of the Government to comment on the proposals, because although this was a structure plan alteration, the scale of the proposals was site specific.

In January 2000, the panel report on the alteration was published and it recommended growth to the north-east of the town. The panel attached considerable weight to the agricultural land issue, which was of higher quality to the

[Ms Beverley Hughes]

west of Didcot than to the north, although it also felt that other issues were finely balanced. Although it considered the western option to be slightly better related to the town, it determined that the best and most versatile land issue outweighed that factor.

The county council considered the panel report, but it was not bound in planning law by the recommendations. In March 2000, the county council rejected the advice of the panel and allocated the bulk of housing mainly to the west of the town. The statement of reasons published with the proposed modifications explained that the county council had changed its view as the western option had the advantage of better integration with employment sites and with the town centre, saying that that outweighed the disadvantages of building on best and most versatile agricultural land.

As the hon. Gentleman said, requests were made at the time—to some extent, those continue—for the Government to get involved in the structure plan alteration, but we reiterated the view that it was a matter for Oxfordshire county council. We made it clear that the structure plan alteration should set an adequate framework to ensure that local plans responded positively to the new approach to planning for housing set out in planning policy guidance note 3.

We want sufficient housing land to be provided, but the priority is to re-use previously developed land in urban areas, bringing empty homes back into use and converting existing buildings rather than using greenfield sites. *[Interruption.]* Do hon. Members want to intervene rather than comment from a sedentary position? I am happy to take an intervention.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): The hon. Lady gives the impression that there is brownfield land available to be developed in Oxfordshire. There is not. Whether it be in South Oxfordshire or in Cherwell district, new development will have to take place almost entirely on greenfield sites. It is as simple as that. The idea that development can mystically and magically take place on existing brownfield sites is mistaken.

Ms Hughes: We accept that not all development can take place in urban areas or on brownfield sites. How much development should take place outside existing sites depends on the overall need for housing land, the capacity of existing urban areas to accommodate additional housing and the efficiency with which land is developed. Where development has to take place outside urban areas, we look to local planning authorities to utilise the most sustainable option. The Government have been assured by Oxfordshire county council and South Oxfordshire district council that PPG3 issues would be fully taken into account during subsequent local plan preparation.

The hon. Member for Wantage referred to the overall housing figures for Oxfordshire. We acknowledge that we face considerable pressures in the south-east, and the figures for Oxfordshire have been arrived at through the same planning criteria as is used for other counties in the south-east.

Last year, the Government published for consultation proposed changes to the regional planning guidance for the south-east. We have listened to comments and we have strengthened our policies for delivering urban renewal, providing affordable housing, avoiding profligate use of land, promoting a living countryside and encouraging development east of London in the Thames gateway.

We have given local authorities the tools they need to achieve that. PPG3 contains a clearly stated presumption that previously developed land and existing buildings will be re-used for housing before consideration is given to developing greenfield sites. We have separately published advice on better design of development and on undertaking urban housing capacity studies. We have also made available guidance on how to manage the release of land in such a way as to minimise unnecessary loss of greenfield sites to development.

I want to say something about the hon. Gentleman's more general points about the relevance of his party's policy to some of these difficult issues. Far from meaning the concreting of the south-east, the Government's policies will mean less profligate use of land, brownfield before greenfield development, and the delivery of our national 60 per cent. target for new housing on brownfield land. It is not the Government who are putting the south-east under development pressure; the pressures are already there, and it is a sad state of affairs when a representative of the area ignores them and pretends that they can be diluted out of existence.

Given that the pressures are there, the question is how they can best be managed. The issue is how housing can be provided for people who need and want to live in the south-east. They are not predominantly people who are moving from other parts of the country; they are people who work in the area and need to live there, or the sons and daughters of those who already live there and may have done so for some time.

Our policies, and the draft revised regional planning guidance, mean that no more land than that which local authorities already propose to use would be used to provide housing for people in the south-east. We are not producing a higher figure by stealth. We want to build the prospect of review into the system, which is a sensible approach—unlike that of the Opposition, who believe in fixed long-term figures.

We propose that the rate of provision should be reviewed within five years at the most, in the light of monitoring, urban capacity studies, and studies of potential growth areas proposed at Ashford and Milton Keynes. It is premature to specify what provision might be after, say, 2006, but at present it is expected to be about 43,000 dwellings a year in the whole area.

We consider that the overall figure of 39,000 homes a year for the south-east outside London represents a realistic level of provision. We have taken a range of factors into account, including household projections, deliverable housebuilding rates, the needs of the economy, and the capacity of the region to absorb growth as well as the impact of our policies for urban renaissance. We try to pay careful attention to environmental capacity as well as need: that is why we are emphasising the importance of building around existing conurbations, recognising environmental constraints and the need to avoid "pepper-potting" around the countryside.

Let me repeat to the hon. Gentleman that migration from north to south is a very small component of the demand for homes in the south-east. Most of the growth in housing need relates to people who already live in the

region. It is a reflection of changing lifestyles, such as the growth in single-person households. That is where most of the increase in housing demand originates. Those involved include young people who want to set up home for the first time, and elderly people—who now live longer—wishing to remain independent. Those people are already there, and it would be irresponsible to deny them the prospect of housing.

We have agreed that fixed-term housing targets should not be imposed on local planning authorities. That was the policy of the last Administration, who, for example, directed Berkshire, Bedfordshire and Kent to increase their housing numbers, and imposed 20-year fixed figures through regional planning guidance notes. Unlike that Administration, we have adopted a system that recognises changing circumstances. Under our system of plan, monitor and manage, reviews of the housing strategy are triggered when required, in response to monitoring information—as a minimum every five years, and sooner if there are signs of under or over-provision.

I should like to deal now with the kernel of the hon. Gentleman's exposition of Conservative party policy—that local authorities should be able to veto all new housing developments in their local area. The policy states:

"we will abolish Whitehall targets for building new homes",

with local authorities left to

"assess and meet the needs of their local population".

The local veto proposals amount to a NIMBY's charter. They are unworkable and they would cause chaos. Local authorities would be under no obligation at all to meet the needs arising in the area of any other authority that could not be met. Inter-regional planning and strategic planning across a region would be impossible. There would be no burden sharing and there would be an effective freeze on the movement of people and business. I think that that would deter investment and damage future economic prosperity. It would also push up house prices in areas of high demand and reduce the provision of affordable housing, thereby denying homes for some of the sons and daughters of local people.

It is quite unreasonable to expect local authorities acting alone to take decisions on housing provision in the regional interest. The difficulties that planning authorities have in agreeing where housing provision should be made is well illustrated by the problems that Oxfordshire county council and the district authorities of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse had in agreeing where housing should be provided in the Didcot area. That in itself is a case study of the difficulties facing local authorities when presented with those challenging issues.

I do not deny for a moment the difficulties of the south-east, but willingly acknowledge them. However, I do not agree at all that it is reasonable to respond to those difficulties, which are basically a need for housing, by saying that it is best for each local authority to determine what will happen in its own area and only what will happen in its own area. It is vital that we retain a system that requires each local authority to accept in a corporate and shared manner some of the responsibility for the needs and future requirements of the region as a whole. That is the type of system that we have tried to institute and on which we are making progress.

I think that that approach is a much more mature way of addressing those difficult issues. It makes demands of local authorities and requires them to work together both with their neighbouring local authorities and with regional planning authorities. I believe, however, that if each region is seriously and maturely to address the current and future housing needs of the region as a whole, that is the only way forward. I also think that the Conservative party policy that we have heard expressed so far on those issues would be a recipe not only for chaos, but for a total abdication of responsibility for the housing needs of future generations in all our regions, but especially in the south-east, where there are particular pressures.

I regret to tell the hon. Gentleman that I do not share his view about the way forward on those issues. I also do not think that Conservative Members have a realistic, meaningful and truly sincere approach to policy on those issues. I think that their policy would leave many families, and the children of many families, without any prospect of setting in the area where they have grown up.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at seven minutes to Twelve midnight.

Deferred Divisions

Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2001, which was laid before this House on 28th February, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 396, Noes 17.

Division No. 151]

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bailey, Adrian
Baldry, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Blunt, Crispin
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Body, Sir Richard
Borrow, David
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burns, Simon
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Collins, Tim
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Corston, Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cran, James
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Curry, Rt Hon David
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Day, Stephen
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Ennis, Jeff
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flight, Howard
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Fyfe, Maria
Gale, Roger
Gibb, Nick
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Healey, John
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Horam, John
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Key, Robert
Khabra, Piara S
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lammy, David
Lansley, Andrew
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leigh, Edward
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Linton, Martin
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Loughton, Tim
Love, Andrew
Luff, Peter
McAvoy, Thomas
McCrea, Dr William
McDonagh, Siobhain
McFall, John
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McIsaac, Shona
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackeon, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Madel, Sir David
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Maples, John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Martlew, Eric
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug

Norman, Archie
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Oliner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Palmer, Dr Nick
Paterson, Owen
Pearson, Ian
Pickles, Eric
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prior, David
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Randall, John
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'bry)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Ruffley, David
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
St Aubyn, Nick
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Squire, Ms Rachel
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Streeter, Gary
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Tredinnick, David
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyrie, Andrew
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Waterson, Nigel
Watts, David
Wells, Bowen
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Wicks, Malcolm
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Clapham, Michael
Corbyn, Jeremy
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Gerrard, Neil
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
McDonnell, John
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Skinner, Dennis
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Wareing, Robert N
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd

Question accordingly agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

That—

(1) at the sitting on 22nd March the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on any Motion in the name of Margaret Beckett relating to Election of a Speaker not later than Four o'clock, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any amendment selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and

(2) if proceedings on any such Motion have not been completed before Four o'clock, the Private Business set down by direction of the Chairman of Ways and Means for consideration at that hour may be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours after it has been entered upon.

The House divided: Ayes 341, Noes 122.

Division No. 152]

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff

Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Key, Robert
Khabra, P'ara S
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

NOES

Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baldry, Tony
Beggs, Roy
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Burns, Simon
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Corbyn, Jeremy
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Day, Stephen
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Flight, Howard
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Gibb, Nick
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John

Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
McCrea, Dr William
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Norman, Archie
O'Brien, Stephen *(Eddisbury)*
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paisley, Rev Ian
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Tredinnick, David
Tyrie, Andrew
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Question accordingly agreed to.

ANIMAL BY-PRODUCTS

That this House takes note of European Union Documents Nos. 12648/00, a draft Council Regulation laying down the health rules concerning animal by-products not intended for human consumption, and 12646/00, a draft Council Directive amending Council Directives 90/425/EEC and 92/118/EEC as regards health requirements for animal by-products; and supports the Government's objective of achieving a revised Regulation to protect animal and public health whilst ensuring that controls are proportionate to the risk they are designed to address.

The House divided: Ayes 348, Noes 10.

Division No. 153]

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Rt Hon Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Bailey, Adrian
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Hilary *(Leeds C)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony *(Chesterfield)*
Benton, Joe
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Rt Hon Paul
Borrow, David
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Rt Hon Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Coleman, Iain
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Dalyell, Tam
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Rt Hon Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, Rt Hon John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Mrs Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gidley, Sandra
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Hoon, Rt Hon Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Rt Hon Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Johnson Smith,
Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Jones, Rt Hon Barry *(Alyn)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Joyce, Eric
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Rt Hon Charles *(Ross Skye & Inverness W)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S

King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lammy, David
Lawrence, Mrs Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Liddell, Rt Hon Mrs Helen
Linton, Martin
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Martlew, Eric
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Rt Hon Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Rt Hon Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morris, Rt Hon Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon Sir John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pike, Peter L
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Quin, Rt Hon Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Rt Hon Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, John *(Glasgow Anniesland)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Rt Hon Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thomas, Simon *(Ceredigion)*
Timms, Stephen
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Turner, Neil *(Wigan)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Warsing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Williams, Mrs Betty *(Conwy)*
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Woolas, Phil
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

NOES

Beggs, Roy
Chope, Christopher
Donaldson, Jeffrey
McCrea, Dr William
Paisley, Rev Ian
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Steen, Anthony
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*

Question accordingly agreed to.

House of Commons

Thursday 15 March 2001

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PRIVATE BUSINESS

CITY OF LONDON (WARD ELECTIONS) BILL (*BY ORDER*)

Order for further consideration, as amended, read.

To be further considered on Thursday 22 March.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Higher Education

1. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): If he will make a statement on the level of unit funding in higher education. [152549]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): Good morning, Mr. Speaker. The Government are planning to spend £1.7 billion more on higher education in England over the six years to 2003–04. For the first time in more than a decade, there will be a real terms increase in the unit of funding per full-time student of 0.7 per cent. in 2001–02, with fully funded increases in student numbers over the following two years.

Miss McIntosh: I welcome that answer, but will the Minister give us the true figures of unit funding? They reveal that unit funding has decreased for students because their numbers continue to rise. In the 1997–98 financial year, the unit cost was £4,850; it has now gone down to £4,770, with no prospect of it rising. What message does that give those who wish to enter higher and further education?

Mr. Wicks: I do not agree with the hon. Lady's analysis. Unit funding will increase over the next three years, as I said, and by 0.7 per cent. in 2001–02. I understand the Opposition's embarrassment because when we contrast our record with that of the Tory years, we see that funding per student in higher education fell by more than £2,500, or 36 per cent., between 1989 and 1997. The Conservatives undermined the universities; we are investing in them.

Mr. Hilary Benn (Leeds, Central): My hon. Friend no doubt receives a lot of external advice on the funding of higher education. Has he yet had an opportunity to assess how much it would cost to endow the universities with a sum sufficient to generate their current level of income? Does he agree that if that were to happen, top-up fees for students would be inevitable?

Mr. Wicks: I have not made the estimate, but Universities UK has. It has independently estimated the cost of the Tory endowment plans at £101 billion. We are not certain where that money is to come from—I do not know whether it is in the Tory spending plans—but, clearly, logic suggests that it would be through the introduction of top-up fees. While we have a fair student finance system, they have to become the top-up Tories.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Is not the real position that the Government are unable to defend their record over the past four years on the level of funding per student? In a Parliament, now is the time when one refers to the Government's record. The Government, rightly, say that in primary education student funding has increased, and is not that a good thing? The truth is that under this Government, despite their discredited tuition fee policy—charging students and making poor students poorer by abolishing the grant—the unit of funding has gone down.

Mr. Wicks: I never know where the Liberal Democrats are coming from. The hon. Gentleman voted against the continuation of maintenance grants during the Report stage of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members do not want to listen because they do not like the truth. The Liberal Democrat education spokesman, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), said in March 1998:

> "We support the Government's proposal to end maintenance grants and replace them with income contingent loans as the fairest way of securing a greater contribution from students."—[*Official Report*, 16 March 1998; Vol. 308, c. 995.]

The hon. Gentlemen are now saying something different. Being a Liberal Democrat means never having to be consistent, except consistently in opposition.

Mr. Gordon Marsden (Blackpool, South): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is extraordinarily rich for the hon. Members for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) and for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) to attack the Government on unit funding when the previous Government cut it savagely year on year? Neither of them had the grace to refer to the range of additional measures that this Government have introduced—opportunities of bursaries, access funding and so on—that add significantly to the welcome increase in unit funding that the Government have announced.

Mr. Wicks: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Having secured the funding of our universities and having introduced a fair and efficient student finance system, the future challenge is to increase the numbers of our young people able to go to university, for which the Prime Minister has set a target of 50 per cent., and to ensure that those from backgrounds and communities with no previous experience of higher education have that opportunity. That is why my right hon. Friend has introduced the excellence challenge, with more than £190 million over the next three years and different ways,

including summer schools, of enabling those children to have that opportunity of going to university. We are about quantity, while ensuring quality; but within that, our goal of equality is also crucial.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): May I invite the Minister to acknowledge that the inflation increase is really in his estimate of the cost of the Conservative proposals? It has risen from the estimate of £80 billion given by his noble Friend Baroness Blackstone at a meeting in the Palace earlier this week, to more than £100 billion. That suggests that his study of the Taylor report and our proposals has been less than comprehensive.

In the light of that, let us turn back to the Government's stance. Will the Minister acknowledge that, after countless questions and letters, and even a full Adjournment debate initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) and me, he has still not given us the detailed figures that underpin his assertion that unit funding will increase over the next three years? Given that independent figures prepared by the Library show that, at best, the amount will be functionally static—therefore, a £10 per capita increase could not be reconciled with the Minister's assertion that the increase will be 0.7 per cent. per annum—will he come clean and give us the actual figure on unit funding that will benefit students?

Mr. Wicks: I believe that the hon. Gentleman has received the figures in correspondence from me, but let me give the unit cost in real terms: in 2001–02, it is £4,800; in 2002–03, it will be a little more, but more or less £4,800; and it goes up to £4,817 in 2003–04. It is a real terms increase over those three years—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) makes a zoo-like noise, presumably to hide his embarrassment about quarrelling with us over the detail of our—*[Interruption.]* I do not know what the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) is saying, but then I never do—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ooh!"] The hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) quarrels with us about the details of our increase; he has nothing to say about the fact that, during the Tory years—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ooh!"] Tory Members are saying "Ooh" because they are so embarrassed that, during the Tory years, the percentage declined by one third. They have nothing to say about that.

Hon. Members: Ooh!

Mr. Speaker: Order. I remind Ministers that they should not worry about the Tory years. Question Time is about Departments—that is what Ministers should worry about.

Literacy and Numeracy

2. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): What evidence his Department has collated on the effectiveness of his literacy and numeracy strategies. [152550]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): Before I answer the question, I should like to welcome the permanent secretary, Michael Bichard, to the Gallery and thank him for the enormous work that he has done at the Department for Education and Employment. Before—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. I must say to the right hon. Gentleman that he should not make reference to anyone in the Gallery.

Mr. Blunkett: I am suitably reprimanded, Mr. Speaker.

The national literacy and numeracy strategies have transformed the quality of teaching and have raised standards in primary schools throughout the country. The principal pieces of research into their effectiveness are the Office for Standards in Education reports on the first year of the numeracy strategy and the second year of the literacy strategy, published last November, and a report by the Ontario institute for studies in education, published last July.

Mr. Dismore: Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating schools in Hendon? Between 1997 and 2000, they achieved an overall improvement of 10 percentage points in English and 12 percentage points in maths. In one year, 1999–2002, Parkfield primary school achieved improvements in English of 26 percentage points and in maths of 24 percentage points, and is one of the 19 schools in Hendon to win a school achievement award today.

Mr. Blunkett: My congratulations go to Parkfield and to all the schools that have been driving forward, using the professionalism of teachers, for which we are grateful, in adapting and developing the literacy and numeracy programmes to make them so effective right across the country. My congratulations go to the 19 schools in Barnet that have received improvement or excellence awards and to the 6,800 schools throughout the country that have also received such awards.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): There was a time when the Secretary of State and the Government linked such strategies to the importance of class sizes. The link was watered down in the Green Paper, which states:

> "As children get older and become more used to the disciplines of school, the size of their class or group becomes less critical".

Leaving aside the fact that secondary school class sizes have risen and that average classes at key stage 2 have become bigger under Labour, how does the Secretary of State reconcile the fact that the number of children of nursery-school age taught in classes of more than 30 is greater under this Government than under the Conservatives? If age is so important, why are our youngest children being taught in larger classes? Is the policy simply incoherent? Have the Government failed by their own measurement? Or was the policy driven by political expediency, rather than the genuine interests of our youngest children?

Mr. Blunkett: Class sizes and the pupil-teacher ratio have not risen in key stage 2—seven to 11-year-olds. They have improved, and the hon. Gentleman knows it. We have reduced, by 450,000, the number of five to seven-year-olds who are taught in classes of more than 30. In 60 education authorities, we have pilot programmes running to reduce the size of nursery and reception classes, with the aim of providing an adult-pupil ratio of 1:15 in reception classes. We have increased nursery

provision by 120,000 since the general election. We are the only party committed to universal nursery provision for all three and four-year-olds.

Secondary Schools

3. **Mr. David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): What plans he has to raise standards in secondary schools. [152551]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): The recent Green Paper—"Schools: Building on Success"—sets out the Government's vision for transforming secondary education. Building on our successful reforms at primary level, the programme will boost the achievements of 11 to 14-year-olds; promote diversity so that each school has its own distinct ethos; narrow the achievement gap by targeting disadvantaged areas, under-performing groups of pupils and low-performing schools; and create a system that responds effectively to the talents and aspirations of individuals.

Mr. Taylor: Our party has historically championed inclusion and combated exclusion. Why cannot investment in diversity in secondary education take place within the comprehensive system, not alongside it? If yet more specialist schools select some pupils, will not that produce secondary moderns, not modernised secondaries? Is it still standards, not structures, that matter?

Ms Morris: My hon. Friend is entirely right to say that our party has raised standards for a range of people—historically, in ending the 11-plus and rigid selection, and, more recently, in raising literacy and numeracy standards and achievement at GCSE—but if we want to continue to do so, we must modernise. There is diversity in the comprehensive system. Most specialist schools are comprehensives, and many of them serve areas of great disadvantage. They can select up to 10 per cent. of students by aptitude—only 7 per cent. of schools do so—but the crucial point is that our party has always wanted to raise standards in every school.

All schools in my hon. Friend's constituency in Leicestershire and throughout the country will benefit from the specialist school movement, because 30 per cent. of their funds have to be used in partnership with other secondary schools and primary schools. Our vision for 2006 is not only to allow more than 40 per cent. of our secondary schools to become specialist schools, but to ensure that every secondary school in the country works in partnership with them, so that we can continue what we have done throughout our history and, more recently, in the past four years: raise standards for every child in every school, in every country, no matter what the label on the school's door says.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): Is not the truth of the matter that the Government are acutely embarrassed by the Secretary of State's comments in the Green Paper, in which he says that only four out of 10 schools will be specialist? On 12 February, I said:

"If specialist schools are good enough for four out of 10 schools, why are they not good enough for all . . .?"—[*Official Report*, 12 February 2001; Vol. 363, c. 28.]

It is worth the House hearing what the Prime Minister said in a letter, which I received today in reply to one that I sent to him. He says:

"As you state, a large proportion of comprehensives, particularly those participating in the specialist schools programme already have strong leadership and a distinct ethos . . . This Government wants to see this extended to all schools, so that they may all achieve a strong reputation . . ."

Does that mean that the policy of the Liberal Democrats and the Prime Minister is at odds with that of the Secretary of State?

Ms Morris: If the hon. Gentleman wants to ask a question that agrees with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, he can use his time in that way, but let us put the issue in context. The hon. Gentleman will remember that, before the general election, only grant-maintained schools were allowed to apply for specialist status. Just over 100 schools were specialist schools in 1997. We have transformed the position and, through excellence in cities, we have now made sure that specialist school status, and what that means, is available to some of the schools in the most challenging areas that were deliberately excluded from the programme of the previous Government.

The hon. Gentleman may be in the business of objecting, but we are in the business of delivering. Delivering means that we plan the expansion of our programme. In every single year since the Government came to power, we have allocated more money for specialist schools and we have changed the rules so that they have to share that money with other schools in their neighbourhood. Of course, future Labour Governments want to build on that. Our vision is to have every school that is so able to play to its own specialism within the diversity of the school system.

We must not fall into the trap of saying that the only schools that can specialise are those that have a specialist school label. Other schools throughout the country have specialisms and they work to them. We shall carefully expand the system and make sure that we do so in the best interests of all schools.

Mr. Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we have been successful in driving up standards in schools only because we have an increasing number of the best body of teachers in the world? However, will she join me in deploring any action by teachers' unions that would damage the possibility of students receiving a decent standard of education, and will she also deplore the annual charade that teachers go through before the Easter conferences? It damages the reputation, esteem and prestige that so many of us have been trying to build up for the teaching profession.

Ms Morris: I agree with my hon. Friend that we have the finest body of teachers, and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made that point clear at the last annual conference. All the increases in standards that politicians talk about are delivered by teachers and classroom assistants working with parents and children in the 24,000 schools throughout the country. We owe them a debt of gratitude for what they are doing for our children and the future of the nation. We all have a responsibility to shout loud and clear what a good

profession we have and what an increasingly attractive profession it is to join. Therefore, I agree with my hon. Friend that teachers who do not stay in classrooms to teach children do nothing for the children, do nothing to raise standards and, indeed, send a false message of what the profession is about. I know that teachers go into teaching to teach and to support children. I have every confidence that they will continue to do so and that they will not take industrial action.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): Perhaps the Liberal Democrats' spokesman should not waste the time of the House by quoting the words of the Prime Minister, bearing in mind the phrase that was made public by the former chief inspector of schools, who said that

"there is an inverse relationship between what Tony wants and what Tony gets".

Given that Ministers now see selection as the way to improve standards in bog-standard comprehensives, is it not time for them to accept that they should drop the Government's hostility to schools that already select and deliver high standards? Is it not time to scrap the grammar school ballot regulations, which the right hon. Lady knows have cost £300,000 of taxpayers' money, achieved nothing and left schools and parents throughout the country facing uncertainty?

Ms Morris: There is a centralising tendency in the Conservative party. We have given the final decision on admission arrangements in selective areas to parents. The hon. Gentleman wants to take that power away from parents and put it back in the hands of central Government. We are busy getting on with raising standards in 24,000 schools. There is no more selection than there was before 1997, and our policy is to let the people, whose children's lives will most be affected by admission arrangements in selective areas, continue to make the decision. It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman would deny parents the right to make that decision.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Will my hon. Friend congratulate two schools in my constituency? Biddulph high recently received a truancy busting award, and Leek high used the £10,000 so generously donated by the Britannia building society to enhance computer facilities available to design and technology students, which has encouraged a range of students to stay on and to become enthusiastic about careers in both design and technology.

Ms Morris: I had the pleasure of visiting my hon. Friend's constituency, where I saw the high quality of schools and the commitment of their teachers. She highlights the commitment of individual schools to the diversity agenda and gives an excellent example of how schools can use a range of Government initiatives and sources of income to create diversity. It is especially pleasing that the children who will benefit from those initiatives are not just those who attend the schools that she named, but those who attend neighbouring schools as well. That spirit of partnership and the spreading of good practice is what our vision for the future of education is about.

Chris Woodhead

4. **Mr. David Amess** (Southend, West): If he will make a statement on the circumstances in which Mr. Chris Woodhead ceased being Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools. [152552]

8. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What categories of advice given to him by Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools are confidential. [152557]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): Chris Woodhead tended his resignation following the meeting of the business appointments committee on Thursday 2 November last year. We agreed that he would leave Ofsted at the end of November.

Her Majesty's chief inspector provides me with advice on a range of matters and may publish reports that include advice that is intended to be in the public domain. In other circumstances, the chief inspector's advice normally remains confidential.

Mr. Amess: Does the Secretary of State now accept that Mr. Woodhead's subsequent remarks cannot be dismissed as being of no consequence? Is it not the reality that the slogan "education, education, education" means more bits of paper and ill-thought-out initiatives? Is not the truth that Mr. Woodhead resigned because he could no longer inspect schools on which he believed that the Government had failed to deliver, and that the Secretary of State's epitaph will be that a generation of our children have been betrayed?

Mr. Blunkett: I am interested in the reality of the evidence base presented by the chief inspector and his successor in subsequent annual reports. The last one, which was signed by Mr. Woodhead, said:

"The quality of teaching has improved in all types of schools, in all subjects and in all year groups."

I rest my case.

Mr. Prentice: May I ask my right hon. Friend what attributes he saw in Chris Woodhead when he decided to keep the chief inspector on despite the great reservations of many people in and outside education who believed that Woodhead was like a dose of anthrax to the education profession? Given that Chris Woodhead has condemned the Government for betraying a generation of children, will my right hon. Friend concede that it was an error of judgment to keep him on?

Mr. Blunkett: I make judgments as I find them and when they have to be made. In a signed article on 20 July 1999, when we were considering the improvements on which Chris Woodhead had worked with us, he said:

"we now have a focus on achievement, a drive to raise standards in the basic skills, and therefore across the curriculum, that we have never had before . . . the only way forward is to continue"

with those policies. I took that at face value. I was glad to work with Chris Woodhead. I wish him well and I am sorry that he has stooped to vitriol rather than sensible open debate.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): According to the latest Ofsted report, the Government's education action

zones and fresh start scheme have failed to deliver, whereas in Guildford the use of the private sector under the Conservatives to improve a state school has been judged by Ofsted to be a resounding success. What does the Secretary of State read into the fact that Conservative policies to improve standards in our schools have done so well while his initiatives are failing so dismally?

Mr. Blunkett: I am happy to make a judgment on Conservative-controlled Surrey county council, which felt it necessary to bring in the technology trust from the west midlands to provide the support, guidance and back-up that the county council had failed to provide. I congratulate all those at King's Manor school and other schools throughout the country, including those in education action zones, where primary school standards have risen faster than in the rest of the country, on their tremendous achievements.

Mr. Vernon Coaker (Gedling): For my part, I think that standards in schools are rising considerably, and we should reflect on that and congratulate those responsible. Does my right hon. Friend agree that instead of concentrating on the resignation of Chris Woodhead, it would be in the interests of our schools if we concentrated on the job that the new chief inspector of schools will do? In the interim, Mike Tomlinson is already talking about Ofsted being a supportive agency for schools and working with teachers to achieve the improved standards that we all want.

Mr. Blunkett: I agree that the new chief inspector has made a flying start, and I congratulate him on that. His job will be, as Chris Woodhead's was, to adduce evidence, to reveal failure and to help us understand where best practice exists so that we can take action, in conjunction with schools and education authorities, to improve standards. That is what we have done over four years, which is why 75 per cent. of our children now leave primary school able to read and write properly and 72 per cent. are numerate. It is why GCSE and A-level results have improved and the confidence and self-esteem of teachers throughout the country are rising.

Mrs. Theresa May (Maidenhead): The Prime Minister described the former chief inspector of schools as his sounding board on education, so when Mr. Woodhead says that the Secretary of State's idea of the purpose of schools is

"depressing, narrow and utterly misguided",

does the Secretary of State think that the time has come to stop betraying our children and to set schools free, recognise the importance of education for its own sake and abandon the Government's utilitarian view of education?

Mr. Blunkett: The father of utilitarianism has his head pickled in the university of London. There are those whose heads could justifiably be pickled in the same way. I shall not rise to the bait because on 4 September last year, only six weeks before he came to see me, Chris Woodhead praised the Prime Minister in an interview in *The Guardian* and suggested that we had no disagreements.

Mrs. May: The Secretary of State may not understand the true importance and purpose of education, but one thing he does understand is how to spin a headline. Last week, in the Budget, the Chancellor announced £1 billion of extra spending on education over the next three years; the Secretary of State welcomed that. However, a comparison of the Government's own figures for total education spending in the Red Book with the figures announced in the last spending review shows that this Budget has added not £1 billion over three years, not half of that or even a quarter of it, but only £200 million. Is that not yet another example of how the Government are all spin and no delivery? What has happened to the other £800 million—has it fallen into the black hole of the Government's education policy?

Mr. Blunkett: My view is that education is about equipping young people for life, which means getting a job and having their own family. It is also means developing a love of learning, potential and talent. To do that, people must be able both to read and write and to draw on a body of historical knowledge; they must use creative skills to reason and be able to deploy that knowledge effectively in future.

As for the Budget, we had that debate on Monday. The issue raised by the hon. Lady was raised then, and is as erroneous now as it was then. When £1 billion is added to a budget for a three-year period for the whole United Kingdom, there is £1 billion more to spend. As I have already allocated most of that for England—it is earmarked for spending on recruiting and retaining teachers and paying direct grant to schools across the country from April—we simply need to ask headteachers and schools whether they are receiving that money, and a great deal more than they ever got under the Conservative Government.

Child Care (London)

5. **Ms Karen Buck** (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): What measures he is taking to increase access to affordable child care in London. [152553]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): The national child care strategy has created 83,000 new child care places in London in less than four years. That is more new places in London alone than the 74,000 places that the previous Government created throughout Britain in 18 years. We have also funded 31,052 new free nursery places in London. Together with the tripling of the child care budget, an extra £155 million from the new opportunities fund, £200 million for 900 neighbourhood nurseries, start-up grants for child minders, free nursery education for all three and four-year-olds, changes in child care tax credit, that means that, by 2004, we will have greatly increased access to affordable child care in London.

Ms Buck: I thank my hon. Friend for her reply. May I take this opportunity to congratulate everyone involved in St. George's school, which, as the House will know, is the school where headmaster Philip Lawrence was tragically murdered six years ago. It has just received a clean bill of health from Ofsted, which is a tremendous credit to the acting head teacher, Lady Stubbs, all the staff, the parents, the governors and the education authority.

Is my hon. Friend aware that the Conservative-controlled royal borough of Chelsea and Kensington recently received £1.5 million through the early years development partnership for nursery education, and the joint highest local government settlement—6.5 per cent.—in the country? Does she share my astonishment that the council is proceeding with the closure of Ladbroke nursery, which is attended by a number of my constituents' children? Does she agree that the council should review its decision and take advantage of the Government's support? That would ensure that the local authority makes provision for all the parents using the nursery who need child care in Kensington and Chelsea.

Ms Hodge: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Marie Stubbs and her staff on the work that they have done at the school. May I also congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that she has done on supporting the national child care strategy in her constituency?

Plenty of new resources are available to increase the number of child care places in every area in the country. There is an especially generous settlement for Kensington and Chelsea, so there is no excuse whatsoever for closing nurseries and losing child care places. I endorse entirely my hon. Friend's comments on the council's action.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): The saccharine self-congratulation of the hon. Lady and her soothing bromides this morning simply will not do. Is she unaware that, according to figures published in April 2000 by her Department, the proportion of children in nursery classes with 31 to 35 pupils has risen by one fifth since the Government took office? Is she aware that, under her watch, more than 1,500 pre-school playgroups have closed? If she is not aware of those things, will she become aware—and, furthermore, abandon the forced cattle-truck mentality that has besmirched the Government's performance, and create a level playing field with genuine competition and free choice for parents?

Ms Hodge: I am delighted to have the opportunity to engage with the hon. Gentleman. I know that those in the Press Gallery find it difficult to accept some of the words that we use, and I do not want to say "mendacious toe-rag", so I shall use the term "economical with the truth". We replaced the unhealthy competition that led to a decrease in the number of places available in playgroups with a planned partnership between all sectors to increase the number of places in every part of the country.

As the hon. Gentleman is probably aware, following declines in the number of places available in playgroups over time, we have finally turned the corner. This year there are almost 6,000 more places. Across the country, we have created new places for more than 500,000 children, and we are in line to create free nursery education places for all three and four-year-olds in class sizes of one to 15.

Raising Standards

6. **Valerie Davey** (Bristol, West): How he plans that the creative partnerships initiative and the pupil learning credits will raise educational standards. [152554]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): The £35 million that we announced for pupil learning credits and the £40 million announced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport for creative partnerships will raise standards by offering pupils innovative and creative opportunities to learn. Children and teachers in my hon. Friend's constituency will get the chance to work directly with artists, cultural organisations and the creative industries. That will pay dividends in raised self-esteem and improved attendance, and will encourage a lifelong commitment to learning.

Valerie Davey: I thank my hon. Friend for that reply and congratulate the two Departments on those imaginative programmes. There is good practice on which to build in Bristol. Multi-A, an arts charity based in my constituency with business backing, already enables more than 3,000 youngsters every week to have tuition and to visit live performances of the arts. Today, 400 youngsters, having had ballet workshops from the English National Ballet, will see "Giselle" at the Bristol Hippodrome. Given all that, does my hon. Friend recognise the description of schools as

"depressing, narrow and utterly misguided",

in the words of the former chief inspector?

Jacqui Smith: When I visit schools I recognise that, as the former chief inspector said in his last report, teaching is improving. That means that children not only have access to the basic skills that are crucial, but are becoming well rounded and creative children. I congratulate Multi-A and other such organisations on the very good work that they are already doing. We want to build on that with creative partnerships and pupil learning credits, which will also support sporting and other activities.

As a mother, I want my children to learn a musical instrument, to go to the theatre, to surf the net for fun and learning, to play football, to read "Harry Potter" and other books at home for pleasure. I expect that many hon. Members with children feel the same; but the difference between Labour Members and the Tories is that we think that if it is good for our children, it is good for all children, and we will invest in it, whereas the Tories would cut it.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Do Ministers accept that, to raise education standards, it is no good the Government having a continuing alphabet soup of initiatives, tsars, taskforces and websites? The only way to raise standards is to have more good teachers. The Government have a serious problem with the recruitment and retention of teachers. Some 10,000 teacher training places have gone unfilled during the Government's lifetime, and teachers in Oxfordshire are leaving the profession because they are simply not paid enough. When will the Government grasp the nettle and pay teachers more so that we can have more teachers, better recruitment and better retention?

Jacqui Smith: That sounds like a pre-emptive strike to cut the money for creative partnerships and pupil learning credits—if we were unfortunate enough to have a Conservative Government. Of course, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that we need good teachers. There are almost 7,000 more teachers in schools in England; if we had followed Conservative spending plans, there would be 10,000 fewer. The increase in the number of teachers

is an important sign of the Government's commitment to teaching. That commitment is reflected in the increasing number of those training to teach, the above-inflation pay rise that we have given teachers, and the threshold payments that grant experienced teachers a significant pay rise. There is also good news about the increase in applications for teacher training.

Conservative Members should join Ministers in praising and supporting teachers, and in encouraging more people to enter the profession. They should stop talking it down.

Skills Base

7. **Mr. Andrew Mackinlay** (Thurrock): What further measures the Government propose to increase the United Kingdom's skills base. [152556]

The Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. David Blunkett): As part of our strategy for achieving a high skills and a high value-added economy, we have established the national skills taskforce, put in place measures to address basic skills needs—they are set out in the document that was published on 1 March—and created the Learning and Skills Council, which will be on stream from 1 April. We are also establishing new technology institutes and centres of vocational excellence throughout the country.

Mr. Mackinlay: The Secretary of State can stick his chest out about yesterday's news of the lowest unemployment for 25 years. However, does he appreciate that new problems arise, such as a skills shortage at a time when we are achieving almost full employment? In my constituency, there are many semi-skilled, unskilled and de-skilled people. Statistics show that only 22 per cent. have access to the internet, whereas the figure is approximately 86 per cent. for the professional classes.

What measures will the Government take to ensure that the people I represent, and my right hon. Friend's constituents, are enabled, emancipated and given access to the internet, in the interests of the United Kingdom economy and so that they can fulfil their moral right to develop their skills and personalities, and enjoy new technologies as others in the United Kingdom do? That's socialism!

Mr. Blunkett: I am in favour of all that. I was pleased that my hon. Friend's constituency received funding for two new learning centres and that I was able to launch the online programme a week ago. It provides for the development of more than 2,000 learning centres throughout the country, linked to the learning grid and our programme of investment, which was reinforced yesterday in our Green Paper. The programme is directed at those with skills needs and those who face the greatest hardship and difficulty. By doing that, we can ensure that we have an inclusive society, in which people have good quality, lasting jobs and are able to take advantage of the strength of the economy, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has ensured.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Does the Secretary of State agree that we will not increase the skills base by putting pupils on buses that drive past excellent schools that they are not allowed to attend? Ribblesdale high school in Clitheroe has technology status and many computers. It is an excellent school, and the head has done tremendous work in turning it round. Youngsters have to drive past it to attend other schools simply because the local education authority has failed to meet the demands of local youngsters to go to it. Will the Secretary of State encourage the LEA to take more account of house building in Ribble Valley and thus ensure that people can attend some of our excellent local schools?

Mr. Blunkett: The question appears to be: do we agree that, whenever possible, children should be able to attend their local school, free from restrictions that prevent that and force them to pass schools that others attend? I agree. It is a pity that Conservative party policies, especially those on selection, would preclude that.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): Does the Secretary of State agree that if we are further to increase the United Kingdom's skills base, every child must leave school having realised their full potential? Will he assure the House that under-achievement, right back to primary school, and the individual needs of children will be identified early, and that that support will continue post-primary school until children leave the school system?

Mr. Blunkett: I do agree with that. I am glad to get back to the subject of skills, because I realised that the previous question was not related to the one on the Order Paper. I am happy to confirm that carrying the basic skills literacy and numeracy programmes through primary to secondary education, engaging young people aged between 14 and 19, and developing classroom and work-based high quality vocational routes are all crucial. Developing the modern advanced apprenticeship schemes and vocational GCSEs and A-levels will contribute to achieving that.

Mr. Peter Mandelson (Hartlepool): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the announcement this morning of the largest single overseas offshore contract, involving 750 jobs in my constituency, is a major boost for the north-east and a fulfilment of the Government's pledge to spread prosperity throughout the regions? Does he also accept that the biggest problem faced by the hard core long-term unemployed in places such as Hartlepool is a persistent lack of skills and a low level of employability, and that we need in constituencies such as mine targeted intervention by the Government and agencies, so that that gap can be remedied and people who want to work can fill the job vacancies that have been generated in the economy?

Mr. Blunkett: Like my right hon. Friend, I greatly welcome the investment and creation of jobs in his area. I congratulate him on his excellent efforts in ensuring that. At the risk of incurring the most venomous writing of Matthew Parris, I also congratulate my right hon. Friend on the fact that his area was a pathfinder in developing the new deal programmes for specific skills training. Indeed, yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities and I announced an extension of action teams for jobs to link people who are in danger of losing their jobs to the skills that enable them to take the new jobs announced today.

Comprehensive Schools

9. **Sir David Madel** (South-West Bedfordshire): How many comprehensive schools have been closed since May 1997; and if he will make a statement. [152558]

The Minister for School Standards (Ms Estelle Morris): Up to the end of 2000, a total of 143 comprehensive schools had closed since May 1997. That figure includes schools that have closed owing to the amalgamation or merger of two or more schools, and schools in local education authorities that have moved from a three-tier to a two-tier education system.

Sir David Madel: The right hon. Lady is aware that, following the closure of the upper school in Houghton Regis, Northfields upper school, in Dunstable, faces additional challenges. She is also aware of the changing nature of employment in my constituency, where there have been heavy job losses in the motor and allied industries. Will she do all she can to grant Northfields school technology status, the better to prepare its young people for the new, high-skilled jobs that are so essential to the south Bedfordshire area?

Ms Morris: Indeed I am aware of Northfields school—thanks to the hon. Gentleman's efforts, it is one of the schools emblazoned on my memory. I fully recognise that he has campaigned long and hard for it to be granted specialist status. I can say no more than that I know that it has submitted a bid—I think for the third time—which will be evaluated against a set of criteria. We shall just have to wait and see. However, it is acknowledged that if schools are really to serve their children, they need to reflect on the changing demands of a changing local economy. I am delighted that he has a school in his constituency that accepts that responsibility and is gearing up to meet it. I very much hope that, if not this term, then at some time in future, Northfields school will achieve specialist status. I, like the hon. Gentleman, realise that that will further help it to deliver quality education for his constituents.

Nursery Places

11. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): What assessment he has made of the take-up rate of nursery places in the last year. [152560]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): Since 1997, we have created 120,000 free early education places for three and four-year-olds. We will announce figures for 2000–01 shortly. All four-year-olds and half of all three-year-olds are now entitled to free part-time early education places. In the same period, 298,000 new child care places for 546,000 more children have also been created.

Mr. Corbyn: I thank the Minister for that reply. I am pleased at the increase in the number of nursery and pre-school places, and I compliment the Government on it. Will she consider a specific and rather unusual problem? Some primary schools have developed nursery classes, but because of the perversity of the charging system, independent, voluntary and local authority day nurseries often lose children, and as a result some of them have tragically had to close. I am sure that she would agree that at the same time as the Government are trying to develop more pre-school and nursery places, which we all welcome, it is sad that some of the independent and voluntary nurseries are having to close. Will she examine the charging system that they have to impose, especially for parents who are out of work or just about to start work and cannot afford the fees, which leads to a loss of necessary and important nursery places?

Ms Hodge: The whole thrust of our policy on expanding early years education and child care is to develop integrated places, bringing together early years education and child care to best meet the needs of children and of the modern family. I hope that the nurseries in my hon. Friend's constituency will take advantage of the substantial new resources that are available to create integrated places, which could be in nursery schools or in nurseries in the private and voluntary sectors. Following the Chancellor's announcement on the increases in child care tax credit, places, especially in areas such as inner London, are now affordable to low-income families.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does the Minister recognise that although there has been an increase in nursery places attached to schools, the number of pre-school playgroups has fallen during the Government's time in office? There has also been a dramatic diminution in the number of registered child minders. Does she realise that the Government are doing further harm by their surreptitious announcement last week of a new stealth tax on small primary schools? When my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) introduced the citizens charter and the charter mark, small schools could apply for the latter free. The Government are now preventing small schools from applying by imposing a stealth tax charge of £600 to be considered for a charter mark. Many schools in my constituency with successful nursery classes have succeeded in winning charter marks, but now they will not even be allowed to apply. Is not that yet another scandal and another example of the Government betraying small schools?

Ms Hodge: It is sad that Conservative Members never quite get their facts right. The additional costs will be met by the Department, so there will be no additional costs to schools. I shall repeat what I said earlier about places in playgroups. There has been a steady decline in pre-school places, which started under the previous Government because of their divisive nursery voucher scheme. We have replaced that with planned partnerships, and this year for the first time the number of places available in pre-schools has increased by 5,900. We are aware of the decline in places with child minders, which is why we have introduced start-up grants to assist child minders. That is already having an effect, and we are confident that there will be 145,000 new child minder places by 2004.

New Deal

13. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths** (Edinburgh, South): If he will estimate the number of *(a)* lone parents, *(b)* young people and *(c)* long-term unemployed young people who have entered the work force under the new deal. [152562]

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Ms Tessa Jowell): The latest figures, to the end of December 2000, show that 81,311 lone parents and at least 274,230 young people aged 18 to 24 have found work through the new deal. In addition, 62,570 long-term unemployed people aged over 25, and 20,385 people in the new deal 50-plus have found jobs through the new deal.

The combined effect of the strong, stable economy, the new deal and the efforts of hundreds of thousands of unemployed people enabled us to announce yesterday that we have reached a milestone. For the first time in 25 years, claimant unemployment has fallen below 1 million.

Mr. Griffiths: Does the Minister remember meeting unemployed people a decade ago, during the recession, who despaired of ever again getting a job? Hundreds of people in my constituency have benefited from the new deal, and tell me that it has transformed their lives. Does my hon. Friend share my deep regret that the policy that has brought about that great prosperity for people is under threat from the Conservative party?

Ms Jowell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Government offer the prospect of a better, strengthened new deal that gives opportunity for long-term unemployed people. The Opposition offer no deal.

Business of the House

12.30 pm

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): Would the Leader of the House please give the business for the coming week?

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The business for the coming week will be as follows:

MONDAY 19 MARCH—Proceedings on the Consolidated Fund (No. 2) Bill.

Second Reading of Regulatory Reform Bill *[Lords].*

Motion relating to the Common European Security and Defence policy.

TUESDAY 20 MARCH—Second Reading of Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill *[Lords].*

Motion on the Churchwardens Measure.

WEDNESDAY 21 MARCH—Opposition day [7th Allotted Day]. Until about 10 o'clock, there will be a debate on "The Government's Conduct of Foreign Policy" on an Opposition motion.

THURSDAY 22 MARCH—The House will be asked to consider a motion arising from the Second Report from the Procedure Committee: "Election of a Speaker".

The Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration at 4 o'clock.

FRIDAY 23 MARCH—Private Members' Bills. The provisional business for the following week will be:

MONDAY 26 MARCH—Second Reading of the Adoption and Children Bill.

TUESDAY 27 MARCH—Second Reading of Social Security Fraud Bill *[Lords].*

WEDNESDAY 28 MARCH—Second Reading of the Private Security Industry Bill *[Lords].*

THURSDAY 29 MARCH—Debate on the Intelligence agencies on a motion for the Adjournment of the House.

FRIDAY 30 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The House will wish to know that on Wednesday 28 March there will be a debate relating to the support scheme for olive oil in European Standing Committee A.

The House will also wish to know that on Wednesday 28 March there will be a debate relating to waste electrical and electronic equipment in European Standing Committee C. *[Relevant documents:*

Wednesday 28 March 2001:

European Standing Committee A—Relevant European Union document: 9431/00; Support scheme for olive oil. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee report: HC 23-xxvii (1999-2000).]

European Standing Committee C—Relevant European Union document: 10802/00; Waste electrical and electronic equipment. Relevant European Scrutiny Committee reports HC 28-i (2000-01) and HC 23-xxix (1999-2000).

Mrs. Browning: I thank the Leader of the House for those announcements. We very much welcome the fact that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will be making a statement to the House following business questions. Events in the foot and mouth outbreak move fast, so may I urge the right hon. Lady to impress on Ministers at MAFF that it would be extremely helpful to hon. Members of all parties if Ministers were able to come to the House with announcements as frequently as possible? The questions and concerns of hon. Members change every day, so I hope that the right hon. Lady will ask her colleague to ensure that Ministers are more available to the House.

In the coming week, is an announcement—or even a debate—planned regarding the Government's proposed cross-party Committee to consider the proceedings of the upper House? The House will be aware that the other place dealt with the Second Reading of the Hunting Bill this week. The Government made an extraordinary proposal: they tabled a procedure motion in the other place to allow only amendments approved by the Government to be debated. That is as great a concern to hon. Members in this Chamber as it is to my noble Friends. Given the precedent that the Government have set, will the right hon. Lady consider sharing with the House what their intentions are for proceedings in another place?

Will the right hon. Lady say whether the Government intend in the coming week's business to allow time for a debate on remaining order No. 50 on the Order Paper, with which she will be familiar? It has been tabled in her name and concerns the reprimand to the Westminster Four. Conservative Members would certainly welcome the opportunity to debate the order—[HON. MEMBERS: "At length."] I agree with my hon. Friends. Extraordinarily, we had anticipated that the debate would take place on Monday because of what was seen to be almost a business announcement by the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), on Report on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill. He informed my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe):

"I look forward to seeing her on Monday evening, although, unfortunately, she cannot speak then. I gather that, when it comes to debating her position, the Opposition Chief Whip will speak for her."—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2001; Vol. 364, c. 1086.]

That was quite an accurate statement, but, again, it was surprising that that was said by a Home Office Minister when the Leader of the House has not confirmed that that debate will take place on Monday.

I wonder whether the right hon. Lady can confirm that the Government intend to provide time, certainly within the next week or two weeks, for the House to debate the conduct of the Minister for Europe, the hon. Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz). It is an astonishing situation. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards has stated clearly that only half the complaints that were put before her in respect of the hon. Gentleman were dealt with because he has failed or has refused to answer any further questions that the commissioner has put to him. Clearly, the House cannot condone such conduct. I hope that the right hon. Lady will ensure that we get a chance to debate that matter.

We would also like to debate the conduct of the Foreign Secretary and the relationship between him and the media during the period that he had possession of a leaked Select Committee report: he had possession of it before it was made officially available. The subject of that report was Sierra Leone, which is an important matter to hon. Members on both sides of the House. I hope that, in the spirit of the reprimand that the right hon. Lady has tabled

in respect of my right hon. and hon. Friends, she will feel that matters appertaining to the Foreign Secretary and to the Minister for Europe are as, if not even more, important in terms of censure.

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome for the statement that will be made by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. She is right to say that it is important for Ministers to come to the House to keep it informed. I recognise fully that hon. Members on both sides of the House are concerned about the situation and about how it changes day to day. I know that she acknowledges that Ministers are doing everything that they can to spread information and to keep hon. Members up to date with the changing situation by placing updated information continually on the Department's website and by placing in the Library the daily briefings that they are giving.

Formal reports to the House, which allow for questions from hon. Members, are part of that process, but I know that the hon. Lady recognises the importance of Ministers balancing their duties to help to tackle the outbreak with their duties to keep the House informed.

The hon. Lady asked about the handling of debates in the upper House. I have not followed the detail of what has been happening in the upper House. My understanding, however, is that the procedures that were adopted for the Hunting Bill were welcomed and supported by representatives of every part of the upper House—those on the Bishops Bench, the Cross Benches and others—with the sad exception of those on the Conservative Front Bench.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): That's all right, then.

Mrs. Beckett: I thought that majorities ruled, even in the upper House. That probably suggests that it was all right, but I emphasise that it is not a matter for me and that the Government are not making proposals for the procedures of another place, which are a matter for that House. That House took the decision, not us. The hon. Lady will also know that the Government do not have a majority in the upper House; indeed, the Government have only one third of the Members of the upper House. Noble Lords took their decision; that is a matter for them.

The hon. Lady asked me about the issue of the conduct of the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe)—rather unwisely, I should have thought, but that is a matter for her. She also asked me about the issues that have been raised in relation to the conduct of my hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary. She has raised issues that are highlighted in the report of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. What she does not recognise, and what the House must at all times take into account, is that the reports of the Standards and Privileges Committee are unanimous and have always been unanimous, although there have been some—not least in the news media, but, occasionally, also on the Opposition Benches—who try to give a different impression.

The House charges that Committee with a heavy and very difficult responsibility, which is to weigh the evidence that is put before it and to come to its views. As I had no part in deciding the framework within which the Committee works, or any part whatsoever in the appointment of members to that Committee, I feel perfectly free to say that I think that it is both dangerous and unwise for hon. Members on either side of the House to pass judgment and to try to second-guess the members whom we ourselves have appointed to that Committee—for all of whom I have great respect, although I do not always agree with them. The hon. Lady and others should take that into account.

The hon. Lady asked also about a debate on the conduct of the Foreign Secretary. I read four or five times—because I thought that I must be missing something—the stories that appeared over the weekend about his conduct, and what he said and what he answered to the House, without being able to discover within them any contradiction with what actually happened. Of course it is open to hon. Members to seek to pursue opportunities to discuss his conduct, but I suspect that the content of any such debate would be extremely short and that most normal members of the public would find the matter extremely boring.

I should like to say one other thing to the hon. Lady about her suggestion—I hope that you will forgive me, Mr. Speaker, for this lengthy reply but I think that it is such an important issue for the entire House—that we should have a debate on such matters. Two things, I think, are of great importance to all hon. Members. The first and by every standard the most important is that there should not be corruption in our public life, and that if there is corruption it should be stamped out—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] That has to be—*[Interruption.]* I am glad to know that Opposition Members support that contention, and I say to the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) that he should be more cautious in what he says.

Secondly, however, while it has to be the prime role of this House to ensure that corruption is identified and removed if it exists, every single hon. Member has an interest in ensuring that frivolous or unsubstantiated allegations are not made or encouraged. I say—I have said it to hon. Friends and I say it publicly as I would say it privately to Opposition Members—that allegations should be neither made nor pursued for what is thought to be either personal or party advantage or vendetta. I think that that is damaging to the House and damaging to hon. Members, and it is something that all hon. Members should bear in mind.

The final issue that the hon. Lady raised was whether we should debate the behaviour of the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald. I recognise that this is not a Question Time for the hon. Lady, but there is a question for her to consider in her role as shadow Leader of the House. It is the question that I put to her the other evening about whether Conservative Members uphold the authority of the Chair. I remind her and other Opposition Members of the words of Mr. Speaker a few days ago—which were that the right hon. Lady had no business to be in that Committee, and that he disapproved strongly of her being there. That has always been the rule of this House, and it is a rule that all hon. Members would be well advised to bear in mind.

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): Will the remaining stages of the Bill on the abolition of hunting with hounds will come back to this House before or after 3 May? Is she aware that yesterday the Duke of Devonshire and the

[Mr. Joe Ashton]

Countryside Alliance were clamouring for a postponement of any election until well after 3 May? Can she tell them when the foxhunting Bill might go through its remaining stages so that they can make their mind up about which date they would like the election to be held?

Mrs. Beckett: I was not aware of the specific individuals who were calling for the postponement of an election, which, as far as I am aware, has not been called. I understand my hon. Friend's concern. It is clear from the way in which the House voted that a majority of Members take the view that a hunting Bill should reach the statute book, and the House has given its verdict on the form that that legislation should take. It is a matter for Members of the other place how and when they take their decisions, but I am sure that they will be mindful of the views of the elected House.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): The Prime Minister yesterday announced the appointment of a Minister for veterans affairs, which I am sure is widely welcomed on both sides of the House. Will the Leader of the House assure us that information will be made available to all Members on the Minister's role and remit, and, in particular, what additional budget will be made available to him? Will the right hon. Lady also assure us that his attention will be drawn immediately to early-day motion 226 on Gulf veterans:

[*That this House notes that, 10 years after the Gulf War, veterans and their families are still awaiting the outcome of research; and calls upon Her Majesty's Government to disclose what further consideration they are giving to the needs of those Gulf War veterans with still undiagnosed illnesses and of the dependants of those who have died.*]

The Leader of the House will recall that I have asked her on two successive occasions at business questions about contingency plans for the census and the county council elections on 3 May. I am very grateful to her for the reply that I received just as I came into the Chamber, which answers some of the questions that arise. However, since I asked those questions, the Tory tabloids have started a clamour to postpone the elections on 3 May.

Hon. Members: Name them.

Mr. Speaker: Order. Do not shout at the hon. Gentleman. He is entitled to say his piece.

Mr. Tyler: We all know that the situation is extremely serious in many parts of the country as a result of foot and mouth disease. Does the right hon. Lady support the view expressed yesterday by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport that the countryside of Britain is not closed? Does she agree that if we suggested that all business in this country, including an election, had to be postponed because of the severity of the situation it would be the worst possible signal to give, particularly to foreign visitors?

Will returning officers be encouraged to issue a postal vote application form with polling cards to all those who may otherwise not be aware of the new facilities, together with an explanation that the means for postal voting are now much more widely available than they were previously? Will she also give an undertaking that the Home Office will reconsider election expenses, which in rural areas such as Cornwall will be much higher if we have to operate at a distance and cannot use volunteers on foot?

Finally, what legislation may be necessary to make any changes to the census date or polling day for any election, be it the county elections or the general election? What is the last available date by which that legislation must be brought before the House?

Mrs. Beckett: On the role of my colleague who has been appointed Minister for veterans affairs, the Ministry of Defence will issue a statement about his role and remit. As for whether that post will have a separate budget, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have already taken steps to deal with the issues of greatest concern that were constantly raised with our predecessors—the treatment of war widows and compensation for former Japanese prisoners of war. Resolution of those issues has been urged on Governments for very many years and it has fallen to this Government to take action, which the previous Government refused to do.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to Gulf war veterans. The Government's view is that the key components of the issue are dialogue, the provision of medical assistance as required, the pursuit of the right research and its publication.

The hon. Gentleman asked about contingency plans with regard to the election, and I am grateful to him for his thanks for the information that I have given to him. He raised an important point when he referred to the comments of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, but it is my understanding that a range of organisations concerned with the tourist industry in particular has begun to express serious alarm at any suggestion that the local elections might be postponed because of the signal that that would send. Along with the concerns of those who, for perfectly understandable and legitimate reasons, argue that the local elections should be postponed, is the different and equally worthy point of view that that would be the wrong signal to give. The Government are taking all those issues into account.

The hon. Gentleman suggested what should be the action of returning officers, and I shall draw his suggestion to the attention of the relevant authorities. It is possible that the money involved would come from local authorities' budgets, so it may be a matter for them; but returning officers must always encourage people to be aware of how they can exercise their votes, and the hon. Gentleman's suggestion is interesting. I shall also pass on his comments about the impact on election expenses, although I offer him no great prospect of change.

As I think the hon. Gentleman knows, primary legislation would be required were we to seek to change the date of the local elections. I understand that we would also be required to name a new date: many of those who suggest a postponement do not seem to have taken that into account.

According to my recollection, the date of the census was set by order, so the position may be simpler. However, the hon. Gentleman will know from the answer

I have given him in writing that those who conduct the census are considering the timing of information and how it is collected, to establish whether there are changes they could helpfully make that would mean things could proceed with the same effectiveness, if not in precisely the same way.

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there is a broad smile on the face of Tyneside this morning, following the excellent news that AMEC and Shell have clinched the largest-ever overseas offshore contract? It will bring 4,000 jobs to the country—1,000 on Tyneside, 1,000 in the rest of the north-east, and 2,000 throughout the remainder of the country.

May we congratulate the workers and management of those companies, and—given that the news comes on the back of major investment announcements by Nissan, Toyota, Rolls-Royce, Volkswagen, Jaguar and Ford—may we have a debate on why Britain is a good country in which to do business?

Mrs. Beckett: I sympathise with my right hon. Friend's wish for such a debate. It is clear from the decisions and, indeed, the comments of these many internationally mobile inward investors that they share the view expressed by organisations as disparate as the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development that, under this Government, Britain is a very good place in which to do business. I also understand my right hon. Friend's welcome for the extra employment—on behalf of his constituents and others—which I am sure is shared by Members throughout the House, and echo his congratulations to management and work force.

I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate on the Floor of the House, but my right hon. Friend might consider Westminster Hall.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): Would the Leader of the House be kind enough to tell us when we can expect a statement from her about future sittings? She will know that, under a completely new and revolutionary procedure, the Committee considering the Criminal Justice and Police Bill was deemed to have finished its work when it manifestly had not. Can we expect the right hon. Lady to announce at next week's business questions that we are to debate a motion stating that Parliament is deemed to have completed all outstanding business, and is therefore to be dissolved?

Mrs. Beckett: I do not think the hon. Gentleman can expect that, although it is a tempting thought sometimes.

On occasion, there is some inaccuracy in Opposition Members' description of these events. The House decided merely to deem that the Bill had been reported. It would have been a case of the Committee's considering a single issue—a single motion that it would certainly have considered, and presumably passed, had there been an opportunity to put the question.

I remind the hon. Gentleman of the words of the hon. Member for North-East Hertfordshire (Mr. Heald). When a Back Bencher used such tactics on a previous occasion, he said that if tactics are used artificially to disrupt the proceedings of a Committee, the Government and the House must find a remedy for it. It is not to be tolerated that such a procedure should be used without remedy.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I am not used to receiving unqualified support from Prime Ministers, especially Conservative ex-Prime Ministers. My right hon. Friend may have noticed that the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) has signed my early-day motion 257

[*That this House warmly supports the proposal put forward by Rita Restorick, and others such as the Royal British Legion, the Gulf Veterans, the Falklands Families and the South Atlantic Medal Association, that a posthumous medal, similar to the US Purple Heart, be presented to the next of kin of troops killed in action so that it can be worn with pride on Remembrance Day; accepts that suitable criteria for such a medal need be carefully defined and that this is best done by the Ministry of Defence in consultation with the Royal British Legion and forces' associations; but believes that servicemen and women who are killed in the line of duty have made the supreme sacrifice and deserve recognition for this in the form of a medal, as well as the Government's proposed memorial in central London.*]

It calls for posthumous medals to be issued to remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice as troops in the forces for Britain. The campaign is run by Rita Restorick, whose son was the last person to be murdered on duty by the IRA in south Armagh. As it now has such prestigious support, may we have a debate about it on the Floor of the House?

Mrs. Beckett: I sympathise with my hon. Friend's point. He knows that the House has the greatest respect for Rita Restorick. We sympathise with her loss, admire her courage and recognise the concerns of the wider community with which she bore that loss. My hon. Friend will know, however, that the granting of medals can be contentious. There is not a tradition of awarding a medal because an individual has died, however tragic the circumstances of that death. The Government keep these issues under review. I am pleased that my hon. Friend is so grateful to the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major). I am sure that such support lends lustre to his early-day motion. Although I will draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of my right hon. and hon. Friends, I fear that that support may not be the clinching factor that swings the decision one way or the other.

Mr. Richard Page (South-West Hertfordshire): Has the Leader of the House seen the draft statutory instrument, Postal Services Act 2000 (Consequential Modifications No. 1) Order 2001? Is she aware that this Bill—Freudian slip—or rather, statutory instrument appeared yesterday and is down to be debated at 4.30 pm on Monday? Is she aware that it is 144 articles long and longer than the original Postal Services Act 2000 that appeared on 27 January 2000? Is she aware that the other place was due to consider it with six other statutory instruments tomorrow but, following representations, it has been withdrawn? This is either carelessness or an abuse of power. Will the Leader of the House ensure that

[Mr. Richard Page]

its consideration is postponed and that either it is split into six or seven manageable statutory instruments or we have a three-hour debate on the Floor of the House?

Mrs. Beckett: As the House will recognise, if we were always to judge the time we spend on a matter by its length, it would not be wise. I was not aware of the issues that the hon. Gentleman identified. I cannot undertake to make changes on the hoof, so to speak. I will certainly draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friends who have responsibility for this matter. No doubt they will take heed of his remarks.

Mr. Syd Rapson (Portsmouth, North): May I first thank my right hon. Friend for her welcome visit to King Richard school in my constituency to underline its anti-drug culture?

May we have time for a debate on fairness at work? I ask because of revelations in a newspaper on Sunday that the Leader of the Opposition has sent a threatening letter to Sir Ken Jackson, the leader of my union, promising that if the Opposition came to power they would revoke all legislation on recognition for trade unions. Does not that underline the Opposition's wish to exploit people, whereas the Labour Government are protecting them all the time?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his courtesy; I very much enjoyed my visit to an excellent school in his constituency, which is doing a tremendous job. I was much impressed by the talent of the young people taking part in the anti-drugs campaign—as any Member of the House would have been.

My hon. Friend asks for a debate on fairness at work, and raises the correspondence between Sir Ken Jackson and the Leader of the Opposition. I have, of course, taken on board the policy observations that were made. I understand my hon. Friend's concern; as he recognises, the Labour Government have long taken the view that it is a gross economic error to try to compete in today's economies on the basis of sweatshop conditions or of aiming for ever-lower pay and costs. Investment in quality and value must be the only sound long-term basis for the United Kingdom. It is clear that that view is shared across the economy—not least by the great bulk of private sector employers. Many people will share some of the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend. I fear that I cannot undertake to find time on the Floor for a debate on the matter, but I am sure that he will find other opportunities to raise it.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Will the Leader of the House find time for an early debate on the latest report of the Select Committee on Liaison, "Shifting the Balance: Unfinished Business"? Does she recall that the previous occasion on which the House debated such matters was due to the generosity of the Opposition, who found time for the debate? It is up to the Government to find time for such important issues.

Is the right hon. Lady aware that the Committee concludes unanimously:

"It is clear that the system for nominating members of select committees must be changed."?

If that change is to be implemented in time for the new Parliament, the Government will have to activate the machinery quite soon. Will the right hon. Lady find time for a debate and the necessary votes?

Mrs. Beckett: I was not aware of the latest report from the Liaison Committee, which was, I understand, published at one minute past midnight today, when I had other concerns. Of course, I shall study the report with great interest. On two previous occasions, we have debated and discussed the recommendations of the Committee; I shall read the report's recommendations with great care and attention.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Will the Leader of the House recognise the misgivings in many parts of the House about the report published on the Minister for Europe? Although my right hon. Friend is right to reject the exaggerated claims made for party political reasons by the Opposition, the report gives evidence of inadequacies in our procedures and of the need for a debate on future reforms.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend may or may not be aware that the Standards and Privileges Committee published a report some little time ago, stating that we should look again at our procedures. The Committee is now taking evidence—several hon. Members have given written or oral evidence—and I have little doubt that a time will come when the House will look again at the framework within which we make judgments on those matters. However, I doubt that it is likely to be in the near future. When and if we discuss those issues, I hope that the House will look more widely at the framework—the structure—for how we make such judgments, rather than relying on individual reports, because there are different views and concerns throughout the House.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): In my constituency, dozens of four-year-old children face the prospect of being bussed five miles or more to their first school in September. That is due to the abject failure of the Conservative-controlled local education authority to provide sufficient school places for those children in their catchment area. Will the Leader of the House ask her right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to make a statement to the House, setting out the duty of local education authorities to provide school places for local children, and to tell the House what measures he can take to ensure that education authorities subscribe to their duties?

Mrs. Beckett: I was not aware of the position described by the hon. Gentleman. I am certainly sorry to learn of another example of lack of investment resulting in inadequate opportunities—especially for young people. I cannot undertake to find time for a debate on the issue, but I certainly undertake to draw the hon. Gentleman's remarks to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is the Leader of the House aware that if there is a debate on the reform of the Register of Members' Interests, full account should be taken of the fact that since it was set up in the mid-1970s it has never had the full authority of all Members of

the House? At the beginning, at least two Members would not comply with it at all. Latterly, we made a suggestion, which we thought would apply, that every Member with outside interests—the moonlighters, many of them on the Tory Benches—would have to put down all their outside earnings within specific brackets. Some of those who sit on the Opposition Front Bench—the Tory shadow Ministers—refused to put down their earnings, so the whole purpose of the register has been violated for several years. We should have full authority to reform the register, and when we have that debate, let us make sure that all those Tory MPs, the moonlighters, who refuse to put down their earnings have to declare them before they are allowed to speak.

Mrs. Beckett: I recall the very early days of the register and those Members who, as my hon. Friend rightly said, refused to comply with it. If I remember correctly, there was one on either side of the House. Of course I understand the point that he makes. There will come a time when the House will have to take a fresh look at how we handle those issues and what is the right framework in which to ensure that the information that should be known is on the record. We have to decide whether Members should declare what is relevant to their performance as Members, or whether everything with regard to Members' financial affairs should be fully disclosed. My hon. Friend will know that some of my hon. Friends and I have different views on that matter, and there are different views about it on either side of the House.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): Will right hon. Lady agree to have words with the Prime Minister before next Wednesday's business, to point out the massive concern in the west country, especially in Devon, about the affect of the foot and mouth epidemic and the feeling that it would be quite impossible to run a proper general election during this period? *[Interruption.]* It may be funny to some hon. Members, but in my constituency and throughout the west country, it is a very serious matter indeed. Perhaps the right hon. Lady would point out to her colleague, the Prime Minister, that, although he is making great play of the fact that there is a great deal that the Labour party yet has to accomplish, he still has 20 per cent. of this Parliament in which to do so, if he would get on with it. That would be much more satisfactory to my constituents, and perhaps even to me, but we shall leave that out.

Mrs. Beckett: We are scheduled to hold local elections on 3 May, as the right hon. Gentleman will know. Of course I understand and sympathise, as does the House, with his constituents' concerns, not least because they live in perhaps the second most severely affected part of the United Kingdom until now. Obviously, although the media have been talking about a general election on 3 May for more than a year, no general election has been called. However, the Government keep the position under review. At present, we are primarily concerned with handling the foot and mouth outbreak, which is obviously at the top of everyone's agenda.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Pursuant to the questions asked by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), may I draw to the attention of the Leader of the House the fact that the last dedicated, full day's debate on veterans' affairs was held on the anniversary of the battle of the Somme—1 July 1994—when I was fortunate enough to table a Back-Bench motion. Unfortunately, such motions have disappeared under the Jopling changes. On that occasion, the House unanimously passed a resolution that there should be a dedicated veterans Minister. My right hon. Friend will understand my joy—and, more importantly, that of the 1.75 million members of the Royal British Legion—that, yesterday, the Prime Minister fulfilled the resolution that was passed in the previous Parliament.

Logically, if we have a veterans Minister, we also need an annual, full-day debate along the lines of the debate on the Metropolitan police that takes place every October. Will she build such a debate into the parliamentary timetable after the next general election?

Finally—*[Interruption.]* The House might not like it, but the issue is important. In the debate in 1994, the then Conservative Minister of State for Defence Procurement, Jonathan Aitken, said:

> "My answer to the thrust of the argument of the hon. Member for Thurrock is that, at first glance, it sounds attractive and interesting, but the attraction of establishing a single focal point with responsibility for all the needs of ex-service personnel is superficial."—[*Official Report*, 1 July 1994; Vol. 245, c. 1104.]

They denied it; we have delivered it.

Mrs. Beckett: I know that my hon. Friend has long been a very vigorous campaigner on this issue.

Mr. Skinner: I think that he should get the job.

Mrs. Beckett: Without any personal interest in the outcome, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Mr. Mackinlay) has long been a vigorous campaigner for such a post to be created. He deserves the congratulations of both sides of the House on the fact that the campaign has been successful. As he rightly said, it has long been a campaign of the Royal British Legion, and I know that it will welcome the creation of the post.

As my hon. Friend knows, any Leader of the House receives many—they are almost all extremely worthwhile—requests on a whole range of issues for a commitment to a day's debate on the Floor of the House. I therefore cannot give him such a commitment, but I shall certainly bear his observations in mind.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): The Leader of the House will know that I have previously called for a debate in the Chamber on early-years education. Such a debate might focus on the fact the pre-schools and playgroups have closed at a rate of knots under this Government or on the fact that the number of children educated in nursery classes with more than 30 children is greater than it was under the previous Conservative Government. I wrote to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment about this matter, and he told me that he was in liaison with the Leader of the House. What are the results of those discussions? May we have a debate in the Chamber about how the Government are failing our youngest children?

Mrs. Beckett: The hon. Gentleman raises an entirely reasonable and legitimate concern, but I rather suspect

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[Mrs. Beckett]

that the chief reason why pre-school groups and playgroups are finding it difficult to continue to make headway is that the Government have made available opportunities for universal nursery education on a scale that has never been seen before. Therefore, the outcome is a consequence of success rather than of failure.

The hon. Gentleman will also know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has repeatedly stressed how much he values that range of provision. The Government have done a great deal to try to work with, support and assist such voluntary groups, and we shall continue to do so. My right hon. Friend is aware of the hon. Gentleman's concerns, but I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate in the near future.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): May I reinforce the point made by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) and ask for an early debate on the suggested postponement of the local elections due to be held on 3 May? My right hon. Friend will have heard that *The Wall Street Journal* has the mistaken view that Britain is under quarantine, and that causes great concern in Chester, which is important to my constituency. I heard today on Radio 5 Live that the deputy leader of Cumbria county council, which covers a rural area, has expressed her concern about such comments. It would cause immense damage to tourism if a similar message were to go out from this House. We must have an early debate.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. He will know that the taskforce that was set up this week is trying to clarify the position in rural areas. It is clear that many people who were thinking of taking a holiday break in parts of the country that might be unaffected thought that they might be helping the general position of the agriculture industry by changing their minds and cancelling their arrangements. That is obviously causing great concern to the tourist industry.

My hon. Friend is entirely right to identify the fact that we must make it plain that Britain is not in a state of quarantine. Firm action is being taken and it is incumbent on us all to try to identify what can safely be done and what should be avoided so that we ensure that we do not do anything that would add to the spread of the disease. I understand his concerns. He will know that we have made regular statements to the House and will continue to do so, but I fear that I cannot undertake to find time for a special debate soon.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): I know that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is here to make a statement and answer questions on foot and mouth, but I want to raise a related matter that concerns the Leader of the House. What mechanisms are in place for Members of Parliament to bring foot and mouth problems to the Minister's attention? The right hon. Lady will be aware that I mentioned this in a point of order on Monday, in which I explained that there is no dedicated officer in the Ministry with whom we can raise our concerns. When I rang the Minister's private office on Monday, one of his officials told me that I should call a local animal health office. I said, "Come on. I am a Member of Parliament. I want a dedicated officer." He promised to get back to me, but still no one has contacted me. I rang the foot and mouth helpline, which said that it could not help because the information was three days out of date. That is not good enough.

Will the Leader of the House urgently investigate whether we can have a dedicated officer to whom we can rapidly bring problems? It was suggested that the hon. Member for Bolton, West (Ms Kelly), the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary, would be that contact. I handed to her last Thursday an urgent constituency case, but I have heard nothing from either the Minister or anyone in his office. I do not know what has happened to that case—perhaps it has been lost. Will the Leader of the House urgently investigate the problem and see what can be done?

Mrs. Beckett: As the hon. Gentleman said, my right hon. Friend is here and will, no doubt, take heed of what he says. I have pages of listed contacts that different hon. Members have rightly and legitimately made with the Ministry to pass on information and concerns, which may be of help to it. My right hon. Friend is doing everything he can in difficult circumstances to keep the House informed, which I am sure he will continue to do. I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman's wish to have a dedicated officer. Although the Government take fully into account the concerns of the House and hon. Members, he will know that the Ministry's primary task is not merely to keep the House informed, but to perform its role of dealing with the outbreak. All its offices are doing their best to balance those heavy responsibilities.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): As a member of the Standing Committee on the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, may I ask my right hon. Friend to reconsider the scope of, and time allocated to, the motion that we will discuss on the behaviour of those Members who disrupted our proceedings? It was obvious to many of us on the Committee that there was concerted effort to engineer a crisis. Conservative members of the Committee wasted the equivalent of one full sitting on bogus points of order. After the disreputable behaviour of the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), she confirmed in the newspapers that their action was part of an organised campaign by Opposition Whips. We now learn that their Chief Whip will defend her and her colleagues in the debate on that motion, but perhaps he should be in the dock with her.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend makes important points and those matters might be aired in the House. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have to consider carefully their responsibilities to the House as a whole and, not least, to the Chair, whoever that may be. I am concerned, as is Mr. Speaker, about the difficult position in which the Standing Committee Chairman was placed. Members who perform that onerous role undertake great responsibilities on behalf of the House. They spend many long hours and are not remunerated. The least we owe them is to treat them with respect.

Foot and Mouth

1.18 pm

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): I want to update the House on the latest position on the foot and mouth disease outbreak. I also want to set out how the Government are taking forward disease control measures, given our increased knowledge about how the disease has spread.

As at 1 pm today, there have been 240 confirmed cases in the United Kingdom. Some 205,000 animals have been condemned for destruction, of which more than three quarters have already been slaughtered. That is out of a total UK cattle, sheep and pig population of more than 55 million. Out of 160,000 livestock farms throughout the UK, 1,200 have been placed under restriction because of a confirmed or suspected case of the disease. We have been able to lift restrictions on more than 660 of those farms, leaving fewer than 550 farms still restricted.

This is a devastating disease for farming and for the rural communities affected. I express my deepest sympathy for those farmers who have lost their herds and flocks and for the wider farming communities who are going through a time of terrible uncertainty and distress.

I was sorry to learn of a confirmed case in France earlier in the week. I understand that, so far, there have been no further cases on the continent. We have stayed in close contact with the European Commission and other European countries' veterinary authorities. They have all strongly supported the firm action taken in the UK to control the disease and prevent its spread. From the outset, the Government have put firm disease control measures rapidly in place. Every action has been taken on the advice of the chief veterinary officer.

Each day, we have learned more about the outbreak. Epidemiological investigations and the incubation of disease in livestock have revealed the mechanisms by which the disease has spread. As our understanding has increased, I have shared new information with the House and given daily briefings.

The disease has spread mainly through movement of sheep and subsequent mixing of animals at a small number of livestock markets. It is important to stress that the vast majority of disease spread around the country took place before 20 February, when the first outbreak was discovered in Essex.

With increased knowledge about how the disease has spread, the Government have been able to refine disease control measures. In the infected areas, we have intensified controls. Where possible, we have allowed movement; for example, licensed movements to slaughter and short movements for welfare reasons.

The Government are working to five key disease control aims. The first is to keep free of disease those areas of the country still free of it, and the second is to halt the deterioration of the disease situation in Devon. Thirdly, we aim to stop the spread of the disease in the north of England and south-west Scotland. We are increasingly seeing localised spread from sheep flock to sheep flock in Scotland and from cattle to cattle in Cumbria. Fourthly, we want to minimise the spread of the disease from Longtown, Welshpool and Northampton markets, where it has been identified that infection has been present. The fifth aim is to eliminate infection in flocks that have passed through dealers known to have handled infected flocks. Of course, we will keep that strategy under constant review.

Taking each of those issues in turn, I shall set out the action that the Government are taking. In areas that are currently disease free, we will establish a new type of controlled area within which we hope eventually to allow a more normal level of activity both in agriculture and the rural community. But in the short term, the priority will be to avoid the risk of importing the disease into those clean areas by movements of animals from areas where there is infection. In addition, we will identify any high-risk movements of sheep that took place before 23 February. Those sheep will be destroyed to ensure that any possibility of infection is removed.

In Devon, the disease has been spreading from farm to farm due to the nature of agriculture, which means that there are many small farms, dense animal populations and movements of people and equipment. The strategy there will be to have an intensive patrol to all farms within 3 km of the infected farm. Each farm will be visited and inspected by veterinary or trained lay staff to ensure that cases of foot and mouth disease are identified as soon as possible to prevent onward spread.

The large focus on infection in the north of England and southern Scotland has been mostly concentrated in the sheep flock, although there is now cattle-to-cattle spread in Cumbria. There are a considerable number of cases in that area, with the potential for rapid spread to adjacent farms and even further afield. In this case, we must still ensure that infected animals are removed as quickly as possible, and to do that it will be necessary to destroy animals within the 3 km zones on a precautionary basis.

We now have clear evidence that sheep from markets in the Welshpool, Northampton and Longtown areas were exposed to disease and there is reason to suspect that, with the passage of time, a number of flocks into which they were imported may become infected. Those flocks will be removed as dangerous contacts. The same approach will be taken to sheep handled during the high-risk period by two major dealers associated with movements of infected sheep.

That is a policy of safety first. We are intensifying the slaughter of animals at risk in areas of the country—thankfully, still limited—where the disease has spread. Provided other areas remain disease free, we can, over the next week to 10 days, consider modifying restrictions in areas that have remained clear. We are deeply conscious of the animal welfare problems posed by the movement restrictions that we had to put in place for disease control reasons. We made arrangements last week for a number of localised licensed movements that, I hope, have alleviated a proportion of those problems. We were not, however, then able to provide for long-distance movements of animals caught in the wrong place, such as sheep on tack on dairy farms in England.

I shall publish later today the principles of a scheme for moving such animals, necessarily under very tight restrictions. The general principle will be that animals can be moved within a currently controlled area, or within currently disease-free areas, or into an area of higher disease risk, but not the other way round. It is my intention that farmers will be able to apply for licences for such movement over the weekend.

[Mr. Nick Brown]

Those arrangements will not, of course, deal with all the welfare problems that animals face. Some animals will be unable to move because of their condition; others will be unable to move because they are in infected areas. Where animal welfare problems cannot be alleviated by local action—meaning husbandry—we shall put in place arrangements for their disposal at public expense. That scheme will apply across the United Kingdom. Payments will be made for such animals, broadly on the lines of those adopted by the Government in East Anglia last autumn for the pig welfare disposal scheme.

I should emphasise that that is a voluntary scheme. It will be for individual farmers to decide whether to offer livestock to the scheme; acceptances will depend on certification by a vet that a welfare problem exists or is about to emerge. The licence to slaughter scheme introduced on 2 March has allowed the meat trade to begin operating again, although on a necessarily limited basis. The latest estimate of the Meat and Livestock Commission is that the pig sector is back to 78 per cent. of normal production, beef is at 68 per cent. and lamb at 30 per cent. of normal production. Veterinary advice does not recommend setting up a system of collection centres, although the option is being kept under review.

The control of foot and mouth disease is a major logistical exercise. In that task, we are drawing on the expertise of many public sector organisations, particularly those with field organisations or specialist knowledge and expertise, including the Ministry of Defence, the Environment Agency, the Meat and Livestock Commission and my Ministry's agencies. The Ministry of Defence is deploying a logistic planning team, drawn from Land Command, to provide advice on the planning and management of civil and Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food resources. We have also been offered support by a wider range of private organisations. In addition, there has been international support, particularly in the provision of veterinary staff to help with the disease control programme. I am enormously grateful for all that support.

Disease control measures have had a major impact on non-farm businesses in rural areas, particularly the tourism industry. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport explained to the House what the Government are doing to help those sectors. A new taskforce has met to take that work forward. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment will make further announcements next week. MAFF will continue to provide targeted advice and guidance from the chief veterinary officer on the risks associated with a range of activities in the countryside.

Movement control measures are keeping the spread of the disease to an absolute minimum. Slaughtering the disease out of infected farms and dangerous contacts is bearing down on it where it exists. An intensified slaughter policy in respect of animals thought to be at risk of developing the disease will add to this effort. As further cases emerge, we will learn more about the way in which the outbreak has developed, and that will inform any further refinements of the control policy as necessary. Of course, I will continue to keep the House informed.

Foot and mouth disease is a personal tragedy for those affected, and a body blow to the livestock industry as a whole. Again, I express the Government's deepest sympathy for those affected. I also express my support and appreciation of the state veterinary service, the farming organisations and all the others who are involved in combating the disease and dealing with its consequences. I continue to appeal to the public for their co-operation. It is important to remember that the key risk is contact with susceptible livestock. The precautionary measures should be focused on bearing down on that risk. There is no need to bring all aspects of rural activity to a standstill. While the disease is still with us, I renew my appeal to the public to avoid unnecessary visits to livestock farms, and where visits are unavoidable, to take the precautions advised.

I am grateful for the support of the House for the Government's actions. It is important that we set aside party politics in dealing with this outbreak. If the whole country works together and works constructively, we will get through this.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): I am grateful to the Minister for his statement, and for making it available to me about half an hour ago. I start by expressing our appreciation of the work of his Ministry's officials, the vets and the others who are in the front line of the efforts being made to curb the spread of foot and mouth disease.

I reiterate our general support for the Minister and our backing for most of the specific actions that he has taken so far. On a personal note, I offer him my genuine sympathy for the substantial burden that he is carrying. The Opposition hope that the crisis is brought to a speedy and successful conclusion.

Last Sunday, the Minister said on television that the situation was under control. Since then, the number of confirmed foot and mouth cases has doubled. New cases are being confirmed this week at a much faster rate than in either of the two previous weeks. Disease has entered Cheshire for the first time, causing alarm and fear among farmers in that important livestock area. The first case is strongly suspected in my constituency in Suffolk, on the farm of Richard Easton, who today, like many others in a similar position, is extremely distressed.

Tens of thousands of diseased animals still await slaughter around the country, and tens of thousands of carcases of slaughtered animals are lying around in the open, awaiting disposal. Whatever the reason for the Minister's claim last Sunday that matters were under control, events have quickly shown how unfounded it was.

On the measures that the Minister announced, we support the Government's decision to embark on the slaughter of sheep that may have been infected through contact at the markets to which he referred. Further large-scale slaughter will clearly put huge extra strain on resources that are already stretched. I urge the Minister again to make wider use of the Army to assist the task than is currently proposed by the Government. The Army's skills and disciplines could be put to good use in the difficult task of slaughter and disposal.

The Minister will be aware of the concern about the lengthy journeys involved in sending carcases for rendering. There are persistent reports that some of the lorries used are not properly sealed, and that that method of disposal therefore runs the risk of spreading infection further. Bearing in mind the backlog of carcases that is still building up, will he examine the possible use of burial

on farms as an additional form of carcase disposal? That method was widely and successfully used in 1967. It is quicker and, in many respects, easier. The Army could be used immediately. Of course, I recognise that in some areas the water table may pose a problem. Will he ask the Environment Agency today to identify specific areas where burial might be dangerous on grounds of human or animal health? Will he then permit burial on farms as a means of disposal in areas that are not proscribed by the Environment Agency?

Does the Minister acknowledge that large-scale slaughter is distressing, especially for farmers who have reared their animals, but also for the wider public? Will the Government undertake a public information programme to explain more clearly the reasons for the slaughter, and why vaccination, which is widely canvassed, is not an acceptable alternative?

Will the Minister give greater discretion to vets who suspect the presence of foot and mouth disease in a herd to authorise immediate slaughter to reduce the risk of spreading infection posed by large and increasing numbers of diseased animals awaiting slaughter? Does he agree that time is of the essence in responding to all aspects of the crisis? Delays between suspecting and confirming a case, and between confirmation and slaughter, can mean that diseased animals are not slaughtered as quickly as is desirable for effective control of the outbreak.

Last week, the Minister asked me to suggest ways in which to extend existing compensation measures. I am sorry that I have not yet written to him. I warmly welcome his announcement about the pig welfare disposal scheme or a similar arrangement. My hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) recommended such action when he wound up the debate on 28 February. How quickly will the new arrangements become operational? How much money will be available for them?

I shall make two more specific suggestions on compensation; I may make others later. First, farmers whose cattle pass the age of 30 months suffer a sharp, unrecoverable loss of value. They are a definable, fairly small group, and they should be compensated for their loss. I stress that the suggestion is not intended to apply to farmers who can obtain licences to send their stock for slaughter. Help should be given to those who are unable to obtain or even apply for a licence.

Secondly, I recognise that industries other than farming are badly affected by the crisis. Tourism is the prime—but by no means the only—example. Cash flow problems are immediate and acute. As I said in a previous debate, many people who work in the public sector and receive their salary cheque on the 28th day of every month have no concept of the anxiety and agony of business men who simply do not know when they will receive their next income. The only permanent solution for such businesses is the control of foot and mouth disease. In the meantime, will the Government instruct local councils to grant businesses that have been hit by the crisis immediate relief from business rates?

The Minister knows that we have supported his efforts through his licensing scheme to facilitate the movement of ewes that are in the wrong place for lambing. I welcome the further measures that he has announced today. I share his anxiety that efforts to facilitate movement should not jeopardise other efforts to prevent the spread of the disease. I accept that, in some cases, requests for licences may have to be refused. Doubtless he, like me, has received reports of local administrative difficulties. Will his officials make every effort to ensure that issuing licences is not delayed by bureaucratic problems rather than veterinary advice?

I apologise for the length of my response, but much has happened in the seven days since Parliament last had the opportunity to question the Minister. There is some conflict between statements from the Minister for the Environment and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Neither is present today. That conflict has caused confusion about the Government's policy on the countryside. Are people encouraged to visit it to support businesses there or discouraged from visiting it to prevent the spread of foot and mouth disease? The Minister for the Environment called some parts of the countryside safe. How can any part be so described when foot and mouth disease may be incubating there? Will the Minister therefore clarify the Government's priorities, so that the public understand what is expected of them?

I agree with the Minister's statement about the gravity of the crisis. Its consequences go far beyond the livestock sector. He ended with an appeal to the whole country to work together, which I wholeheartedly endorse. I hope that that will be accompanied by a real effort in all Departments to work together and a willingness to use resources available from outside agencies and industries. I also hope that the Government will be willing to apply any lessons learned from the policy adopted in France and Ireland, if it appears that those measures are effective, and from reports written in the aftermath of the 1967 outbreak.

The whole nation has a deep interest in the urgent and successful resolution of this crisis. It rightly expects that no other considerations will be allowed to impede progress towards that outcome.

Mr. Brown: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's remarks about public officials, who are working extremely hard to exterminate and resolve this terrible disease outbreak and to get everything back to normal. He is right that we should learn from the experience of others and previous episodes. I am guided, of course, by the key conclusions of the Phillips report. There are lessons to be learned from that in the management of animal disease. I am following very closely Lord Phillips' recommendations on managing the disease outbreak.

I want to do justice to the hon. Gentleman's range of perfectly proper questions. First, should people visit the countryside? Everybody wants to do what is right to help bring this outbreak to an end, and it is clear from what the tourist industry is saying to the Government that overseas visitors are not coming to our country because we have foot and mouth disease; they are even not coming to London. The domestic tourist market, which is about twice the size of the overseas one, is also constrained in the countryside. I think that that is largely because people want to try to help, so they are staying away. They are going much further than Government advice suggests.

The advice from Government is very clear: the public should stay away from farmed livestock. The risk is that the virus will be transferred from the livestock to the person, and that the person, unwittingly, will then transfer it in a sufficient amount to spread the disease. That does

[Mr. Brown]

not mean that people should not visit market towns, or go to events in villages, or cannot admire the landscape or walk in the country where there is no livestock. The advice is very clear: stay away from farmed livestock.

On bureaucratic issues, the hon. Gentleman said that there were individual delays and anomalies. In a very fast-moving situation such as this, where control measures are having to be implemented and necessarily operated locally, there will be issues of dispute from time to time. He was right in our previous exchange when he referred to the micro-management of some of these issues. That is the correct approach. By and large, however, we have received an enormous amount of praise from farmers for the work of veterinarians and those in support. In these difficult circumstances, that speaks very well for both the farming industry and public services.

The hon. Gentleman made a fair point about the over-30-months scheme. I cannot say anything about that today, but I promise to keep the matter under review. He also asked about the cash flow of other industries and countryside businesses that are not directly agricultural. That is being examined by the taskforce that has just been set up.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comments on the welfare disposal scheme. Having set up the scheme in the circumstances of the classical swine fever outbreak, I envisaged right from the beginning of this outbreak that we might want to use such a scheme, as it was necessary for movement restrictions to endure and to deal with the problem of sheep on winter grazing. So it has turned out. I emphasise again that the scheme is voluntary, but it is intended to help very hard-pressed farmers and to prevent unnecessary cruelty to and suffering of animals.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Starting when?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman heckles me about when the measures will start. They will all be under way as quickly as possible. I am reporting to the House the on-going work that the Government are undertaking. We are getting on with it.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) referred to the immediate slaughter of animals that a veterinarian believes have the clinical signs of foot and mouth disease. In the case of almost all the cattle and some 80 per cent. of animals that have been slaughtered, the request to slaughter was submitted on the advice of the veterinarian who made the clinical examination. We do not wait for the tests to confirm the virus, although they are undertaken. If a professional veterinarian identifies the disease on clinical examination, the request to slaughter is made straight away.

On alternative strategies, I shall explain why it is necessary to slaughter the animals as soon as the disease is found, which comes as a shock to people who are not familiar with the industry. The hon. Gentleman is right. I have repeatedly explained that the animal breathes out the virus, and once it is dead the problem is of a different order. Thus it is necessary to kill the animal as soon as the disease is discovered.

The hon. Gentleman and I have a similar view on the vaccination strategy, because we are following the same professional advice. The view in the industry is unanimous. I am trying to arrange a short presentation on vaccination strategies for the media representatives who attend my daily press briefings so that the issues can be set out and those who report these matters are exposed to the same advice that Ministers receive. If parliamentarians would find it helpful to have such a presentation next week, I am willing to arrange it. [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes."] I take that as assent, so we shall do that.

I appreciate that it is one of the most harrowing things for a farmer to see his flock or herd slaughtered, even if it is for understandable disease control purposes. It is incredibly harrowing to experience on-farm slaughter, and having the animals remain on the farm to await removal only adds to the misery. We are examining further disposal routes, and we intend to make use of burial. The hon. Gentleman was right to ask me about burial. We are also looking into the possibility of opening further rendering plants specifically for this purpose. I understand that we are about to have a plant up and running in Devon, so the movement of animals from Devon up to the north will no longer be necessary. We are in discussions with the Environment Agency about what would affect the water table and what would be safe. We are also considering other routes of disposal.

There is much concern about the movement of carcases in wagons. It is not the journey that poses the risk. However, if the hon. Gentleman knows of a lorry that has not been sheeted properly or is not as it should be, I urge him or anyone else to take the lorry's licence number and report it. A Member of Parliament can report it to me.

We have received help from the armed services for veterinary and logistical purposes. We have arrangements with the Ministry of Defence, and can call on the Army for other help if it is needed.

I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman now has a case near his constituency in Suffolk, because that area has thankfully been free up till now. The disease must have been incubating in an animal for a fortnight or so before it emerged. He will have heard me say that it is our intention to pursue dangerous contacts that have gone into areas that we believe to be clear, which may include his constituency, and to take the precautionary measure of purchasing the animals for destruction. Our deliberate strategy is to try to keep the clear areas free of the disease.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the outbreak was under control. I do not want to get into a semantic quarrel, but when I say that it is absolutely under control, I mean precisely that. The movement controls that are in place are very severe indeed. The fact that more disease emerges does not mean that the outbreak is not under control.

There are two factors about which no one can be certain. The first is the extent of the infectivity that is still out there, and the measures that I have announced today are designed to bear down on that on a precautionary basis. The second is the geographical location of infectivity. However, we know that there are specific problems in three areas—on the English-Welsh border, in Devon and in Cumbria. What I have announced today is intended to bear down on those specific problems.

Dr. George Turner (North-West Norfolk): My right hon. Friend will be aware that, to date, Norfolk has not suffered an outbreak of the disease. However, I was pleased to hear him state the precautionary principle,

because the lessons of BSE must be learned. I understand the commercial pressures on the tourist industry, and the despair being felt in my constituency, where we rely very much on the weekend visitor. I hope that he will affirm that he will make it his first, second and third priority to ensure that areas that currently are free of the disease remain so.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the first priority is to bear down on the disease and eliminate it, and to avoid anything that risks spreading it. I am especially concerned to ensure that the disease-free areas stay disease free. That is why we are tracing the movement into those areas of animals that are suspected of being at risk. We are purchasing those animals for destruction. It is the Government's clear intention to keep disease-free areas disease free.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for his customary courtesy in providing an early copy of it.

The Minister has announced plans for the slaughter of overwintering ewes in restricted areas. Will he confirm that that policy will be implemented only as a last resort and that, if possible, other measures will be introduced to avoid taking what is clearly a drastic measure?

Is the Minister aware that sheep prices in the north of England are collapsing because of the sheer number of sheep being moved under licence to abattoirs? It is possible that the low prices will mean that there is little benefit to farmers in sending sheep there. Is he also aware of scare stories to the effect that even grain cannot be exported because of the possibility of spreading the disease? I hope that we can put such stories into perspective.

What assurances can the Minister give the House about the contingency planning measures that were in place prior to the outbreak? For instance, after the 1967 outbreak, it was recommended that epidemiological teams comprising personnel from various bodies should be set up. The teams were to have two main functions. The relevant report stated:

"In an outbreak they would collect information by studying the outbreak from the start, predicting its probable development and so provide information which would help in formulating measures to control it. They would also collect data for the purpose of future epidemiological studies. The teams should gain experience in working together before outbreaks occur so that they would be fully prepared when their services were required."

Will the Minister confirm that those teams were put in place, and that some of the information now available stems from their formation?

The report from which I have quoted also recommended considerable additional research into foot and mouth disease, but we learned today that the last remaining independent research facility, CAMBAC, is about to close. It was supported by MAFF and the Meat and Livestock Commission, and was a very valuable source of research, especially into pigs. At a time when we need more research and information capable of being disseminated throughout the world, does the Minister agree that it is a great shame that that facility should be closing?

Mr. Brown: I will inquire into what the hon. Gentleman says about the research programme, as I do not have the answer to hand. I can assure him that epidemiological work is under way in the Ministry. In part, it is informing the decisions that I have announced today.

Although there is a dispute between the UK and Morocco over a shipment of grain, I assure the hon. Gentleman that grain poses no risk whatsoever of spreading foot and mouth disease. That is being explained to the Moroccan authorities.

On the movement of sheep in their winter quarters, there is an order of decision making. If we can safely move them, we will, but each case must be looked at very carefully. We must ensure that lorries are disinfected, that animals are not carrying the disease and that they will not move to areas where there is a risk of infectivity. All that must be considered case by case.

We are looking at providing advice and what other support we can, although it is necessarily limited, to aid husbandry on site, if that is possible. I know that the hon. Gentleman will understand why that is not always possible, but there may be local solutions that can be adopted, including temporary housing and the bringing in of specialists to assist with lambing. The third option—it is the last resort—is mercy killing.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I thank the Minister for his statement. It is a sombre statement, but I am sure that farmers in Cumbria will accept the new controls because they want to get ahead of the disease and to get it over with as quickly as possible. We still have a problem with slaughter and disposal. I have a constituent whose beasts were diagnosed three days ago and have still to be slaughtered.

Can the Minister put the outbreak in context? It is difficult in Cumbria to put it in context. What percentage of farms nationally are affected by the disease? I know that it is difficult—the Minister is very busy—but if he had the opportunity some time to come to speak to farmers in Cumbria, they would welcome the opportunity to tell him what the problems are.

Mr. Brown: I would like to meet farmers who are personally affected. I try to meet farmers to discuss their problems, but I must stay here and manage the disease outbreak first. However, I would like to visit farmers as soon as I can, including my hon. Friend's constituents, to hear from them at first hand. Although it is hard for the farmers who are affected, at the moment, less than 1 per cent. of all livestock farms are under restriction, or affected by the outbreak.

My officials are working now on ensuring that we can speed up the slaughter and disposal arrangements. There is a serious problem in Cumbria. I want to ensure that we have all the resources necessary to deal with what has emerged and with what we are trying to prevent from emerging.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): What financial help will the Government offer to those whose livelihoods and lives are being devastated by the consequences of foot and mouth disease? When the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who has responsibility for tourism, came to the House yesterday, the best that he could do was to say that the Government would be

"looking sympathetically at . . . possible options."—[*Official Report*, 14 March 2001; Vol. 364, c. 1036.]

[Mr. Tony Baldry]

I am sure that the Minister will appreciate that those living in the countryside want not sympathy from the Government, but some action now.

His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales has appreciated how serious the situation is now and the need to get money to those who are affected. May we have some clear indication from the Government that they recognise that many in the countryside need financial help today?

Mr. Brown: I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman has said about the Prince of Wales. It was a kind and generous thing for the Prince to do. I appreciate it very much. I think that the whole House knows that he has extraordinary sympathy for and empathy with farming and the rural community. I met him yesterday and was able to thank him personally for what he has done.

I want to do what I can to help. For all the animals that the Government are purchasing for slaughter because of the need to control the disease, we will pay 100 per cent. compensation. We have drawn down the agrimonetary payments. Of course, the outbreak of foot and mouth disease has informed that. We are spending money on the welfare scheme that I have announced today. That will be at a cost—an unquantifiable cost—to the taxpayer. I am looking at what more I can do, but the hon. Gentleman should not overlook the substantial public expenditure implications of what I have announced today.

Mr. Derek Twigg (Halton): Tomorrow, I shall visit the Grannox rendering plant in my constituency, which is taking thousands of slaughtered animals for disposal. Will my right hon. Friend put on record his recognition of the efforts of the work force at Grannox in dealing with the problem, which, as hon. Members can imagine, is not one of the best jobs in the world at the moment? Does he also appreciate my constituents' concerns about the transportation through my constituency of so many thousands of slaughtered animals and the environmental impact of processing the carcases? Can he give my constituents assurances on those issues?

Mr. Brown: The operation poses no danger at all to my hon. Friend's constituents. I can give him that assurance. I should also like to place on the record my thanks to the work force in his constituency. As he will know, I visited the plant a few months ago, and took the Spanish Minister with me to see it. It is a very impressive operation.

Mr. David Tredinnick (Bosworth): The Minister touched on alternative strategies. Is he aware that there is very strong anecdotal evidence, but not the evidence of trials, that a homeopathic remedy called borax can protect animals from the threat of foot and mouth, that it was used extensively in the 1967 outbreak, and that 7,000 farmers are using it now? Will he undertake to conduct trials to establish whether it is effective, rather than simply relying on anecdotal evidence? Will he so instruct the chief veterinary officer? Is he aware that in the 1967 outbreak, a farmer near Chester unwittingly used borax in a feed, and that although the animals on every farm around had to be put down, that farmer's cows never caught the disease? The reason why that happened was a mystery to Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food officials.

Mr. Brown: I listen to all views on the matter. The Phillips report says that Ministers should keep an open mind about alternative theories, and should not polarise debate between the professional and official view and other points of view. I shall therefore draw the hon. Gentleman's comments to the attention of the chief veterinary officer, upon whose professional advice I am relying in handling the disease outbreak.

Mr. Doug Henderson (Newcastle upon Tyne, North): My right hon. Friend will be aware that six farms in my constituency in Newcastle—in the area where the infection probably began—have been affected, probably all by windborne infection. Has he discussed with his meteorological advisers the weather ahead of us, as the second two weeks in March are usually the windiest part of the year? Is there a potential extra risk because of the weather? If so, will he continue his tough measures, including keeping people out of the countryside wherever possible?

Mr. Brown: I assure my hon. Friend that windborne disease presents very little further risk to his constituents, because, of course, the animals that caused it were killed some time ago. The risk of windborne infectivity comes specifically from pigs. The disease is far more infectious in pigs than it is in cattle and sheep, and a large number of pigs can pump out enough virus for it to form an infective dose and be carried quite some distance by the wind if conditions are right—or wrong, depending on the point of view. Of course we are examining that issue, but it is specifically relevant to large concentrations of pigs. Fortunately—if there is anything fortunate in this—the main problem with which we have to cope now is predominantly, but not entirely, to do with sheep.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): I am grateful for the Minister's statement on the movement of in-lamb ewes back to their home farms, which is particularly important. However, as thousands of ewes from my constituency are now in Pembrokeshire, we have huge logistical problems. One haulier told me that he had to make at least 12 journeys. Will the Minister ensure that those journeys are expedited—under Army escort if necessary? Will he also define "movement into an area of higher risk"? What does that mean? As a vast part of Powys could be covered by that classification, could ewes be moved into an infected area? If lambs are killed in an infected area, what percentage of the market price will farmers receive for them? Will he also give us some evidence—I ask this on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik)—of a link between Welshpool market and outbreaks in Cheshire and Shropshire?

Mr. Brown: We know that infectivity has been transferred through Welshpool market. There is the possibility of a link with the outbreak in Cheshire, and the veterinary authorities are looking at that now. I promise to convey the answer to the hon. Gentleman once we know it. At the moment there is a suspicion, not a confirmation.

The price for animals that the Government are slaughtering to control the disease is the animals' market value. If the hon. Gentleman would like me to give him indicative prices—and they are only indicative, because such matters can go to arbitration if there is a dispute—I will make sure that he gets that information.

It is vital that escorted journeys are strictly controlled. Nothing would be worse for the control of the outbreak than to allow people to start moving around in an uncontrolled way animals that might be carrying the infection.

Mr. Russell Brown (Dumfries): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement today. He is fully aware that, as of this morning, the number of cases in my constituency has risen to 32. I am sure that he will want to place on record his thanks to the local authority, which is co-ordinating all the sterling work in that area.

I have been informed by the local authority that it is taking two days to move from slaughter to burning, but I am told by farmers that it takes considerably longer than that. Those at the sharp end—the farmers—believe that we do not have this fully under control and are not operating as efficiently as possible. If we are to move to wider-area slaughter, there is a need for more resources and for personnel to carry out that work. I hope that if we undertake that, additional resources will be put into the areas.

On the disinfection of vehicles, my area is at breaking point. Everyone is doing their best, but I believe that additional resources are needed now. We need to say how quickly we will get compensation to those who have lost their livelihood by losing their stock. Some of the financial institutions are not being as helpful as I had hoped.

Finally, farmers who have been told that their stock is infected need information that is easy to understand. At present, they are having to plough through tomes of paperwork to understand the process.

Mr. Brown: I have written to every farmer trying to give information about the workings of the helplines and the front-line advice. The Minister of State, Baroness Hayman, is meeting representatives of the main agricultural banks to urge them to do what they can to help, particularly with cash flow, in the present outbreak.

I have asked that where the state has purchased the animals and an agreement has been made, the payment be made to the farmer as quickly as it can be expedited. I have also asked to be told the average time it is currently taking to make payments, but I do not have that information yet.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that vehicles have to be disinfected for every journey. The extra resources that he pleads for are coming. He is right—but we must remember that our priority is to get the animals killed to prevent the spread of the disease. At the moment there is a delay between killing the animals and moving them. I am trying to shorten that delay, and I hope that it will be possible to prevent dead animals from remaining on farms for an inconvenient and distressing length of time.

I am happy to join my hon. Friend in thanking local authorities, not just those employed by central Government, for their very hard work. I discussed the situation yesterday with Ross Finnie, the Minister responsible for agriculture in Scotland.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): Does the Minister accept that there is a good degree of confusion, and perhaps even anger, among farmers and people in the tourist industry? Both occupations are immensely important in my constituency. Yesterday the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said that the countryside was open for business, and the Minister has reiterated a similar message today. Does he accept that that is demonstrably not the case?

In my constituency, the Badminton three-day event, which is the largest single sporting event in the world, has been cancelled. Tomorrow's visit by Her Majesty the Queen to Chippenham, a town of 30,000 people, has been cancelled. The countryside march, involving 500,000 people coming to London, has been cancelled. Church services across my constituency have been cancelled, and schools are closed. It is simply not the case that the countryside is open for business.

If that were so, however, would the Minister really welcome it? Will not the tourist industry, for example, recover only when this appalling disease has been finally eradicated from the countryside? In the meantime, no one should try to pretend that it is perfectly acceptable for people to trudge all over the countryside—the roads, that is, not the fields; people know that they must not go near livestock farms.

As going anywhere in the countryside carries a strong risk of spreading the disease, no one wants to go to Chippenham. Surely the message ought to be that the countryside is closed for business until such time as this killer disease has been eradicated.

Mr. Brown: I agree with the final point, but not with the others. I do not think that we shall re-establish our tourist industries and other rural businesses properly until the outbreak has been exterminated and we can demonstrate that we can maintain that position, but there is no reason why people should not visit Chippenham. Indeed, there is no reason why people should not come to London, and no reason why church services should be cancelled. [HON. MEMBERS: "What about the countryside march?"] That was not cancelled at the Government's request; nor have I, as the Minister, asked for racing events to be cancelled.

If schools in the hon. Gentleman's constituency have been closed as a result of foot and mouth, will he give me their addresses so that I can take up the closures with the Department for Education and Employment as a matter of urgency? There is no disease control reason why schools should be closed.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): As my right hon. Friend will know, the discovery of foot and mouth disease in Cheshire has been a great blow, although there may be a direct link with the markets that he has mentioned. He will also know that the veterinary investigation service is anxious for culls to take place speedily when clinical signs of the disease are readily identifiable. Will he please do all he can to ensure that if

[Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody]

a vet has identified clinical signs, the cull follows as quickly as possible—and that, preferably, disposal by some means follows before long?

Mr. Brown: When a veterinary inspector identifies clinical signs, killing of the animals can be authorised there and then. For 80 per cent. of all animals that are culled to control the disease, authorisation is given there and then on the basis of a clinical inspection by a vet.

I agree with what my hon. Friend has said. I am sorry that the outbreak has reached Cheshire; it must have been incubating there for a while, and now it has come to fruition. I hope that we shall be able to contain it, and then to exterminate it and keep as much of Cheshire as possible disease free.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): People will be relieved to learn of today's announcement of the introduction of a voluntary welfare disposal scheme. Will the Minister confirm that it will cover all uninfected animals that come not only from uninfected farms but from the huge infected areas?

I cannot stress sufficiently the importance of introducing the scheme as soon as possible. There is a build-up of animals in farms in my constituency and, indeed, throughout the country. That applies especially to pig farms. Last week, about 2,000 pigs were born in my constituency. Nature does not stand still: inexorably, the numbers rise.

Will the Minister tell us when the scheme will be up and running? Will he also tell us that it will be as unbureaucratic as possible? Will he please assure my constituents, and constituents throughout the country, that it will apply to pigs, sheep and beef, and—I beg of him—that it will be introduced without delay?

Mr. Brown: The scheme will be introduced without delay, and it will apply to all infected species. The intervention board is working on the plan now, and I hope to have it up and running within days. As I have said, it will apply across the country and is open to all species, but a vet will have to certify that a real welfare risk exists and is being dealt with. I understand the special importance of the scheme to the pig sector because of the impact of movement restrictions on the sector. The model closely follows the first use of the scheme in East Anglia during the outbreak of classical swine fever.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): There have been no problems in my constituency so far, but people are concerned when they hear of the spread of the disease throughout the countryside. To be fair to business people in the countryside, however, they fully support all that the Government are doing.

Only this morning I received a call from a business man who said that he had lost 70 per cent. of his business on the day the outbreak was declared, but nevertheless he wanted all that the Government were doing to be carried through. His main concern was about the need to make clear where people may or may not go in the countryside. There is undoubtedly confusion about that, and he, like me, would like much more use to be made of local media. Would that not make the position plain, and maintain confidence in what the Government are doing? Let us hope that the outbreak could then be brought swiftly to an end.

Mr. Brown *rose—*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Before the Minister replies, let me say that I require short questions. Some hon. Members will be disappointed today, but the shorter the questions, the more hon. Members I can call.

Mr. Brown: My advice—my appeal—to the public is to stay away from farm livestock. That does not mean staying away from every market town or village; it means exactly what it says.

My hon. Friend's constituent has my sympathy. What we are doing is incredibly hard, but it is necessary. It is in everyone's best interests for us to ensure that this disease is extinguished.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The organisers of the countryside rally did not need to wait for the Government to ask them to postpone it. They postponed it themselves, because they are responsible, they love the countryside and they did not want the disease to spread.

Will the Minister ensure that the money he has announced so far will be available as speedily as possible, and that the taskforce knows of the urgent need of those involved in tourism? Some businesses have only one week left before they must close their doors and lay off staff. Rose County Foods, an abattoir in my constituency, had to lay off 100 workers for two weeks, and is only now starting to take them on again. Much of the meat that it kills and bones normally goes to Northern Ireland. What discussions has the Minister had with the Northern Ireland Agriculture Minister to ensure that food supplies are properly checked by hygiene specialists, so that it is clear that they are not diseased, can be packaged in Northern Ireland and distributed to a much wider market?

Mr. Brown: Those are all fair points. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State is working with officials on the relationship between Great Britain's and Northern Ireland's trade. I can give the hon. Gentleman the other assurances that he seeks, including the one about work between Ministers in my Department and the agricultural banks on the cash flow problem that he correctly raised.

The only point that I make about the countryside march is that the Government did not formally ask for its cancellation. Let me express my support and gratitude to the organisers, who took what would have seemed to them to be a responsible approach, and tried to do what they could to help the countryside through these difficult times.

Mr. Mark Todd (South Derbyshire): Farmers need precise information about the risks that they face. Concern has been expressed in my constituency—which is, in part, an infected area—about the movement of lorries from places where there is known to be infection towards livestock abattoirs that are currently operating. We need clarity about how the system works; we also need resources to deal with the strategy set out by my right hon. Friend. Thus far, there is doubt about whether such

resources are available to a sufficient extent, and in the right places, to enable the job that my right hon. Friend described earlier to be done.

Mr. Brown: The resources are being gathered. Where we need more, we are getting more. There is no constraint: the Government intend to defeat this disease.

There are at present no unlicensed movements of livestock in the country—or there should not be. I am grateful to the police for stopping livestock vehicles to check that they are licensed, and that their arrangements are not unlawful. Nothing will perpetuate this disease outbreak longer than the unauthorised movements of livestock that might be at risk.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Notwithstanding the fact that some of the countryside may be open for business, the New Forest is most definitely closed. Indeed, the district council has written to several rural businesses specifically asking them to stop their operations. Will the Minister undertake to look at the suggestions made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) at the Dispatch Box yesterday for providing relief to those businesses?

Mr. Brown: The Government are doing what they can to help. We have set up a taskforce to look at the broader issues. My advice is clear. We all have a part to play in explaining this clearly. The disease risk is from the public coming into contact with farmed livestock and spreading the disease. To avoid that risk I am appealing to everyone to stay away from farmed livestock.

Mr. Nick Ainger (West Carmarthen and South Pembrokeshire): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement about the licensed movement of tack animals, particularly from my constituency—a matter already raised by the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Mr. Livsey). Large numbers of sheep are there and my farmers will much welcome it. If those animals have a definite welfare problem, what price will be paid in compensation? Will it be the market price, as if they had foot and mouth, or not? Will my right hon. Friend ensure full veterinary attendance before a movement takes place? It appears that at Llanidloes abattoir something went wrong and sheep with foot and mouth ended up there and caused serious problems. Finally, my right hon. Friend mentioned that he was going to pursue with two dealers the question of what stock they had distributed around the country. Is he willing to name them?

Hon. Members: Too long.

Mr. Speaker: Order. I know that this is a difficult time, but asking three questions is going over the ration.

Mr. Brown: The movements of animals that were at risk were unwitting. I am not allocating blame; I am explaining the problem and how the Government will deal with it. All current movements must be authorised by a vet. It strikes me as highly suspicious when 23 sheep showing symptoms of the disease turn up in one batch in one abattoir with a certificate from the farmer saying that they were disease free when they left.

I am grateful for what my hon. Friend said about movements from winter holdings. These are intractable problems. The order of dealing with them is to get movement, if we can; to manage them in their geographical location, if that can be done, which requires the co-operation of the dairy farmer; and, if that cannot be done, as an act of mercy the animals have to be killed.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will the Minister ask the Prime Minister to get a grip on the other Departments that should be helping rather than hindering him? Yesterday the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport told people that all the beaches were open. The National Trust has closed everything, including the beaches in my constituency that have no agricultural land adjoining them. People arriving at those beaches will probably go off and get access to the beaches over agricultural land. It is no good the Home Office saying that there is no need to make any changes to election arrangements. We have town council, district council and county council elections happening now. We need action and advice.

Mr. Brown: It is very important that our response to the disease outbreak is proportionate and targeted at the real actions that can spread the disease. We are all on the same side in this. It is important that we talk to each other across Government, with local authorities and across parties to ensure that advice is clear and sensible. If there is no farmed livestock on a beach, it is perfectly reasonable for people to visit it and walk along it. I understand how, when the disease broke out, people wanted to do everything that they could to help, which meant acting on the precautionary principle. I am grateful for that, but we need to make sure that the actions that we are taking now, all of which are designed to be helpful, are targeted at the real problems associated with the spread of the disease.

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Will my right hon. Friend explain the criteria that are being used to select rendering plants to deal with infected carcases? Will he give some assurance to my local farmers, who are very concerned that a local rendering plant in Cheddleton will be taking infected carcases? I am delighted that he will allow farmers to bury carcases, as they did during the 1967 outbreak, so long as the water table makes that permissible.

Mr. Brown: Burial is a route of disposal that is being considered, but it would have to be used under strictly controlled conditions. I can announce that we shall make use of burial in Cumbria, because we have found a possible site. There will certainly not be a blanket presumption that that route can be used in all places. Where it can be used and where it is appropriate, it will be used, but under controlled circumstances.

Nothing that is done with rendering plants will be done in such a way as to risk the spread of the disease. Our plan is to extinguish the disease, not perpetuate it. The considerations involved in selecting plants are wide ranging. We have to look at a number of aspects, but clearly the geographical location of the plant is one factor that we are bearing in mind.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Is the Minister totally satisfied that there is complete availability of disinfectant

[Mrs. Margaret Ewing]

where it is required—at abattoirs, on farms and so on? Will he make it clear whether he now considers it necessary to have disinfectant used at exit and entry points from and into the United Kingdom as well as internally and domestically?

Mr. Brown: Very, very firm action has been taken by my Department to prevent the disease from leaving the United Kingdom now that we know that it is here. As for its being brought in, it is here already, and we are setting out to exterminate it. I have had the availability of disinfectant looked at closely. There is sufficient available. We have licensed for use new disinfectants that will serve our purpose in combating the disease. There were distribution problems, but I believe that the industry has overcome them.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): May I commend my right hon. Friend for his solid principle of safety first, and urge him to continue to stick to it? May I ask him about the particular position of the small businesses of contractors who are excluded from farm premises and are of necessity losing all their livelihood? Will he ensure that the process of diagnosis, slaughter and disposal is made as speedy as possible, in the interests of all?

Mr. Brown: That is exactly what I am trying to do. We are working hard to overcome the logistical difficulties. As for the consequential effect on small businesses that would normally rely on working normally, by far the best step that I can take is to get the countryside back to completely normal working as soon as possible.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): I should like to make a particular point about a slaughterhouse in my constituency that sends trailers to south Wales and Devon with sides of beef for Tesco, and naturally they have to return. There is a risk or fear of contamination. What steps are taken to ensure that the vehicles are properly disinfected?

If we are to have elections on 3 May, will the right hon. Gentleman suggest to the Home Secretary that an application for a postal vote be sent to all farmers on the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food lists?

Mr. Brown: I am very keen to make sure that we stay together as one country and one community, that everybody is treated fairly, and that if they face difficulties, in as much as they can be helped, they should be helped. Yes, we inspect vehicles to make sure they are disinfected. That is an obligation on the industry. I cannot be certain that every vehicle is inspected, but we are in no doubt of the importance of making sure that vehicles are cleaned out properly and thoroughly disinfected.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): I do not know the circumstances that led to the appalling incident in Llanidloes in which a farmer took 23 sheep with suspected foot and mouth to the abattoir. However, will my right hon. Friend tell me what information farmers are given about the disease by way of leaflets, videos or whatever? They might not have encountered the disease before but they must be as vigilant as can be; early detection will mean that we can soon stamp out the disease.

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right to appeal for vigilance. He is also right to say that many younger farmers will not have seen foot and mouth disease previously. I have written to every farmer in the country to explain the symptoms and to set out where advice can be found. I hope that is of some practical value.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Setting aside the strong rumours that officials were inquiring as to the availability of railway sleepers suitable for funeral pyres three weeks before the first outbreak, will the Minister now answer the question that I tabled last week? I asked him when he was first advised of a potential risk to animal health from imports from Africa.

Mr. Brown: If there can be a red herring in an animal disease outbreak, that is it. This is nothing to do with imports from Africa, as far as anyone in the Ministry knows. The strain of virus, which has, of course, now been typed, is found in about 23 regions right around the world. Work is going on to find out, first, how it got into our country—I agree with the hon. Gentleman that it must have come from abroad, as it could not possibly have been incubating here for 30 years or whatever. Secondly, we want to know how the disease got to the point of first infectivity, which we believe to be the farm at Heddon-on-the-Wall. We are all too familiar with the rest of the story. Work is being done in the Ministry. When it is complete, I shall consult on it. I promise that the hon. Gentleman will be among those who are consulted.

The business about railway sleepers being purchased because we knew the disease was there three weeks before anything was said is another red herring.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): When the Minister looks at the map of the outbreaks in Cumbria and then applies the policy of killing everything within 3 km of every outbreak or suspected outbreak, he will know that nothing much will be left in between. I and my constituents will, with deep regret, support that policy of complete extermination, provided it can be done quickly.

In Cumbria, the story is that farmers spot definite foot and mouth, there are delays in having it confirmed—understandably—and vets do not have the authority on the spot to begin the slaughter. Please can they be given that authority? We trust Ministry vets to know what they are doing—let them bring in the slaughter teams and kill the animals immediately so that the disease is not spread.

May we please have the powers to close all the roads around the area? I know that MAFF is considering that. We need those powers this afternoon—Cumbria county council is begging for them.

Finally, I know that I should not bounce the Minister at the Dispatch Box, but in view of the severity of his announcement for my constituency, I should be very grateful if he could spare 15 minutes later today or at any time tonight to meet me.

Mr. Brown: The situation is extraordinarily serious in Cumbria—including in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency. I express my sorrow for what has happened

to his constituents and also my solidarity with them. I give the right hon. Gentleman this commitment: if I visit Cumbria, as I am trying to do, to meet farmers' representatives—clearly, it will have to be their representatives—I shall do so on all-party basis, so I shall make sure that all the county's Members of Parliament have the opportunity to be present and to take part.

I am not advised that road closures are necessary for disease control reasons. On the question of veterinary authority, I am advised that in 80 per cent. of all the current cases, slaughter of the animals was carried out because of clinical examination by the vet, on the spot, there and then.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): May I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that when members of the public ask regional MAFF offices in north Wales for advice about the problem, they are referred to the offices of Members of Parliament? Surely that is not good enough. Will he ensure that people are given up-to-date advice? I realise that it is a fast-moving scene, but please can better advice be given to the offices and can they pass it on when necessary?

Finally, why was no Wales Office Minister formally invited to join the taskforce yesterday?

Mr. Brown: My understanding is that it is a United Kingdom taskforce and that the devolved authorities are represented on it. I met the Assembly's Minister for Rural Affairs yesterday to discuss the agricultural aspects of this matter. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we meet monthly to discuss the agenda for the Council of Ministers, but we also deal with other agriculture matters. Much of our time yesterday was taken up in discussing a co-ordinated approach on the foot and mouth outbreak. That is especially important because one of the centres of difficulty straddles the England-Wales border, while another straddles the England-Scotland border.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): South Hams is mercifully free from foot and mouth; all the area south of Dartmoor is also clear. Licences are the problem. Will the Minister ensure that licences for pig slaughter are speeded up for the local abattoir in the area that is free of foot and mouth—Henry Lang in Ashburton? It could be more fully used.

Secondly, will the Minister issue licences for farmers to move animals from one part of the constituency to another, where the distance is more than 6 km? Many farmers have animals stranded in various parts of my constituency that cannot be brought back to base.

Mr. Brown: I hope that the announcement I made today will deal with the second of the problems identified by the hon. Gentleman. As he knows, there is already some limited local movement—within a 5 km radius or for a 10 km road journey. Today's announcement is intended to help in the circumstances that the hon. Gentleman describes.

On the hon. Gentleman's first question, licensing is an issue for local authorities on the spot. However, I shall ensure that the constituency case he raises is drawn to the attention of the local supervising authorities.

Mr. Duncan: The position of pigs is desperate and urgent. Welcome though the pig disposal scheme is, we cannot afford to wait a few days for its implementation. It really must happen immediately. Like the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), I have a farm in my constituency where there are 2,000 pigs. The farmer has no money at all; he has one day's feed left and by tomorrow night he will not know what to do. Can the Minister assure the House that the scheme will be implemented within 48 hours and that that farmer and others—simply as a result of a visit from a vet—can slaughter their animals in the knowledge that they will receive proper compensation?

Mr. Brown: The scheme about which the hon. Gentleman asks is voluntary; it is not one whereby we compulsorily purchase the animals. The scheme is voluntary, and application for it is a matter of commercial judgment for the farmer. I shall get it open as soon as I can. I give the hon. Gentleman an absolute assurance that officials are working on it now, both at MAFF and at the Intervention Board. To make use of the arrangements, a veterinary certificate is required to state that the welfare of animals is compromised or at risk of being compromised.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Will the right hon. Gentleman clear up a point that has been causing concern? He will recall that where a farmer is on a premium scheme and an animal is lost through force majeure, the farmer has to give notice to MAFF, and there is a great deal of attendant paperwork. When a farmer has had his animals slaughtered, would it be possible for MAFF to deem that due notice had been given, instead of the farmer having to sit down straight away and do the paperwork?

Mr. Brown: We are looking at how to protect the position of the premium scheme for farmers whose animals have been slaughtered. I shall write to the hon. Gentleman on the technical point that he raises, but I can state the principle: the Commission has allowed us to invoke the force majeure rules on the five principal livestock premium schemes. In principle, the case that he describes will receive the premium—unless there is some caveat that I do not know about. I shall write to the hon. Gentleman about the administration of the scheme.

Mr. Brian Cotter (Weston-super-Mare): As the Minister knows, the farming crisis also affects small businesses and tourism. Will the Government consider relief on rates, VAT and business rates? Councils would like to give business rate relief, but they do not have the money. Will he urge fellow Ministers to promote the marketing of tourism, both now and, especially, at the end of the crisis?

Mr. Brown: The taskforce led by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment is considering all those issues. I have an enormous amount of sympathy for the hon. Gentleman's final point—about the need to get things moving again once we come through the crisis. Clearly, there is a role for marketing and for tourist promotion.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): There is no foot and mouth in my constituency, but there are several sheep farmers whose ewes are now lambing. The lambs are dying at night because the farmers cannot move the ewes back to the lambing sheds, as they cannot get a response

[Mr. David Prior]

from MAFF to get licences. Will the Minister assure us that he will put more resources into the handling of those licence applications?

Mr. Brown: Yes, we are doing so as a matter of urgency.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): As the Minister rightly wants to maintain the atmosphere of national unity, which has been prevalent in the House today, will he very gently talk to the Prime Minister and suggest that he heed the advice from the political leaders of parties in local government that it is not appropriate to hold the county council elections on 3 May?

Mr. Brown: The best that I can do for the hon. Gentleman is to forward the representations that he has made.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): The Minister is absolutely right to respond to the dire situation by announcing today an enhanced, more proactive slaughter policy, but may I ask him a question somewhat the converse of that asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean)? Will he assure the House that he has adequate legal cover for the extended slaughter programme as dangerous contact animals may be involved? In the interests of natural justice, will he tell the House what representations by farmers may be entertained in borderline cases? Clearly, farmers in such cases do not want to lose their stock, but, perhaps rightly, Ministry vets insist that the animals should be slaughtered.

Mr. Brown: That is a very difficult matter. I am satisfied that, on the basis of legal advice, I certainly have the powers to implement what I have announced to the House, because the overriding priority is, of course, the national interest and the Government's legal obligation to exterminate the disease. I am trying to deal as sympathetically as I can with the hard cases that inevitably occur in such circumstances, but I must tell everyone that the extermination of the disease has to be my first priority.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): Does the Minister recognise that where ewes are trapped a long way from their holdings, they may be not on extensive farms but on small parcels of land? They may be on bare earth or stubble; and they may have been fed on turnip or beet tops, but now probably nothing more than big-bale straw. Many of those ewes and their lambs are dying, so the welfare problem is arising now. Will he ensure that the licence applications are attended to very quickly, that farmers to do not have to use a computer—80 per cent. of them in my constituency do not have one—and that transport arrangements are facilitated, because it is literally a matter of hours as to whether they can get their flocks back in time? If they cannot do so, the slaughter will be much more extensive than anyone would like, and rotting and bloated ewes and lambs in the field is the last thing that we want as it will create yet another major disposal problem.

Mr. Brown: Everything that the right hon. Gentleman says is true, and we shall do our best, where we can, to get the animals moved, but—he knows what the "but" is—that must be done consistently with the overriding importance of controlling the spread of the disease. With that very important caveat, I agree with all that he has said.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): The chairman of my local NFU, Mr. Graham Clay, with whom I had a discussion this morning, is deeply concerned about the delays, which have been mentioned time and again today, especially as there is now foot and mouth in my constituency. Does the Minister accept that the delays represent one of the most critical features of the problem? They must be dealt with, and speed is of the essence in the slaughter and throughout the entire process. Does the Minister accept that there could be a problem with the importation of airline food, which is apparently now making its way commercially into the pigswill industry? Will he look into that matter because, apparently, it could be a source of further infection?

Mr. Brown: My understanding is that the food from airlines should not make its way into pigswill because there is a special regime for airline foodstuffs. However, if the hon. Gentleman wants to give me chapter and verse of the allegation, I will have it looked at very quickly indeed.

I am sorry that there is foot and mouth disease in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and I hope that he will pass on my sorrow and regret to his constituent. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is important that we get on top of the problem as quickly as we can. That is why I have come to the House today to announce these measures, and I know that I have the support of the House in seeing them through.

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): What does the Minister say to my constituents, Ian and Katrin Thompson of Crust Cottage, Snargate in Romney Marsh, whose applications for a licence to move their lambing ewes were twice lost by his Department? Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, who were already at their wits' end, had to fill in the same forms for the same animals on three different occasions. As Mrs. Thompson says in her letter, a copy of which I forwarded to the Minister yesterday,

"the consequences of foot and mouth are dire, but necessary; the consequences of bureaucratic bungling are not much less, but are so very unnecessary. Why, why, why?"

Mr. Brown: I am not sure whether the right hon. and learned Gentleman is describing licensing arrangements for which the local authority is responsible, or those for which the Ministry is responsible, but, whichever it is, I shall have the constituency case drawn to the attention of the appropriate officials and get an explanation. I cannot give him an explanation today because I am not familiar with the individual case.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): The Minister will be aware of the concerns raised by veterinary surgeons in Hampshire about the inadequacy of disinfection procedures and, especially, the guidance for using them. In particular, the manufacturers of the disinfectant, Virkon, which is approved by MAFF, recommend a dilution ratio of 1:100, yet apparently MAFF's guidelines recommend a ratio of

1:1,300—a difference of thirteen times. Clearly, there is a huge problem, so will the Minister give some clear guidance to farmers and vets on what to do?

Mr. Brown: In all this, I am acting on professional advice. I will have the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises looked at by the veterinary authorities. If there is an anomaly, I will ensure that it is corrected, but, in any event, I will write to him with the answer to the points he makes.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien (Eddisbury): Following the very distressing news that, since 11 am yesterday, there is an outbreak in Cheshire, two miles from my family home in the southern part of my constituency, I have received numerous representations from farmers and all those involved in the rural community. Of course that raises the spectre and the deep fears of the 1967 outbreak, which affected the Cheshire plains so devastatingly. My constituents are desperate to know that the vets will be given the autonomy and authority to carry pistols and to shoot animals on clinical suspicion, as proved to be successful in 1967. They want to be able to bury the animals immediately, where clay lining can be found for the pits. Often clay occurs naturally near the farmhouses in the area. There are many mounds of buried animals from 1967 behind the farm houses, but no farmer in Cheshire has ever caught anything as a result of that successful interment in 1967.

Furthermore, there are many rumours and reports of vented lorries and of tarpaulins flying off the so-called sealed wagons that travel to the Widnes rendering plant along the main arterial routes in my constituency, so many farms are obviously within the airborne spread risk areas. Although I do not have the evidence and, therefore, cannot raise the matter with the Minister directly, which is how he responded previously, there are serious concerns. So, if he could urge the police to man those routes to ensure that that risk is stopped, my constituents would be given more reassurance.

If a state of emergency is necessary, may I urge the right hon. Gentleman not to be shy in discussing it with the Prime Minister so that the necessary powers can be taken if needed. I recognise that that would be dire in terms of the political firmament, but if it is necessary to help control the spread of the disease, I urge him to consider it carefully.

Mr. Brown: I have all the powers necessary to control the disease, and the Government will do whatever is necessary to bear down on it. That is what I am doing. I know that the hon. Gentleman's constituents will be anxious about road movement and, therefore, the possibility of airborne disease from the lorries. The chances of that are as close to zero as anything can be.

Hon. Members should remember that the incubation period of the disease is a fortnight on average. Of course the disease is a biological phenomenon, so there may be some movement in the profile, but it cannot possibly be windborne from the lorries; it is far more likely to come from Welshpool market. The vets have the authority to do as the hon. Gentleman suggests. That is precisely the route that has been taken with 80 per cent. of all the animals killed so far. We do not wait for laboratory tests; the vets can issue the instruction on clinical diagnoses—in other words, on first sight.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): At the outset of the crisis, the Minister expressed his concern that even the time required for him to participate in debates in the House might damage his ability and that of his fellow Ministers and officials to look after the crisis as best they could. Given that that was his view then, can he put his hand on his heart and say to the House that his ability and that of other Ministers and officials would not be damaged much more severely if we were to proceed with a general election while such a crisis is raging? Or does he agree with me that any Government who went ahead with a general election under these circumstances, when they have a year of their time left to run, would fulfil the worst fears of the electorate—that the convenience of politicians comes before the interests of their constituents?

Mr. Brown: Let me say this to the farming community: while I am the Minister, I will work night and day to get the disease extinguished. That is my responsibility and public duty, and I shall fulfil it to the very best of my ability. The use of my time in the early days of the outbreak, when a response had to be devised and veterinary officials relied upon my support in government, was extremely important. That was the only point I was making. I do not begrudge coming to the House or begrudge the dialogue between us here. The testing of the Government's policies in a constructive atmosphere is the right way for a parliamentary democracy to work.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): Cheshire was devastated in 1967 by foot and mouth. We now have one outbreak on the Shropshire border, but the rest of the county is still clean and we want to keep it that way. May I register again my strongest objections and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) on behalf of farmers in the east of the county about the movement of dead stock to the processing plant at Widnes? Those farmers are not convinced that the decontamination of vehicles is foolproof. I hope that the Minister will understand their concerns.

May I also express the view that rapid reaction is essential, which is probably why we went a little wrong at the beginning? I welcome the fact that vets can now shoot animals as soon as they diagnose the clinical signs of the disease and that there will be on-farm burial when that is appropriate.

Mr. Brown: There is nothing new in the veterinary authorities' ability to order livestock for destruction once they have examined them and identified there and then the clinical signs of the disease. The word of the vet is enough; we do not have to wait for the test results to come through if a vet identifies the clinical signs. I repeat that in 80 per cent. of the cases in which animals have been destroyed that is what has happened.

On the question of vehicles, the hon. Lady's constituents have my wholehearted sympathy. I am not going to take any risks with the spread of the disease. Indeed, right from the beginning, we have clamped down on movements. The risk comes not from the movement of dead animals in lorries, but from the movement of live animals from infected to uninfected herds. The incubation

[Mr. Brown]

period for the disease is a fortnight, so the events that caused the infectivity on the Shropshire border must have taken place some time ago. We have caught it; we have isolated it; and I want to do what I can to work with the hon. Lady to keep her constituents' land and that of their friends and neighbours disease free.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): It was a clear recommendation of the 1968 report on the 1967 outbreak that burial was preferable to burning as a means of disposing of carcases. In Cheshire, north Shropshire and the Maelor, 25 JCBs are working full time. The Minister has said that he will use the Army for logistical support, but will he consider using its machinery and personnel immediately to implement a burial policy?

Mr. Brown: All the points that the hon. Gentleman perfectly properly raises are under consideration. We have been using contractors to carry out the destruction work so far, and we have used burning. There are a range of reasons why, in the circumstances that we have faced so far, we have not adopted a burial strategy, but it is an option that we could use. If we require the support of the armed forces to help with the physical work as well as the logistical work with which they are already helping, that option will be available to me. I will have no hesitation in using it if I am told it is necessary, and nor will the Ministry of Defence have any hesitation in providing its support.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): Given the price collapses facing the sector, is the Minister any nearer making a decision on introducing a private storage scheme?

Mr. Brown: I am considering that option. The hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) suggested it for the pig sector, but it is clearly an issue for the sheep sector, too. It is not the preferred route that is being recommended to me by officials, but I am keeping everything carefully under review, including the impact on markets.

Mr. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (Cotswold): This may be the last in the long succession of questions that the Minister has answered, and I think that he has dealt with the House in a very sympathetic manner. He will have heard my question to the Leader of the House, and I hope that he will be able to deal with that matter.

Another issue relates to my constituent, Mr. Tom Fudge, of Neighbrook farm, Aston Magna near Moreton-in-Marsh, who sent a load of sheep to be slaughtered this week. They made only 20p per kilogram compared to a price of 34p per kilogram before the foot and mouth outbreak. It appears that some abattoirs and supermarkets may be engaged in some form of price cutting to farmers, which is totally wrong when the price of meat in the shops is higher than it was before the outbreak. Will the Minister make representations to the slaughter industry and the supermarkets that they should give British farmers a fair price during the outbreak? Will he also guarantee that the compensation to British farmers will be based on the pre-outbreak price? If they were paid at the price of 20p per kilogram, that would be exploitation by the Ministry.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman's point about the rates that the Government pay when we purchase animals for destruction is a fair one. I will write to him setting out the average prices that are being paid. As he knows, each case can be contested and there is an arbitration procedure. I have urged the big retailers and others in the trade to behave responsibly and fairly throughout the supply chain. I have received a sympathetic and supportive response.

As the hon. Gentleman knows, there are particular problems in the sheep sector, because many lambs are bred for the continental market and do not meet the specifications of the main part of the United Kingdom market. They are not therefore a displacing product on the market and are not specifically bred for the main demand in the UK. Prices are depressed for market specification reasons and because supply is in excess of demand.

Mr. Speaker: The Minister has answered every hon. Member who wished to ask a question. The House would wish me to thank him for his patience.

Points of Order

2.57 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. A few moments ago in my question to the Minister, I inadvertently indicated that some schools in my constituency had closed as a result of the outbreak. What I meant to say was that Wiltshire county council has considered whether to close the schools. However, as far as I am aware, none of them has been closed.

Mr. Speaker: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's point will have been noted.

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is it in order for me to reiterate that I fully understand that the rural community wants to do everything necessary to assist farmers and others who rely on visitors to extinguish the disease?

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. I am sure that you were absolutely right to thank the Minister for the time that he has given to the House, and we would like to thank you for ensuring that the exchanges were able to continue. They demonstrated Parliament at its best.

Sadly, I raise a point of order because I wonder whether you have received notification from the Secretary of State for Defence of his wish to come to the House to make a statement. I was telephoned by my local radio station last night about a £200 million investment, including £3 million for my constituency, for barracks accommodation for soldiers. I have received no information from the Secretary of State, so I approached his office this morning, but I have still not received any information. That is appalling.

The Minister for the Armed Forces is in his place and I heard him on my local radio station this morning telling my constituents about the investment, but he has not had the courtesy to let me know about it so that I can tell my constituents what on earth is going on. I wonder whether you, Mr. Speaker, would deprecate the behaviour of Ministers in the MOD who—unlike the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food who has made such a great effort—have made no effort to keep the House informed.

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is trying to draw me into an argument. All I can say is that I have had no approach from the Ministers that he has mentioned.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Further to that previous point of order, Mr. Speaker. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) said, it has been extremely good of you to give us so much time for questions.

Mr. Speaker: I am obliged to the hon. Gentleman; praise from him is praise indeed.

BILL PRESENTED

ADOPTION AND CHILDREN

Mr. Secretary Milburn, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Secretary Straw, Mr. Secretary Murphy, Mr. John Hutton and Jane Kennedy, presented a Bill to restate and amend the law about adoption and amend the Children Act 1989: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 66].

ESTIMATES DAY

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

VOTE ON ACCOUNT: 2001-02

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Considered in relation to weapons of mass destruction, pursuant to Resolution [14 March]

[Relevant documents: Eighth Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, Session 1999-2000, on Weapons of Mass Destruction, HC 407, and the Government's Response thereto, Cm 4884]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That resources, not exceeding £410,620,000, be authorised, on account, for use during the year ending on 31st March 2002, and that a sum, not exceeding £508,690,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for the year ending on 31st March 2002 for expenditure by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.—[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

3 pm

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate, which is based on the report on weapons of mass destruction published by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs in August 2000. I am pleased to say that it is a unanimous report. I am very grateful to my colleagues on the Committee for the dedication, diligence and teamwork that went into producing it.

The inquiry was wide ranging, covering national missile defence, the major nuclear treaties, conventions on chemical and biological weapons and control regimes. We took evidence from academics and the Foreign Secretary, and received a vast amount of written evidence from a wide variety of sources. We visited the disarmament conference in Geneva, the United Nations in New York and our American counterparts in Washington, and we drew on the experience of our specialist advisers, to whom I pay tribute. We also had in mind the fact that the subject had previously been tackled by the Committee in the 1994-95 Session.

The inquiry was timely, partly because of the plans for national missile defence, which were being considered by President Clinton. In addition, there were new Presidents in the Russian Federation and the United States and various review conferences were approaching, such as the conference on biological and toxin weapons this year and the non-proliferation treaty conference in 2005.

Arms control is not in the headlines as much as it was during the cold war in the 1970s and 1980s—indeed, our visit to Geneva was extremely depressing, as the conference has not been able even to agree an agenda—yet the subject is of vital interest to the future of mankind. The threats are now of a different nature. The regional threats between India and Pakistan, the middle east—including Iran and Iraq—and North Korea are a concern. Most worrying is the new scale of threats from terrorists and other non-state parties. I think in particular of the 1995 sarin attack in Tokyo. We were all alarmed by the Foreign Office statement, which said:

"100 kilograms of anthrax released from the top of a tall building in a densely populated area could kill up to 3 million people."

How should we respond to such new threats? The Committee believed that various methods might be effective, such as diplomatic persuasion, arms control, deterrence and other defensive measures. Unfortunately, the situation is not encouraging, in part because of the rejection by the United States Senate of the comprehensive test ban treaty, CTBT, the failure to start negotiations on the fissile material cut-off treaty, FMCT and the poor state of bilateral nuclear-arms control efforts between the Russian Federation and the United States.

It is not my task to summarise the whole report, which I commend to the House. Instead, I shall single out key recommendations. The Government should make renewed efforts to break the deadlock on the FMCT negotiations, which have yet to start in Geneva, and should urge the United States President to resubmit the CTBT to the Senate. They should use their position in the G8 and the European Union to accelerate progress in helping the Russian Government to dispose of their surplus nuclear materials.

The key tests for the chemical weapons convention will be whether it can effectively tackle states and parties who are possibly cheating. We highlighted the delays in the implementation of the inspection regime and recommended that the Government urge the United States Government to rescind their power of presidential veto over challenge inspections. We noted that the biological and toxin weapons convention, which entered into force in 1975, did not include a verification process, which severely undermines its credibility. Again, the United States argued for the right to refuse intrusive inspections on grounds of commercial confidentiality. We urge the Government to impress on the United States that a strong verification procedure is a viable goal, and to exert maximum efforts to that end.

Progress on the non-proliferation treaty was slightly more encouraging because of the 2000 review conference and the joint statement by the five nuclear weapons states in which they pledge an

"unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals".

We welcomed that, but it remains to be seen whether that declared aspiration will mean much in practice.

Understandably, the greater part of the substantial press comment on our report related to national missile defence, on which President Clinton set out four criteria: assessments of the threat; the arms control and strategic environment; the cost; and the technical assessment. The Committee questioned whether national missile defence, as it was then called, was necessarily the most appropriate and effective response. We learned that the threat of rogue states—later to be called states of concern—was exaggerated and hyped. Some people claimed that there were commercial pressures; others referred to the failure of the United States to recognise the positive changes in, for example, the Korean peninsula.

We learned that the NMD could be destabilising, in particular because of the threat to the anti-ballistic missile treaty and our relations with Russia and China, and of the danger of undermining arrangements that are based on mutually assured destruction. There were doubts about technical feasibility because of the failure of tests and questions such as whether the missiles could easily be countered by measures such as decoys. In addition, the temptation towards unilateralism might give the United States a false sense of security.

The Committee asked whether the additional security that NMD offers outweighs the negative impact of its deployment on strategic arms control. We were aware that it poses acute dilemmas for the United Kingdom. To refuse a request by the United States for the use or upgrading of Fylingdales would have profound consequences for relations between this country and the United States. We therefore recommended that the Government articulate the strong concerns about NMD in the UK; that they encourage the United States to seek other ways in which to reduce the perceived threats; and that they impress on the United States that it cannot necessarily assume unqualified UK co-operation in the event of its unilaterally abrogating the ABM treaty.

A number of significant changes have taken place since we published our report. I must emphasise that from now on I shall give personal views, based, I hope, on what the Committee would broadly wish me to say. I cannot give its opinions because it has not had the chance to reconsider the issues. There have been serious developments—especially with the advent of President Bush—that have implications for NMD. I still have profound doubts that it is the most appropriate and effective response to the clear threats that exist. It is preferable to address those by building strong international non-proliferation regimes by giving economic, political and military incentives to dissuade countries from developing missiles. However, the signals that we are receiving from the new Administration indicate that they are determined to go ahead. There appears to be strong consensus in the Administration and across parties in Congress. The Administration's position is, perhaps, indicated by the choice of Donald Rumsfeld, with his background, as Secretary of Defence.

If that is so, we in the UK and Europe have two options: to protest or to engage in dialogue with the new Administration. We have to consider which will give us greater leverage. Simple criticism of the desire of the United States to defend itself against threats will be wholly counterproductive. The starting point is that the US is a key friend and ally of this country. It is of the utmost importance that our relationship should be a key priority and that it should be preserved. Nevertheless, friendship involves honest assessments and a willingness to point out the dangers. As a start, we must propose a joint threat assessment by our Government and that of the US relating to the ballistic missile threat from rogue states.

There are a number of serious questions to be raised at this stage.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): I intervene at this point only because, as the right hon. Gentleman said, he is going beyond the debates that we had in the Select Committee. On threat assessment, does he agree that one of the major problems that we discovered in our discussions with American representatives is that although they have an extremely effective means of assessing the capability of rogue states to launch a pre-emptive strike on America, they have very little ability to evaluate their intent to do so? In that regard, does he agree that it is essential for us to have a rational, sane analysis of the threat, not the capability?

Mr. Anderson: I fully agree with the hon. Gentleman, who made a distinguished contribution to the Committee. Such a distinction is of the utmost importance and might assist in the joint technical assessment by ourselves and the US that I suggested.

The questions that I hope will provide a platform for the debate concern the uncertainties surrounding the form of national missile defence envisaged by the Bush Administration. Will it be on the same lines as that of the Clinton Administration? Will President Clinton's four criteria still apply? The Bush Administration have already dropped the word "national" and are emphasising, perhaps for marketing reasons, that the dangers posed by an unintended missile launch will have to be considered.

The Bush Administration's review began in mid-February. The outcome is not yet known, but from early indications it may confidently be said that the President would prefer a more robust defence system than the one outlined by his predecessor, which could include sea and space-based components. If so, we need to examine those matters very carefully. Certainly a sea-based system would not be cheap; nor would it be quick. According to the Pentagon's most recent judgment, if the process were accelerated, an initial deployment could be made in the financial year 2011, but otherwise not before 2014, with possible full deployment in 2020. During those 19 or 20 years the international landscape could change dramatically. A sea-based system would be technologically very challenging.

It has been suggested that there might be concentration on the boost phase. The desire for multiple opportunities to intercept attacking missiles is understandable, but defence experts have highlighted a key concern about the boost phase—the shortage of time available to make an informed decision. Such a system would depend on an instantaneous automatic reaction. The decision would, in effect, be made by computers rather than humans, and there would be the potential for serious accidents and misunderstandings to arise, with terrifying consequences.

What should now be the UK's response? I recommend the International Security Information Service briefing published this month, called "National Missile Defence: The Role of RAF Fylingdales and Menwith Hill" by Dr. David Wright. The Committee emphasised some of the dilemmas that we in the UK would face in making a decision on NMD and Fylingdales as well as our traditional role as a perceived bridge between the United States and our partners in Europe. Of course, European countries have shown greater scepticism about the whole concept than have our Government. It would be unwise to make a firm decision about NMD until we have a clear outline of the new Administration's plans, so we should await the outcome of their review.

What exactly would be expected of Fylingdales? It is likely that it would still have a key role unless the United States decided to rely entirely on a boost phase interception. Would Europe definitely be under the umbrella? Would Russia be included? There is, of course, still no proof that such a system would work. We remind ourselves that even the more limited Clinton project largely failed each of the tests, with only one test being a partial success. At the end of the day, the UK will have to weigh up the options and decide what is in our best interests. Will NMD increase our security or put us at greater risk?

I also pose the basic question of what would be the impact of NMD on strategic stability, particularly if the new Bush Administration included extensive land and/or

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sea-based systems and if they were deployed without Russian or Chinese agreement, which would abrogate the ABM treaty. That has to be given the highest priority because it has potentially disastrous consequences. The Select Committee outlined its fears. Last week, China announced an 18 per cent. increase in defence spending in response to drastic changes in the world security situation, focusing particularly on Taiwan. I noticed that today's *Financial Times* contained a suggestion that even the Chinese Government may be moderating their position.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): The right hon. Gentleman is making a most important point. The People's Republic of China is augmenting its defence spending at a time when there is no perceptible threat to it whatever. Will he speculate why China should be making that potentially aggressive increase in weapons of mass destruction? As China has not participated in the non-proliferation treaty or other treaties to limit the spread of such weapons, is that not a grave development, especially in view of the potential conflict over Taiwan?

Mr. Anderson: It is a grave development partly because of a potential spill-over into theatre missile defence and the perceived effects on Taiwan and partly because of the Chinese criticism of the hegemony of the United States in what is now a single-superpower world. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the article in the *Financial Times*, which makes it clear that China may conceivably be moderating its position in the light of the forthcoming visit to the United States of a senior Chinese official.

Russia is of course deeply concerned about some of the apparent attitudes in the United States Administration to the acutely sensitive issue of the anti-ballistic missile treaty of 1972. There are two points to make about that. First, officials in the United States Administration have claimed that the ABM is ancient history. That is certainly not true. Although some claim that because the Soviet Union is no more, its treaty obligations no longer exist, the Russian Federation has, in international law, stepped into the shoes of and assumed the obligations of the old USSR. Secondly, last month, the American Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, said that he believed that Russian objections to NMD were "not really serious". That is a highly dangerous suggestion. The big question is whether the Russians are adopting an absolutist rejection of NMD or whether they are in a negotiating position. We must ask whether they are trying to gain access to American technology, which the US would be unwilling to give. What Colonel General Ivashov said on 12 March in relation to national missile defence is highly worrying.

There is real danger of an escalating arms response, as we have seen with the Chinese response of a potential increase in intercontinental ballistic missiles. There is also danger to the whole system of arms control, which would unravel. The *Financial Times* stated last week:

"Washington must think long and hard about the direct and the indirect consequences of its missile defence plans".

The litmus test is surely whether the end result will be enhanced or increased instability.

In my judgment, there is no topic in foreign policy of greater importance than weapons of mass destruction. I hope that our report will be seen as an important contribution to the public debate; it certainly received extensive and largely positive press coverage. The role of the Foreign Affairs Committee is to monitor the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Where appropriate, we have been highly critical of it. In this area, however, the United Kingdom has a record of which to be proud. Mr. Dhanapala, the Under-Secretary General for disarmament affairs at the United Nations, said:

"Britain's leadership in the fields of disarmament and non-proliferation has been impressive indeed."

Mr. Dhanapala commended the United Kingdom on leading by example.

In this highly dangerous world, there is still no room for complacency, however. In 1962, at the height of the Cuban missile crisis, the then Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, said:

"We were eyeball to eyeball and the other fellow just blinked".

That is how close we were; we hope that we never get that close again. Whether we can avoid that will depend to a large extent on the decisions that we make now about how to control those deadly weapons of mass destruction. That is our responsibility at the start of the 21st century. The stakes are high. On behalf of the Committee, I look forward to hearing colleagues' views on this most vital of subjects.

3.22 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): The report is extremely good and comprehensive. There is little in it with which I disagree, save perhaps in relation to the assertion of the Foreign Affairs Committee that any question of the relaxation of sanctions against Iraq must be conditional on Saddam Hussein allowing the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission to have access to sites where weapons of mass destruction may be being manufactured. I shall come back to that in due course.

I have two initial reservations about the report, the first of which relates to the opening paragraph of the elegant memorandum submitted to the Select Committee by Sir Michael Quinlan, a most sagacious and experienced commentator in these areas. He said that the use of the expression "weapons of mass destruction"

"lumps together weapons that differ widely in key respects and so need markedly different policy handling."

My second reservation, which has been freely acknowledged by the right hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), is the fact that, since 25 July 2000, a great deal has changed. One may be critical of the fact that it has taken nine months to secure an opportunity to debate the report, but that may reflect the fact that the risk to the United Kingdom from weapons of mass destruction is probably rather lower than it has been at any time during the last 25 or 30 years, or even going back to 1945.

The national missile defence debate has moved on, not least because of the change of Administration in Washington. I still believe that the current proposal is unwise and proceeds on a flawed assessment of threat, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) said a moment ago. The traditional definition of threat involves analysing capability and intention. It is reasonable to assume that there is a risk that capability will be acquired by certain states. However, even if it were, would those states use weapons of mass destruction in the certain knowledge that the likely response would be overwhelming and catastrophic?

I observe that the "states of concern" under the Clinton Administration have become "rogue states" again. There is some importance in language of that kind. I freely confess that my view is half-developed, but it bears further examination. If one treats a state like a rogue state, it is more likely to behave like one. It is true that some regimes are intransigent, some cheat and some enter into agreements with no real intention of keeping them. However, we must recognise that improved intelligence-gathering makes deception, at least in the nuclear arena, more difficult. Weapons tests and missile launches are now easily detected.

I am concerned that describing states as rogue states and treating them as such means that political change is unlikely to be encouraged. Of the four so-called rogue states that bulk substantially in the minds of policy makers in the United States, with the exception of Iraq, the other three—North Korea, Iran and Libya—are all states in which there has been, or is, contemplation of political change. If they are lumped together in a single category and described in a deprecatory way, we may inhibit the very political change that would make safer our lives and those of people in those countries.

Many people hoped that the election of a new Administration in the United States would create an opportunity to reinvigorate the multilateral processes that control the means and opportunities for the development, use and testing of weapons of mass destruction. To use a colloquialism, the jury is out on that. However, there are signs that the new American Administration and Congress favour a unilateral approach to strategic issues. We all remember the Senate's failure to ratify the comprehensive test ban treaty. Taking that decision together with the apparent determination to press ahead with a system of ballistic missile defence, it is not too difficult to identify a trend.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): With reference to the point that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is making, it is worth pointing out that, on 3 February, Mr. Rumsfeld said:

"let me be clear to our friends here in Europe: we will consult with you. The United States has no interest in deploying defences that would separate us from our friends and allies."

Mr. Campbell: I was in Munich, and attended the conference at which Mr. Rumsfeld spoke. With all due respect, the hon. Gentleman may have taken that paragraph out of context. It was clear from the contribution of Mr. Rumsfeld and other Americans at the conference that the Administration are determined to proceed with national missile defence. There may be an acknowledgement of the need to consult, but if the consultation continues to reveal opposition there is no suggestion that effect will be given to that opposition.

The comprehensive test ban treaty was signed on the understanding that it could be adequately verified and existing stockpiles safely maintained. I am one of those who believe that the outlawing of nuclear testing worldwide is vital. I believe, too, that a continuing United States refusal to ratify the treaty makes it easier for other countries to deny any responsibility to do so. I have in mind, in particular, the cases of India and Pakistan.

It is inevitable in a debate such as this that one must focus on the United States as the last great military superpower. The United States shows an unwillingness to endorse the International Criminal Court, and a reticence to accept the ban on the deployment of anti-personnel land mines—a topic that was dealt with to some extent by the Committee in its report.

I have always thought that there is a risk in unilateralism. I thought that there was a considerable risk in unilateralism throughout the debate about whether the United Kingdom should maintain its own nuclear deterrent. The unilateral approach can be seductive. Treaty negotiation and adherence to the terms of treaties can be a restraint on freedom of action; treaties are cumbersome and sometimes messy. The agreements that they embody are not always satisfactory, but if the major military superpower moves increasingly towards a unilateral approach to the matters under discussion, that will make the maintenance of a collective—a multilateral—regime to deal with those matters extremely difficult.

One of the lessons learned from the cold war was that collective action is essential to success. In the new post-cold war environment, the best way to ensure security is by collective action through NATO, the United Nations, the Commonwealth and the European Union, and through arms agreements that are universally subscribed to. Just as unilateralism was rejected, by some of us at least, during the cold war, so it should be rejected now.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell: Arms control agreements not only control proliferation, but ensure predictability. If predictability were a word to describe any hon. Member, it would certainly describe the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). I can almost guess the question that he wants to put, but so that my curiosity may properly be satisfied, I shall give way to him.

Dr. Lewis: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. He is right that my remarks on this subject are predictable, because, unlike his party, I consistently supported the British nuclear deterrent and NATO's policy of nuclear deterrence during the cold war. Will he explain why Liberal Democrats were in the forefront of the unilateral disarmament movement? I will be happy to quote the Liberal Democrats chapter and verse from the 1980s. Why, in October 1983, at the largest ever CND demonstration against the vital deployment of cruise missiles, was one of the star speakers on the platform the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown), who went on to lead the Liberal Democrats?

Mr. Campbell: I was right, and I suppose I was wrong, as well. If we are to go back to 1983, those were the days when the Conservative and Unionist party in Scotland was advocating the merits of something that came to be called the poll tax. One thing is certain. When it comes to defending the interests of the people of the United Kingdom, my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown) has put himself and his own life at risk on rather more occasions than many, many hon. Members who now see fit to criticise him.

It is quite wrong to say that the Liberal party ever espoused the cause of unilateralism. There is no resolution of our party that ever did so. It is certainly true that, along

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with many others, there were people in the Liberal party drawn from the traditional nonconformist and Quaker tradition, which has always been part of our party, who said that as a matter of religious belief they did not consider that nuclear weapons ought to be maintained by the United Kingdom or that their use should ever be contemplated. A party that is wide enough to embrace people of such sincere religious conviction has nothing to answer for to the hon. Gentleman, who was, in his earlier existence, the witch-finder general of the old Conservative party, which perhaps explains his enthusiasm for these matters.

Dr. Lewis: Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell: I shall give way once more, as I may have my curiosity satisfied again.

Dr. Lewis: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. I know that the record of his party is such that he is strongly tempted to rewrite it. It is an historical fact that at the crucial time about which he was speaking—the crucial period when decisions were taken whether to employ cruise missiles and to replace Polaris with Trident—his own party leader repeatedly and publicly called Trident a white elephant and said that it should not be deployed, and repeatedly said that cruise missiles were the missiles that we had to stop. That was his leader's and his party's position. It is astonishing and deplorable that the right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot face up to that, but harks back to something like the council tax, about which we Conservatives admit we were wrong. Will he not admit that he, his leader and his party were wrong about unilateralism in the 1980s, for that is what they were?

Mr. Campbell: This is a pretty arid discussion. The views of my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil are on record and he has defended them on many occasions. I do not think that anyone like him, who served his country with great bravery and put his own life at risk many times, has anything to answer to the hon. Member for New Forest, East for.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Campbell: Not at the moment.

With regard to my party, it is quite wrong to say that the Liberal party or the Liberal Democrats ever espoused a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament. It is right to say that there were members of our party—indeed, there are still some—who, out of sincere religious conviction, believe that nuclear weapons should not be tolerated. That is something for them to be proud of. Our party is sufficiently wide to embrace that nonconformist and Quaker tradition from the 19th century and allow it to flourish in the 21st century, without feeling any embarrassment whatever as regards the hon. Member for New Forest, East.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that one does not have to be a Quaker to be worried about any weapons that the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) is so enthusiastic about?

Mr. Campbell: The Minister makes his point, and no doubt he will have an opportunity to expand on it in due course.

The debate has echoes of the period immediately before the 1992 general election, when we had a debate about nuclear policy just about every Friday because the then Conservative Government were attempting to embarrass the Labour Opposition on the question, which now seems less relevant than it was then, of whether Labour would build the fourth Trident submarine. We had such debates Friday after Friday. Not much light, but a certain amount of heat was generated. The important point—which is important as a response to the intervention and to my momentary trip down memory lane—is that nuclear weapons must be seen in the present strategic context, not in the obsessive historical context to which some in the House seem determined to refer us back.

I reject the suggestion that the anti-ballistic missile treaty is ancient history. I also reject the approach that declares that the anti-ballistic missile treaty is no longer in force. We must accept a determination on the part of the United States to proceed with NMD.

It is important to remember that the treaty is capable of amendment. My view is that we cannot exclude the possibility that Mr. Putin, on behalf of the Russians, will seek—if I may use a colloquialism—to cut some kind of deal. It is not difficult to envisage the basis of some agreement between the United States and Russia that allowed for an amendment of the treaty in return, for example, to agreed reductions in the total number of strategic warheads held by both Russia and the United States; that relied on at least a reconsideration by the Senate of the comprehensive test ban treaty; and that included some additional funds replicating the Nunn-Lugar programme, in order to enable Russia to deal with the detritus of its nuclear weapons programme, some of which swings on anchors at Murmansk and some of which is to be found in decaying arsenals throughout Russia. Mr. Putin might argue, perhaps with more difficulty, that a bargain was possible if the expansion of NATO was inhibited. It is not impossible to understand such an arrangement.

The article in the *Financial Times* argued that China's position of outright opposition may be changing. It is not difficult to envisage that country, although not a signatory to the treaty, endeavouring to reach some accommodation with the United States, perhaps to drive a harder bargain on trade, economic advantage or, indeed, on Taiwan. We must therefore accept the determination of the Administration to proceed and the possible willingness of the two principal protagonists to reach some agreement.

The development of effective missile defence is measured in decades rather than years. The land-based system cannot be deployed until 2007 at the earliest, and the sea-based system cannot be deployed until 2011, long after the United States constitution allows Mr. Bush to continue to occupy the White House.

History shows that impregnable defences are illusory. Strong defensive systems encourage the proliferation of offensive systems or the development of the means to

circumvent defence. I do not believe that 21st century technology, any more than the technology that gave us the Maginot line, makes that fundamental military truth redundant.

On Iraq, the Select Committee concludes:

"for so long as Iraq denies UNMOVIC access there can be no progress towards the suspension and eventual lifting of sanctions."

It is no secret that the Liberal Democrats have argued for some time for lifting non-military sanctions against Iraq. We accept that Saddam Hussein's regime must be contained and the maintenance of the credible threat of military action is part of that containment. We also accept the need for sanctions on military and dual-use goods. However, we do not believe that non-military sanctions are justified any longer. They are a blunt weapon and they erode the consensus in Arab capitals. Colin Powell must have discovered that during his recent trip through the middle east. Non-military sanctions make Arab support for the containment policy difficult. However, re-introducing a weapons inspection regime is imperative.

Mr. Richard Butler is often mentioned in the context of sanctions against Iraq. I recommend his recent book, "Saddam Defiant", to anyone who has an interest in the matter. After making the case for inspection, he deals with sanctions. On page 55, he states:

"it is clear that their impact has been on ordinary Iraqi people. The members of the Iraqi power structure have been scarcely affected, either in terms of the quality of their lives as individuals or in terms of their retention of control over the economy, the military, and the nation."

On page 60, he states:

"So, over the long haul, sanctions have proven a relatively ineffective weapon against Saddam and his flouting of international law, and they've provided a propaganda opportunity he hasn't hesitated to milk."

I therefore disagree with the Select Committee's conclusion that the current regime of sanctions should remain in place.

Mr. Wilson: Do the right hon. and learned Gentleman and the Liberal Democrats oppose a sanctions regime that is directed against Iraq's capacity to develop weapons of mass destruction?

Mr. Campbell: Not at all. I have been at pains to explain that the policy on Iraq must be containment supported by the credible threat of military action, and that sanctions should be directed against military or dual-use equipment. However, non-military sanctions are no longer justified. The hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson), in his new capacity as Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, has already spent time in the middle east, taking account of opinion on those matters. I am sure that he recognises that considerable reservations about the current sanctions regime exist there.

Is Saddam still a threat? Of course he is. As Richard Butler acknowledges, he has continued to develop weapons of mass destruction in the years since the UN inspection team was forced to leave the country. He has certainly developed biological weapons, and recent evidence from German intelligence sources suggests that he has the capacity to develop nuclear weapons in three years. That underlines the threat that he poses and the overwhelming requirement to maintain an effective policy of containment. My policy would attract more support than the current arrangements, which cause anxieties about the broad-band, untargeted and relatively ineffective non-military sanctions.

The right hon. Member for Swansea, East, the Chairman of the Select Committee, referred to biological weapons. He pointed out that efforts have been under way in Geneva since 1995 to establish a protocol that would allow for verification provisions in the chemical weapons convention. Negotiators are supposed to complete their work in time for the next review of the convention at the end of the year. As recently as 19 February, the chairman of the negotiators warned that little time remained to reach the compromises necessary for a successful conclusion and a verification regime.

The United Kingdom is one of the three depository states for the convention. It is fair to say that we have an exemplary record in trying to achieve an effective protocol. It is imperative that the British Government use all their political influence to try to ensure a satisfactory outcome to the negotiations on the convention. Doubtless the Minister will be able to give the House some assessment of the likelihood of success.

Some people oppose a verification regime because they are anxious to prevent secrets in commercially lucrative biotechnology from becoming more widely available. However, the need for a verification regime for the most easily carried and concealed weapons of mass destruction is overwhelming.

The chemical weapons convention came into force in 1997. Since then, more than 850 inspections in 44 countries on more than 4,000 sites have occurred. The current budget for the technical secretariat for the chemical weapons convention is approximately $66 million. It has made a positive and successful start, but some ambiguity exists about a so-called "challenge inspection", when one state can call for the immediate inspection of a site in another state's territory. That procedure has not been tested, and there are doubts about whether the effectiveness of the convention can be assessed properly until that happens.

Any verification regime that is adopted for biological weapons will almost certainly be based on the chemical weapons convention regime. We must ensure that it avoids the ambiguity about the challenge inspection process. Several states—North Korea, Egypt, Iraq, Syria and Libya—have not signed the chemical weapons convention. We must use all our political influence on at least some of those states to persuade them to become part of the non-proliferation regime.

Although some individuals take a different view, it is the common policy of all parties that the United Kingdom should maintain a nuclear deterrent for the foreseeable future and that it should be based on the two principles of minimum deterrence and weapons of last resort.

It is worth while reminding ourselves occasionally of just how far the United Kingdom has proceeded in nuclear disarmament. We did not encourage or have any part in any programme for the modernisation of short-range weapons—the "Follow On To Lance" programme, as it was been described. However, it must be said that Baroness Thatcher was a pretty enthusiastic supporter of that suggestion, at least in the first instance.

We have abandoned nuclear depth charges and we have decommissioned free-fall nuclear bombs. Intermediate nuclear weapons—Cruise and Pershing, to which

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reference has been made—have gone from the UK. We have abandoned the proposal for a tactical air-to-surface missile, which would have had a nuclear warhead. All that has happened over the past 10 or 12 years. If, in the preceeding 10 or 12 years, those changes had been offered as a possible programme of nuclear disarmament for the UK, it would have been thought optimistic, to say the least. The number of nuclear warheads under this Government has been reduced to about 200, approximating to the number on the Polaris system that has been replaced.

That is all well and good, but we have obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. There is no question but that there were some difficulties in the review conference about the renewal of the treaty. One important step that allowed for renewal of the NPT was the fact that all five of the declared nuclear powers signed up in very robust language to a commitment leading ultimately to the elimination of nuclear weapons. I am not so naive as to think that that will happen over a very short time, but that commitment was important for the NPT. Its importance lies in a continuing obligation on the part of the five declared nuclear states, which are of course the five permanent members of the Security Council.

The United Kingdom has a great opportunity to lead the charge to implement that obligation. It is based on article 6 of the treaty, but it was reinfused and re-emphasised in the declaration that all five states made in New York last year. There is a substantial political opportunity for the UK, which this Government ought to take. I doubt very much that in the lifetimes of any of us we can eliminate nuclear weapons from the planet, but we can certainly go a long way towards making the planet a very much safer place for our children and grandchildren by a gradual decline in the extent to which states regard nuclear weapons as essential to their security.

3.52 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I want to refer to a couple of recommendations in the Foreign Affairs Committee report. I am a member of the Committee and happily signed the report. There is mention, as the Minister knows, of the proliferation of small arms. The use of small arms brings about much terror and repression in many parts of the world. I am referring to page 9 of the Government's response to the recommendation. I welcome their response because, among other things, it states:

"the Committee will wish to be aware that the UK has nominated Sir Michael Weston, our former Ambassador to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, as a candidate to chair the 2001 UN Conference on the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons."

I should like the Minister to comment on that candidacy. My research may be poor, but were we successful in recommending Sir Michael Weston for that position?

We need to examine other measures to curb the proliferation of small arms—the phrase used in the report. We need to look again at the European Union's code of conduct on arms exports, which is mentioned in the report that was published this week by the Quadripartite Committee—comprising the Defence, Foreign Affairs, International Development and Trade and Industry Committees—entitled "Strategic Export Controls: Annual Report for 1999 and Parliamentary Prior Scrutiny". It recommends greater transparency in the code of conduct. I have long been a critic of the code because I think that I am right in saying that it is entirely voluntary and that no sanctions can be imposed by the EU on member states that ignore it.

The Government should take the report very seriously. It recommends:

"in all future bilateral discussions with applicant countries, the Government makes a specific point of pressing the need to conform to the EU Code of Conduct."

I refer to that report because it impinges directly on the Foreign Affairs Committee report. I am a member of the Quadripartite Committee as well. Concern is also voiced in the Foreign Affairs Committee report about the proliferation of small arms. Applicant countries need to have it spelled out to them very clearly that they must conform to the code of conduct. That of course also means that the 15 member states must conform to it. I should like the code to be strengthened.

I listened closely to what the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) had to say on the proliferation of nuclear weapons. I welcome his generous tribute to those who have a principled objection to the British nuclear deterrent. I happen to be one of those who have never supported the British nuclear deterrent. I say that in the full knowledge that a goodly number of my constituents work across the water at the Clyde submarine base at Faslane and Coulport. They know my views on the issue.

The five nuclear weapons states cannot expect other nations that, unfortunately, are acquiring the capacity to build nuclear weapons to listen to their warnings about the dangers of proliferation. The right hon. and learned Gentleman made some mention of that. Might not other nations say, "Put your own houses in order", given that the five have a massive amount of nuclear weaponry?

Nuclear submarines are a common sight on the lower Clyde and the firth of Clyde, and I have long argued that there should be a tough code of conduct to keep them well away from fishing vessels. I remind the Minister in that context of the sad sinking of the fishing vessel Antares. Skipper Jamie Russell, whom I knew, and his three crew members died when a nuclear submarine sailed straight into their demersal gear. None of the four men had a chance of escaping their terrible fate.

The code of conduct that has been introduced is working well. I am honorary president of the Clyde Fishermen's Association, and have not had any recent complaints about infringements of the code by submarines. However, I would welcome an assurance from the Minister that it is under regular review and that there are discussions with members of the Clyde Fishermens Association and others who fish in those traditional waters. I know that he and his officials would disagree with me, but I think that submarines should always be on the surface when steaming through traditional fishing grounds.

A principled abhorrence of British nuclear weapons was clearly shown by the people, including the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, who gathered at Faslane a few weeks ago to express their hostility to our nuclear fleet. Many ordinary, decent people joined in that event, but their presence was lost sight of because of the conduct of those two sun-tanned socialists, Tommy Sheridan MSP

and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway). Accusations were levelled at those two protesters over their theatrical behaviour—both were arrested on that day. I could not join the demonstration, but I assure the Minister that I would not have been arrested by the Strathclyde police. In fairness to those two, they have long held the view that our nuclear deterrent should be done away with.

If ever Her Majesty's Government chose to decommission those vessels, measures would have to be taken to provide alternative employment for my constituents and others who have long worked at the base. I know that the matter is not the Minister's responsibility, but I totally oppose the privatisation—that is what it is—of the essential repair and maintenance activities that that first-class work force have undertaken for many years. The Ministry of Defence should think again. Its officials and Ministers seem to believe that it is axiomatic that private management is always superior to that in the public sector. The Government should seriously consider the joint trade union response to the proposals for that partial privatisation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) and the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife mentioned the so-called national missile defence system. We all know that there is not a cat in hell's chance of the Bush Administration deploying such a system in their term of office. My right hon. Friend argued that more eloquently than me. It will be many years before it can be deployed.

I was keen for the report to recommend that the Government must take account of people's deep-seated concerns about the United Kingdom's involvement in the so-called national missile defence system. I have great sympathy with the reservations voiced by our European friends on this matter. When the report talks about our special relationship with the United States, it puts the term in inverted commas. I happen to think that this country and many others are client states of the American superpower. There is concern about such developments, which violate certain articles of the anti-ballistic missile treaty. We must take those serious concerns on board.

I believe that we have produced a reasonable report covering matters from small arms to the national missile defence system. I welcome some of the Government's responses to it, but they must do more on the European Union's code of conduct. It must be transparent, and there must be sanctions. The applicant countries must be told that the issue is important for many people throughout the world, and that they must conform to the code of conduct.

In contradistinction to what the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife said, I would like our deterrent to be done away with. One of the witnesses, an Australian professor, told the Committee, "You British are pouring money down a rat hole"—a typically Australian observation, if I may say so, as I told him at the time. However, he was voicing a genuine truth, and I would like our deterrent to be whittled down. That report and the one published this week deal with many other issues that the Government should take very seriously.

4.5 pm

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): Like other right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken, I shall speak mainly about national missile defence—but before doing so, I shall make some observations about the wider international arms control scene, which is an essential backcloth to responsible decisions on NMD.

At the outset of the Committee's inquiry, I asked the experts a question that I have asked over many years: did they judge that the international community was winning or losing the battle to establish an effective system of verifiable and enforceable arms control worldwide that covers weapons of mass destruction? The answers that we received were, as always, mixed.

There were the relative optimists, who could point to the fact that in recent years we have managed to conclude the comprehensive test ban treaty; that since the end of the cold war we have brought about a major reduction in the nuclear arsenals of the two big nuclear powers, Russia and the United States; that we have concluded the chemical weapons convention; that the various non-proliferation regimes have been strengthened; and that we have made some progress, at least procedurally, and albeit at a snail's pace, towards the critically important verification regime under the biological weapons convention, which is so urgently needed, as the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) rightly said.

If those are the plus points on the more optimistic side of the scale, there are equally formidable points on the pessimistic side. Some countries have signed and ratified the important arms control conventions, but some potentially dangerous countries have not done so. Some potentially dangerous countries have signed up to certain treaties, but there are reasonable and possibly strong grounds for doubting whether they will comply with their provisions.

Moreover, proliferation of nuclear materials, of components for nuclear weapons, and of guidance systems and delivery systems, is widely reported, and supported evidentially. Scientists and technicians are lured away, often for understandable financial reasons, to work in countries where they are well paid for their skills and expertise in weapons of mass destruction.

The number of nuclear weapons states has continued to expand slowly but remorselessly—most conspicuously, more recently, in the Indian sub-continent.

Finally, I suppose, there is the age-old truth about arms control—that arms are not dangerous, only the people who possess them. Today, there is a small minority of people—as there has been through the ages, and will always be—who act outside the normal boundaries of morality, compassion and humanity. Such people are prepared to cause loss of life, possibly on a prodigious scale.

When I weigh the optimistic factors against the pessimistic ones, I regret to say that I conclude that we are losing the battle to create a worldwide system of enforceable arms control for weapons of mass destruction. That is the sobering background to the question of national missile defence.

I have no problem with the concept of NMD. It is a purely defensive system, and any country is entitled to safeguard its national integrity with defensive weapons. The system represents no offensive threat to other states.

[Sir John Stanley]

I will have no difficulty, either, if the United States Government decide to spend what will no doubt be billions of dollars of American taxpayers' money on the research and development stage of NMD. I am deeply relieved that the taxpayers of this country, and of my constituency, will not have to spend that money, but if the elected American Government decide to spend their taxpayers' money in that way, that is a matter for them.

Beyond the research and development phase, however, lies the question of deployment, which involves the wider international community. It certainly involves Britain, given the existence of the Fylingdales radar facility, and our membership of the UN Security Council. If a US Government wished to deploy land-based interceptors in locations other than those allowed under the anti-ballistic missile treaty—that is, around their national capital, or existing domestic intercontinental ballistic missile fixed-silo sites—either they would have to achieve an agreed renegotiation of that treaty, or they would have to abrogate it unilaterally.

I agree with the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife that an agreed renegotiation of the ABM treaty between the US and Russia is well within the bounds of possibility. The Russian Government would no doubt exact a legitimate price, but an agreed renegotiation is certainly possible. The US and Russia are the only parties to the ABM treaty; if they could achieve an agreed renegotiation, the integrity of the treaty and of international arms control agreements would be safeguarded.

However, the story would be very different if a US Administration went down the path of unilateral abrogation. I earnestly hope that no future US Administration will feel obliged to go down that route. The fragility of the international arms control environment means that if countries around the world saw that the most powerful country in the world, with the largest defence capability, was willing unilaterally to abrogate international arms control agreements that it had signed, they would inevitably wonder why they should not do likewise if such agreements became inconvenient for them. There would then be a serious risk that the already all too fragile structure of existing international arms control agreements would unravel.

I hope that during the research and development period, the US will take all possible steps to explain the defence and security rationale behind the NMD programme much more fully than has so far been the case. There are fundamental questions to which I have seen no very credible answer, and three in particular are in the forefront of my mind. I hope that the US Administration will answer them.

First, which are the so-called rogue states that the US Administration regard as a threat sufficient to oblige them to erect the NMD shield? It is not enough to answer that question by trotting out the quartet of rogues gallery states that have been presented to Congress and the wider world—North Korea, Iraq, Iran and Libya. The postulation that one of those countries might launch an ICBM attack on the continental United States raises the question of why it would do so when the US Administration has a wholly invulnerable and massive retaliatory nuclear capability.

The people responsible for launching an ICBM strike against one or more American cities could not but be aware that in doing so, they would be sentencing themselves to literal nuclear incineration, probably within a matter of minutes. Would the heads of the four states that have been trotted out as rogues be willing to sentence themselves to nuclear incineration? I am wholly unpersuaded that they would.

We read that North Korea's leader, Chairman Kim Jong Il, enjoys a very comfortable and possibly slightly hedonistic life style, which is in marked contrast to the abject misery to which he has sentenced virtually all the rest of his people. He is currently engaged in a welcome thawing of relations between the two Koreas, as a result of which rail communications across the Korean peninsula and the 38th parallel are being opened up. Nothing that I know of him suggests that he would be remotely interested in sentencing himself and his regime to instantaneous nuclear obliteration.

Then there is Saddam Hussein. We would all agree that, of all the leaders with significant military power at their disposal, he is one of the nastiest pieces of work around, if not the nastiest. However, like other very nasty pieces of work, he combines a capacity for extreme nastiness with an almost paranoid concern for self-preservation. Thousands of people have died as a consequence of Saddam Hussein's determination to preserve himself. That determination is hardly the characteristic of a man who would sentence himself and his Administration to nuclear incineration at the hands of a retaliatory US strike.

At the moment, I do not find it remotely credible that the regimes in Iran or Libya would contemplate for a moment subjecting themselves to the certainty of an American retaliatory second strike. Therefore, we need a much clearer, more credible explanation: which are the countries with an ICBM capability against which NMD is seen to be a key and necessary defence?

The second question that I hope that our American friends will explain much more fully to us is why they believe that, of the three options that a possessor of weapons of mass destruction has to inflict many millions of casualties on the United States, an intercontinental ballistic missile would be the one chosen. That option is far and away the most expensive. Perhaps the most critical point of all is that it is easier to determine the source of an ICBM strike than the source of other strikes, so it is easier to target retaliatory action after an ICBM strike than after an attack with either a chemical or a biological weapon.

The only thesis on which NMD can be based is that there could be a rogue state leader who had taken it upon himself to try to kill millions of Americans—but even if that were true, it seems to me that he would use not an intercontinental ballistic missile, but possibly a chemical weapon. As has already been mentioned, we had an ugly real-life example of that in 1995: the sarin attack in the Japanese underground system, which resulted in 12 people losing their lives and approximately 5,000 people being made ill, with various degrees of severity. A chemical weapon attack is a possible option, but chemical weapons used on any scale are bulky. Far and away the most likely means of assaulting the continental United States with a weapon of mass destruction is a biological weapon.

As has been said, in our report we specifically drew attention to the Foreign Office paper that was placed in the Library on 4 February 1998, in which the Foreign Office, rightly, declassified information that had been held, classified, within Government circles for years. It announced in non-classified form its assessment that

"One hundred kilograms of anthrax released from the top of a tall building in a densely populated area could kill up to three million people. "

It is the danger from biological weapons that should be exercising the minds of the defence and presidential leadership in the United States, and indeed around the world, given the devastating consequences of small quantities of those materials and the serious risk that the perpetrators of such an appalling crime might go undetected. They would almost certainly be extraordinarily difficult to trace. That is my second question to the United States. The whole foundation of national missile defence is the supposition that some rogue state seeking to destroy millions of Americans will use ballistic missiles, rather than a chemical or biological weapon.

That brings me to my final question to our American friends. Let us take the scenario on which the whole of NMD is based: out there, a rogue state leadership is willing to initiate an assault with a weapon of mass destruction on the American continent. Let us take the second assumption: it has decided, for whatever reason, to do that with an intercontinental ballistic missile. Why do our American friends believe that in such circumstances the President of the United States will not take action well before any ICBM is launched? Putting it the other way round, why do they believe that the President of the day will wait in the Oval Office until an ICBM from a rogue state, which they will clearly be aware of—they will have seen it under construction and during flight testing, and they will have seen the launch pads—is launched, hopefully to be intercepted by NMD?

There is no possibility of a President of the United States and the commander of the United States armed forces in such circumstances waiting for the launch of any ICBM attack. Even now the American President has at his disposal a means of destroying the ICBM on the launch site, or well before it even gets to the point where it is ready to be launched. Like the British Prime Minister, the President has the capacity to use conventionally armed cruise missiles, whose pinpoint accuracy has been strikingly demonstrated in the Kosovo war.

Those of us who have been to the Republic of Yugoslavia recently have seen for ourselves how American cruise missiles could be targeted successfully at the slim bridges over the Danube in Novi Sad, dropping those bridges into the river. I will always carry with me one of the most striking images of the extraordinary accuracy of the American cruise missile technology. In Belgrade, the main secret intelligence building, which, accidentally or possibly by design, was sited cheek by jowl with a maternity hospital—that is, within 50 m of it—was taken out by a cruise missile, which left the hospital untouched.

An American President with the capability to put a cruise missile right on to the launch pad of any installation that he believed might result in an ICBM attack on the United States would use that pre-emptive strike capability. The Americans have used pre-emptive strikes before. As the House will recall, they did so in the mid-1980s. F111s with conventional weapons attacked Tripoli and Benghazi to make a pre-emptive strike against Colonel Gaddafi and to stop his state terrorism, which we had seen throughout Europe: the TWA airline attack and the Achille Lauro liner hijack.

The F111 attack was intended to stop Libyan state terrorism in its tracks. Indeed, there was no repetition of such actions. For that reason, the United States President would use the weapon of a pre-emptive strike. He would be entirely justified in doing so, rather than allow an ICBM to be launched against the continent of the United States.

Those are my three questions about national missile defence. I hope that, if the current American Administration—who, I am sure, wish to carry with them as far as they possibly can both the NATO alliance and the wider world community—move strongly into the research and development phase of national missile defence, they will come forward with much more coherent and much more credible answers to the type of questions that I have asked, and that I know other hon. Members will be asking in the course of this debate.

In my view, there is no greater policy priority for the world's international leadership than to reverse what I believe is a worrying downward trend in adherence to international arms control measures concerning weapons of mass destruction. There is no greater priority than to halt that downward trend and to reverse it. The long-term future of millions of people on this planet depends on putting in place in relation to those weapons, which can destroy millions of people, an effective worldwide system of international agreements that can be monitored and policed.

4.31 pm

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I commend the speech made by the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley), in which he expressed very clearly many of the concerns that are shared by most Committee members about the current rationale for national missile defence.

One of the lessons that I took from the Committee's visit to Washington was the extreme importance of the current network of international arms control treaties, and the enormous results that those treaties have achieved. Not unnaturally, our Committee tended to concentrate on the failures of arms control. However, it is very important to start by acknowledging the immense achievements of those treaties. I believe that they have contributed to making the world much safer today than it was decades ago.

Those achievements include, of course, the START 2 treaty, which committed the United States and Russia to continue to reduce their nuclear arsenals, and the unilateral action that the French Government and our Government have taken to reduce our nuclear arsenals. Therefore, four of the five nuclear powers are actively unilaterally or bilaterally reducing their nuclear arsenals. As the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling said, one of the outcomes of the 2000 nuclear non-proliferation treaty review was that all five nuclear weapons states made a commitment to work towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons. Although, unfortunately, they did not set themselves a target date by which that was to be achieved, at least they all committed themselves to moving towards the total elimination of nuclear weapons.

[Dr. Phyllis Starkey]

It is still a concern that there are three unacknowledged nuclear states—India, Pakistan and Israel. It is difficult for the international community to find a way of bringing them into the international arms control framework. It would not be acceptable to acknowledge them as nuclear weapon states and add them to the existing five, because by so doing we would clearly be encouraging other states to move towards acquiring nuclear weapons. Conversely, as it is not even officially acknowledged—at least in the case of Israel—that they have nuclear weapons, we do not have to face up to the implications of their having nuclear weapons in regions where there is active and open conflict and therefore extreme danger that those nuclear weapons might be used.

It is precisely because the international framework of arms control treaties has achieved and delivered real gains for world peace that the threat posed to those treaties from the United States plans for national missile defence is so extremely concerning. As has been mentioned, the original push for national missile defence came from the Rumsfeld commission. I believe that, at that time, he was Senator Rumsfeld; now, however, he is of course the American Secretary of Defence.

The prime error in the commission's work was that it used a different method of threat assessment from that which had been used previously. The commission did not attempt to assess the intent of a missile-owning state to attack another state—to assess whether there was a rationale to attack—but simply examined the state's missile capability, drew a circle around the state and said, "Everything within that circle is at risk." If that approach had been followed when assessing American nuclear weapons, for example, one could say that the United Kingdom is "under threat" from American nuclear weapons. That exposes the fallacy in the Rumsfeld commission's argument.

Mr. Wilkinson: Surely a serious analyst would examine the international relations track record of the countries that have acquired a nuclear capability and conclude that they were politically unpredictable as they do not have societal control systems to make quite sure that their leadership does not become aberrant and a threat to neighbouring states and the world order. Surely it is because of such a judgment that Mr. Donald Rumsfeld and his commission reached the prudent conclusions that they did.

Dr. Starkey: There is no indication that the commission assessed intent at all.

Mr. Wilkinson: Surely it has to be a fact that one judges a state by its military capabilities, in the knowledge that its intentions may vary with alterations in political regime. That is the point: capabilities can be built up over time and maintained, whereas there can be very sudden, abrupt and fundamentally crucial changes in political leadership that no one can foresee.

Dr. Starkey: I think that the hon. Gentleman is making my argument for me. In a proper risk assessment, one considers both the possession of weapons and intent. I do not think that he and I are arguing. I am saying that there is no evidence that the Rumsfeld commission considered intent at all. That is why the risk assessment that it made differed so markedly from any risk assessment made by any previous American Administration.

The commission did not consider intent and, additionally, simply extrapolated forwards. It considered current weapons possession, decided what it thought those states might do, and said that America itself might be under threat, when it is not.

The Rumsfeld commission also introduced the bizarre concept—the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) may not feel that it is bizarre—of a rogue state. As the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) said, at some point in the previous American presidency, the concept of a rogue state had changed to "a state of concern". Under the current presidency, however, the concept has changed back to that of a rogue state.

Rogue states are in the eye of the beholder. One could list many criteria for defining a rogue state that could be used by some states to label as rogue states others that we regard as allies. The criteria include being unpredictable, intending to take action outside national law, and believing that national self-interest justifies action regardless of the framework of international law.

The hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood will know that there are countries that believe that the NATO action in Kosovo, which we supported, was outside international law. Although I do not agree with that assessment, some states genuinely question whether our action in Kosovo complied with international law. Inasmuch as they believe that we contravened international law, they may reasonably feel that they could view us as a rogue state. Such definitions, therefore, are distinctly unhelpful. Indeed, they say much more about the people who decide on them than about the states that are labelled as rogue states. In any case, as many other right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out, rogue states are not believed to provide the same degree of threat by other countries as they are by the United States.

The right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling pointed out that North Korea is now behaving slightly more acceptably in engaging in dialogue with South Korea. North Korea has agreed a moratorium on further testing of its ballistic missiles. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office does not believe that there is any significant threat at present from North Korea, which is starting to behave slightly less like a rogue state. The trend in North Korea, in foreign policy terms, is taking a rather more benign direction than has been the case in the past.

We heard evidence during our investigations that Iran has a perfectly legitimate right to feel under threat. It is right next door to Iraq, with which it previously engaged in an extraordinary war, resulting in the death of thousands of Iranian and, indeed, Iraqi citizens. Iran is also already within range of the Jericho 2 missiles that the Israeli Government have deployed. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable to expect that Iran may wish to take steps to defend itself. Iran's acquisition of defensive capacity, given the threats that it faces, should not be taken as evidence that it wishes to move into aggressive mode. The Shahab 3 missile that Iran is developing has Cyprus and Turkey within its range. However, neither of those states feels particularly threatened, because there is no evidence of any intent by Iran to attack them.

Iran certainly poses no threat whatever to the United States. The only way the United States has been able to suggest otherwise is by extrapolating the threat forward and saying that Iran intends, in the fulness of time, to acquire missiles that would reach American territory.

Libya is assessed as posing no particular threat in this regard. Iraq is clearly a threat, but experience has demonstrated that America and the other allies, including ourselves, are able to deal with Iraq if necessary. Again, there is no need to cite the development of national missile defence to provide defence against Iraq.

The threat of the so-called rogue states is simply not credible. That raises very disturbing questions for other nations about the USA's intent in moving forward with national missile defence. Given that there is no credible threat from rogue states—but even if there were, there are much simpler ways of dealing with it—what exactly is the USA's intention in developing national missile defence? The suspicion must be that this is merely a precursor for something much bigger and that it is not simply an entirely defensive system. Making America entirely invulnerable, as far as America and some of its allies are concerned, allows it to act in a way that is distinctly unhelpful to other states and might be aggressive. That perception of the real reason for national missile defence, given that the cited reason is not credible, worries other states, including Russia and China, and has caused enormous concern among many people in Britain and other European Union member states.

The perception in Russia and China is important, not just because it is not in our interests for them to feel insecure, as insecure states do foolish things, but because the effect on China would be to encourage it to increase its nuclear arsenal. That has a knock-on effect on other undeclared nuclear states, notably India and Pakistan. An upward movement in nuclear movements would be extremely unhelpful.

The fear is that America is moving towards an ability to impose its will on other countries, regardless of international law and international norms. That general feeling of insecurity is not in British interests because it makes us less secure.

Since the report was produced, there has been a change of presidency in the United States and a change in the apparent nature of its plans. The new Bush proposals are not yet, I understand, completely formulated. However, there are suggestions that instead of having land-based facilities, America might move to sea-based or air-based facilities. There are also suggestions that British participation, through use of the Fylingdales listening post, although desirable might not be essential, and that America might move to attacking missiles in the boost phase rather than as at present.

As has been pointed out, even the original Clinton proposals could not have been deployed until beyond 2007. The new proposals could not possibly be implemented until beyond 2011—and, in all probability, way beyond that—so we are not talking about deployment of this facility in the foreseeable future. However, the US commitment to the concept—its preparation for it and investment of huge resources in it—is itself destabilising. It causes a climate of fear among other nations, which believe that America will simply impose its will. It causes all the compensatory reactions in Russia, China and other nations that help to unravel the arms control treaties.

I believe it is absolutely right that the Prime Minister has attempted to communicate to President Bush the deep concerns that are felt throughout the world about the American proposals. My right hon. Friend is trying to get across the importance of the Americans discussing their proposals with Russia, their allies and China, as well as the extreme importance of the Americans not unilaterally breaching the anti-ballistic missile treaty.

I am concerned about the wider implications of the American Administration's commitment to national missile defence and the way in which that commitment betrays a certain approach to foreign policy objectives. In the first instance, it betrays a unilateral approach. Of course every country must be concerned about its own security. All Governments have a duty to ensure the security of their citizens. However, we are all interdependent. Frankly, it is not within the power even of the American Government to protect their citizens at home and abroad by themselves. America is dependent—to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the circumstances—on other Governments helping them to protect their citizens, particularly when their citizens are abroad.

Every Government must take account of the effect of their actions on other Governments—especially their allies—and of the effect that their actions may have on the behaviour of other Governments, which may contribute to the greater insecurity of the citizens of the countries concerned. The current approach of the United States Government, particularly in regard to national missile defence, demonstrates the worrying view that they and they alone can secure the safety of their citizens—that they need not bother about the concerns their allies may express, and indeed that they need not bother about the concerns of Russia or China.

When we were in the United States, we heard advisers to Republican senators waxing lyrical about NMD. They demonstrated a disturbing mindset, seeming to be entirely unaware of the perceptions, fears and views of those outside the United States and, indeed, seeming to regard them as unimportant and irrelevant. The only thing that mattered was the safety of American citizens and the view of the American Government; everyone else would just have to put up with it. That is a worrying approach.

Another worrying factor is the almost exclusive reliance on technical solutions. The world is a worrying place, containing many regimes that are deeply unpleasant, but I do not think that many regimes are irrational. They may do things that we do not like, but there is a certain rationality behind most of them. Some regimes are certainly amoral, but that is not the same as being irrational.

As I have said, the world is a worrying place, but I do not believe that the problems can be solved simply by that reliance on technical solutions—and NMD is essentially a technical fix. It constitutes a refusal to face up to the complexity of foreign relations, and to the fact that conflicts generally have a cause rather than coming from out of the ether. It does not accept that the best way to start making the world a safer place is to concentrate on existing conflicts, and—through a combination of diplomacy and other pressures—to try to resolve them by removing the reasons for them.

The middle east provides an example. The United States is deeply concerned about Iraq and Iran, as we are. That concern is based largely on the extraordinarily poor

[Dr. Starkey]

relations between Iran and America that have existed in the past, and, obviously, on the hostage-taking episode in the United States embassy in Tehran. Those relations are becoming more positive, but the United States is nevertheless concerned about the two nations.

The policy that the United States is currently pursuing in the middle east, however, makes a threat to the United States more likely. The bombing of Iraq, and the United States' unconditional support for Israel, help to stoke up conflict in the area and make it more likely that the US will be at risk from threats from this country and its population.

I was disturbed to hear on television just before this debate that the United States was about to vote, in the United Nations, against sending UN observers to the west bank in an attempt to protect Palestinian civilians from the excessive violence that is being visited on them by Israeli armed forces. We are talking of unconditional support for a state that is the only nuclear weapons state in the middle east, a state that is much more heavily armed than any other in the middle east, a state that is illegally occupying territory—as it has done for 30 years—and a state that is pursuing a policy of assassination of individuals within that occupied territory, as has been admitted by the Israeli armed forces.

That unconditional support by the Americans, and the failure to try to defuse conflict in an even-handed fashion, simply stokes up the problem in the middle east, and increases the threat that has prompted the Americans to propose NMD to protect themselves. Their reliance on a technological fix, and their ignorance of the need to pursue a diplomatic solution, worry me greatly, and I think we should not associate ourselves closely with such an approach. We should also bear in mind the fact that the general conflict in the middle east increases Iran's insecurity, and makes it even more likely that it will step up its programme of missile defence.

NMD is a dangerous diversion from dealing with those conflicts and it threatens to derail the treaties to control weapons of mass destruction. We need to make sure that the United States Government are well aware of the serious concerns in this country about the line that they are taking, and that they start to move away from their proposals for NMD and back towards serious measures, in concert with their allies, to reduce conflict across the world and to get the reduction of weapons of mass destruction and the treaties that govern it back on track. That will contribute most to the security of British and American citizens.

4.55 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): This is a serious subject. I congratulate the Chairman of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) and the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) on their contributions to the report. Their speeches were serious, as the subject deserves, as was that of the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell). In athletics he was a sprinter, but when it comes to a speech in the House of Commons he is definitely a marathon man—except that once it has been delivered he becomes a sprinter again, so soon is he out of the Chamber.

Let me take up the point made by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West, who said that insecure states do foolish things. The first duty of any Government is to defend their citizens. In a highly technological age, weapons of mass destruction become more precise and potentially more destructive, thereby more of a threat if used unscrupulously. I see no moral reason—she brought ethics into her speech—why a responsible democracy such as the United States should not use its technical capabilities to enhance the security of its citizens.

Everybody understands that conflict resolution is a prior imperative of Governments. Everyone comprehends, for example, that year after year the United States of America has sought a diplomatic solution to the problems of the near east and the Arab-Israeli dispute. However, many disputes are so intractable and deep seated that the potential for regional and, indeed, wider conflict exists. Those include the near east, the Kashmir dispute, the dispute over Taiwan, and the rivalry between Iran and Iraq. A number of those potential flash points are areas where there is a build-up of weapons and weapons of mass destruction, so the need for diplomacy and peaceful solutions in great.

Nevertheless, there are limits to diplomacy, peaceful persuasion and rationality in international affairs. It is imperative that wise democracies prepare for the worst. Leaderships change, as I tried to show in my exchange with the hon. Lady, political intentions alter and unscrupulous, aggressive dictators can all too rapidly come to power. The examples are legion. The most recent in our history was only 19 years ago when the Falkland Islands were invaded. No one would have dreamt that Argentina could launch an invasion, but it did. We were surprised and many people lost their lives. Those unpleasant surprises in international affairs occur all too frequently. It is thus reasonable and wise policy for the United States to develop systems of defence against the most fearsome of all weapons of mass destruction—ballistic missiles.

When we examine what happened in the Gulf war, we realise that it was fortunate that the USA could deploy the Patriot anti-aircraft missile system, notionally in anti-missile mode, against the Scuds launched by Iraq. Had the USA not been able to do that, I suspect that Israeli public opinion would not have tolerated the Scud raids launched against Tel Aviv and other Israeli targets. The provocation of the Israeli people would have been such that they would have demanded the armed intervention of their Government, and then a serious regional crisis—following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait—would have become a regional conflict of dangerous proportions.

That example alone demonstrates the importance of the reassuring effect of an appropriate defensive system. In retrospect, we all know that the Patriots were not effective and that, by and large, the Scuds were not intercepted. Nevertheless, the importance of a modicum of defence was understood.

The USA is embarked on the development of missile defence systems, and nothing we can say in this place will deflect it from that objective, especially as it was put to the American people as the programme of the newly elected Republican President, Mr. Bush. The US Secretary of Defence—Mr. Rumsfeld—Colin Powell and the President himself are determined to achieve a

successful development programme, which within a few years will enable the USA to determine whether missile defence is feasible and cost-effective.

In essence, there are three types of system: point defence systems—theatre missile defence; wider systems—national missile defence; and, ultimately, space based systems of global significance, which could bring the international community a measure of security against surprise missile attack that we have never enjoyed. Even setting up the rudimentary architecture is an advance. For example, if the allies had to launch a taskforce to intervene to bring peace to an especially troublesome part of the world, such as the middle or the near east, it would be reassuring to know that theatre missile defence was available against ballistic missile attack—whether from nuclear, chemical or biological, or even conventional weapons. It would be wise policy to make available such a capability.

National missile defence is inherently a matter for the United States, but of course some of the facilities, such as the early warning installation at Fylingdales in Yorkshire, are overseas. It would be foolish of the United Kingdom to fail to assist the US in upgrading that facility, inasmuch as we would gain from it. At the very least, as US allies, we should have improved early warning of missile launches that could risk our people. If only in national self-interest, we would be foolish not to assist the Americans in NMD.

Of course, there are international ramifications, but missile defence threatens no one. I am delighted that major powers such as the United States—at present, solely the United States—are working towards an enhancement of defensive capabilities that will reduce the risk to their population, and are no longer keen on increasing their offensive armoury of weapons of mass destruction. That is a great advance.

As other hon. Members have said, the arms control process has already diminished the inventories of offensive weapons systems available to the principal powers. The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West said that four out of five main nuclear states had reduced their nuclear armouries: quite so, but one such state remains, and she was not critical of it, any more than was the right hon. Member for Swansea, East. It is China.

The People's Republic of China has been inexorably increasing its defence spending in recent years, allied to which its economic potential is constantly growing. It receives aid, assistance and technical transfers from the western powers and considerable military assistance from the Russian Federation. Analysts would do well constantly to study the People's Republic of China, which is seeking to enhance its sea power in the Pacific and is prepared to sabre-rattle against Taiwan and to embark on military exercises in the neighbouring regions. Its space programme is closely allied to its missile capability and its potential capacity to launch weapons of mass destruction. In those circumstances, the United States is wise to pursue the research programme on which it is embarked. I hope that the research programme will lead to some successful conclusions.

Dr. Starkey: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that national missile defence is intended to protect the United States against China?

Mr. Wilkinson: Indeed so; otherwise, why would the early-warning installations in Alaska be the first to be upgraded? It is conceivable that not just Russia, but China or North Korea, or any of those Pacific states, could be a threat to the western United States of America. That is absolutely true, and no one can argue against that fact.

The policy makers in the United States place more emphasis on the risk of rogue states, because we all assume that they are so inherently unstable that an aggressive dictator is more likely to come to power in them. They have had a succession of unpleasant totalitarian regimes of the kind mentioned by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West. Nevertheless, it would be extremely imprudent not to take note of the steady increase in China's military power and its potential.

There is also the potential for nuclear blackmail. A nuclear power of whatever size does not have to launch a nuclear weapon to be in a better position to secure its interests. Since we acquired our own nuclear weapons in 1945, we have secured our interests, to some extent, by having a nuclear deterrent. We have kept that nuclear deterrent. As other hon. Members have said, that is now to a much greater degree a non-partisan doctrine across the Floor of the House, but I recall the days when it was a matter of intense political debate.

As my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) knows better than I do, there was an intense struggle to prevent the modernisation of NATO's nuclear arsenal in the early 1980s, but we were resolute. The former head of the East German secret service, Marcus Wolf, has just produced a fascinating book that merits careful reading by those who study such matters. We warned that the peace movement was being manipulated by the KGB, the East German secret service, and so on. We also warned about the degree of infiltration in West Germany.

We recognised that the concerted efforts that were being made by the Warsaw pact to create division in the western alliance represented a serious threat, and we stood up to it. Furthermore, President Reagan's programme to try to establish a ballistic missile defence system and the work that General Abramson and others did in the 1980s was a contributory factor in the then Soviet Union's realisation that it could never beat the free world, led by the United States, in an international arms race.

The Soviet Union realised that it was much wiser to move to a democratic system, to allow a process of self-determination in the constituent parts of the former Soviet Union and to reach an accommodation with neighbours. Mercifully, that has been a great step forward.

Nevertheless, old habits die hard within the Russian Federation. The Chechen operation was a bloody undertaking. A Polish Member of Parliament, whom I know well because he sits with me on the Council of Europe's Committee on Migration, Refugees and Demography, went to Grozny. When he came back, he told me, "I have not seen such devastation in a western city since the devastation that we saw in Warsaw at the end of world war two." If the Russians are prepared to use military force against people whom they purport to be their own, who knows how they would react if their leadership changed? In those circumstances, is it not important to have not only an arms control regime in place, but a modicum of defence in case deterrence breaks down?

[Mr. Wilkinson]

I hope that the United States' western European allies will try to understand why the United States has to pursue its research efforts into ballistic missile defence. I hope, too, that the western Europeans do not divide themselves into EU sheep and non-EU goats. Our common security interests transcend the artificial division that exists on our continent between EU and non-EU members. Such a division is pernicious in the process of the European security and defence identity.

Many central European countries that are crucial to the security of the continent have already joined NATO. They include the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. Others aspire to join NATO and they are participating in Partnership for Peace. Their interest is in the preservation of their hard-won democracy and the rule of law, which they now value so much. They are entitled to be full members of the decision-making process over European security. They and the countries that have always been members of NATO—such as the Turks and the Norwegians, who had a frontier with the former Soviet Union, and the Icelanders—are all in it together.

That is why I hope that the value of the Assembly of the Western European Union, on which I serve, will be fully appreciated. The treaty of Nice means that everything apart from article 5 of the Brussels treaty and the role of the armaments group will be transferred from the WEU, but that is no reason to give up the invaluable dialogue between interested and informed parliamentarians that exists in the WEU Assembly. We have produced countless reports. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson), who chairs the aerospace committee, produced a report on transatlantic co-operation on anti-missile defence and Mr. Schloten, a socialist who chairs the defence committee, has published one on nuclear armaments, which discusses the issues involved and the prospects for the common European defence and security policy.

Those national parliamentarians have a dialogue with national Defence Ministers and may participate in the national defence committees. They vote funds for defence and influence Governments, and I hope that they will influence their Governments to ensure that the Europeans do not diverge from the United States on the question of missile defence. If the developments prove successful, I hope that the Americans will seek to achieve an agreement with the Russians to allow the deployment of proven systems and, as Mr. Putin has offered, will participate jointly in missile defence. Let us work on that offer as a token of his good intentions.

If that could be achieved, the anti-nuclear missile umbrella that has been offered by the United States could protect not just the United States but our continent and could offer a degree of security to Russia as well. That is what is on offer. However, if we turn our back on the technology, we will be turning our back also on an enhancement of our defensive capabilities.

5.14 pm

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): I congratulate the Committee on an outstanding report with whose conclusions I fully identify myself. I also congratulate it on reaching all-party unanimity, on its objectivity and on finding a consensual and rational process of discussion and dialogue on these vital issues. That is the proper approach, which is why we established the all-party parliamentary group on global security and non-proliferation. I thank the Committee for its favourable mention of two meetings that we organised.

There is one underlying message of the report on which people of different attitudes in all countries could agree. At the end of the cold war, it was agreed by common consent that the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction had disappeared. It is now widely acknowledged that we have not grasped the opportunities of the past decade; as a result, it is recognised across the political spectrum, from the far right of the Republican party to the far left of the European parties, that there is a threat. Part of the great challenge in future decades will be to see whether we can reduce that threat in time.

The report compliments Britain on its unilateral reduction of nuclear weapons and on its major contribution to multilateral moves—in particular its positive role in the nuclear non-proliferation review treaty 2000, on which the UN also complimented us. I fully concur with those comments.

We should take seriously all perceived threats, including the threat from rogue states—however they are defined. In doing so, we need to consider the extent of the threat, what is the correct response to it and whether a wrong response could increase other threats that might be more dangerous.

The report records a weight of expert evidence suggesting that the size and time scale of the threat has been hyped in the United States. The Committee believes that political and military industrial complex interests played a greater role than rational strategic analysis in pushing the conclusions that were reached in the US. It is interesting that the Ministry of Defence White Paper "The Future Strategic Context for Defence" seems to reflect, in paragraph 89, a similar estimate of the threat from rogue states. My right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) referred in his outstanding speech to the fact that, during the Committee's investigation, diplomatic developments, especially in North Korea, led the United States, at least temporarily, to talk instead about "states of concern".

The right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) and the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) also made outstanding contributions. As they said, the report explains that the United States should never underestimate the deterrent effect of its devastating retaliatory power.

Like other hon. Members, I shall concentrate on missile defence, which is known variously as national missile defence, ballistic missile defence or missile defence. We must consider whether NMD is the wise response, because it threatens the anti-ballistic missile treaty. Some people say that that was only a bilateral treaty and that now, following the memorandum of understanding, it is a pluri-lateral treaty between the United States and some of the Soviet Union's successor countries. However, the Government's response to the report correctly says—as the Prime Minister has said since—that they value the stability afforded by the ABMT.

The ABMT has a multilateral aspect because one thing that was agreed by all parties, including the United States, at the NNPT 2000 review conference was that the ABMT should be preserved and strengthened as

"a cornerstone of strategic stability and a basis for further reductions in offensive weapons."

If the treaty were to be abrogated, it would, as the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling said, be a devastating blow to arms control. Russia has said that it sees a connection between ABM and the SALT and START treaties. As NMD threatens limited nuclear arsenals, it might prove to be a deterrent not to rogue states but to multilateral disarmament. Indeed, it has been suggested by a prominent United States diplomat that NMD should perhaps stand for "no more disarmament".

There would be tremendous pressure on Russia to increase or update its nuclear forces, and for China, which is already expanding its nuclear forces, there would undoubtedly be an impetus to expand further, with the danger of a knock-on effect on India, Pakistan and other countries. Russia and China might not be able to afford vast expansion, but there is a danger in destabilising major nuclear powers, partly because of the risk of increasing the export of nuclear and missile technology at a state or criminal level. Such exports might be not only to rogue states but to that far more dangerous group—terrorists—whose members cannot be deterred because they are more difficult to identify and locate and can convey weapons of mass destruction using a case or a lorry, rather than a ballistic missile.

Missile defence could also encourage a gung-ho adventurism, in the belief that the United States or its allies were protected. That could be extremely dangerous in dealing with existing or potential nuclear weapons states. Missile defence could also increase the risk of catastrophic accident, in three ways in particular. The boost phase interceptor system will have particular dangers. The more invulnerable the United States believes it is, the greater the danger that countries that fear that they may be its rivals will feel vulnerable, and the greater the danger of hair-trigger alerts. The weaponisation of space will be extremely dangerous.

It has been said that sea-based boost phase interceptors may be the form of missile defence that will be favoured by the Bush Administration. It is certainly easier to hit a target during boost phase: it is larger and slower, it is hot and it has no decoys. Dangerous debris may be returned to sender. However, if we have interceptor missiles around the world, close to nuclear weapons states, and with a boost phase that lasts less than five minutes, at what point after a suspected detection of a missile launch would a decision have to be taken to fire if another missile were to intercept it? We are talking about a matter of seconds, and the decision would be taken either by very junior officers—or possibly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East suggested, by computers.

What would happen if a missile was launched at a nuclear weapons state and the situation was misinterpreted? We must remember that some advocates of the system, such as Richard Perle, are talking about having vessels patrolling not only off so-called rogue states but off major nuclear weapons states, in case of an unintentional launch, as they put it. What would happen if a missile was accidentally fired and misinterpretation of that act led to an uncontrolled situation?

I strongly support the Select Committee's conclusion that it is not convinced that NMD is the appropriate response to proliferation, and back it in urging the Government to encourage the US to find other ways of reducing perceived threats.

I disagree with the official Opposition's unconditional acceptance of missile defence without even knowing the terms on which it would proceed. I am disappointed by the way in which the Leader of the Opposition and certain other people who share his point of view have discussed this issue. They talk about whether people have or have not been, or are or are not, members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and to conjure up the 1980s. I am sorry, but the issue is far too serious for us to get involved in the cheap party political knockabout in which we engage on other topics in the run-up to elections.

Dr. Julian Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is always courteous in giving way. However, surely he recognises that the issues debated in the 1980s were, if anything, more important than those on NMD that we are debating now? The outcome of the cold war depended on them. It is a matter of concern when people who were on the wrong side of the debate on 1980s issues try to falsify the record and do not show the slightest acknowledgement of the fact that, if their judgment was wrong in the past, it may be a little susceptible to error now.

Mr. Savidge: That is typical of the Opposition, and underlines my point. This is not about debating personalities and history; it is about debating issues and the future. What matters is the strength of people's arguments, not whether one believes in the organisations to which individuals have or have not belonged. I could go in for guilt by association with various organisations on the political right or left. I am not interested in that; I am interested in debating the issues and arguments. We should concentrate on that and on arguing about the future. I may have different interpretations from others about who was right and who was wrong on certain issues in the past, but we should concentrate on genuine debate.

Mr. Spring: Nobody thus far has introduced any party political points—apart from the hon. Gentleman himself.

The whole basis of the cold war was massive retaliation. However, we are talking about defence. Henry Kissinger, the architect of the anti-ballistic missile treaty, now thinks that it lacks relevance. What he is now saying is pertinent and I hope that it helps the hon. Gentleman to understand our position. He says:

"History teaches that weakness is provocative and, in a real sense, the absence of missile defence provokes others into seeking such weapons."

Mr. Savidge: I am sorry, but when we talk glibly about missiles being defensive, we should always remember that—going right back to the days of castles, and irrespective of people are in armour or tanks—there has been a delicate balance in warfare. If someone has a lot of offensive power and also builds up defensive power, that can be seen as threatening. That can lead to problems.

On the whole, hon. Members have been extremely sensible about personality issues today. I am simply expressing disappointment at the fact that when Government and Opposition Front Benchers have debated the issue in the past, some Members have treated it as a

[Mr. Savidge]

personality issue, which cheapens the debate. Opposition Front Benchers have genuine convictions on the issue—especially the shadow Defence Secretary, who is committed because he fears the asymmetric threat.

I wish to caution against the Conservatives' position, which seems to be at variance with their traditional position. They seem to be moving away from a belief in deterrence and away from a professed belief in multilateral disarmament. If we speak about the 1980s, it should be remembered that in the 1980s the Conservative party opposed star wars 1 because it believed that that might undermine deterrence and multilateral disarmament.

I compliment the shadow Defence Secretary on his honesty in saying that he wants to see the cover of missile defence extended to the United Kingdom, and in arguing that we should buy into it. He has heard the same thing from Republicans as I have. When they say that they would be happy for the missile defence umbrella to be extended to the United Kingdom, it is on the basis that we would be prepared to spend millions of pounds for that to happen.

The right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling said that he was glad that it was US taxpayers who were paying for missile defence, but he should realise that his own Defence spokesman said on "Today" just three weeks or so ago that he wanted British taxpayers to buy their way into it. I wonder how enthused British taxpayers would be by that idea, given that according to the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Ministry of Defence, the threat is remote.

What should the Government's attitude be? There will be voices, not just on the Tory Front Bench, urging us to accept that missile defence is inevitable. Some will say that that was the mandate on which Bush was elected, and that we must therefore accept it. I leave open the question of whether Mr. Bush was or was not elected; I assume that Florida's votes will be debated for many years to come.

More sensibly, some people suggest that there is a bipartisan consensus in the United States, so missile defence is bound to happen. However, I believe that the position is more complex than that. When the Missile Defence Act went through, the Democrats accepted it on four conditions: that it could be proved to be financially reasonable; that it could be proved to be technically feasible; that there was a justifiable threat; and that it did not cause diplomatic damage. Senator Daschle, the Democrat leader in the Senate, said that he intends to push those four tests. It should be remembered that at present the Senate majority depends on the casting vote of the Vice-President and on the longevity of a certain number of elderly and infirm Senators.

It has been said that the US Administration is determined—although the Canadian Prime Minister said that he found a degree of flexibility in the President's commitment or otherwise to missile defence. I do not know whether that is true, but views seem to be divided on how the US should pursue the matter. It worries me greatly that the division between, say, the Powells on the one hand and the Rumsfelds on the other seems to be moving in the direction of the Rumsfelds. I am extremely concerned about the Americans' attitude to North Korea. It is notable the South Korea is against national missile defence and is in favour of pushing ahead with diplomatic means of dealing with the North Korean threat.

The question of whether the more hawkish or the more consensual people win out in the United States may be influenced by the attitude of other countries. Others would say that there is a special relationship, so we must do what the United States wants. However, that relationship has never involved absolute subservience. For example, Britain did not send people to fight in Vietnam. The special relationship survived, and probably many British people survived as a result. As I said, Britain did not support the original star wars proposal.

I believe that there is fluidity in the United States, Russia and various other countries with regard to the issue. I concur with the Prime Minister, who said that the matter should be handled with care. We should take seriously the concerns of the United States, as the Prime Minister said, but, as the report suggests, we should try to persuade the United States to consider other ways of meeting the threats that it perceives.

There should be genuine dialogue with Russia and China. Making the anti-ballistic missile treaty a pluri-lateral or a multilateral treaty should be considered. In the millennium report to the General Assembly of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General, suggested that we should hold an international conference on nuclear dangers to which all countries, including non-signatories to the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, could be invited. My hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) referred to them. At such a conference, we could discuss threat assessment and enter into the deeper, careful, considered international dialogue that the Government proposed in their response to the report.

Let us compare that offer with an imaginary offer. Let us suppose that we were offered a short-term fix: the United States would back the European strategic defence initiative, thus ending all dissension in NATO; the missile shield would be extended to us without our having to pay for it, and we would get extra jobs; the special relationship with the United States would be promoted; and Fylingdales and Menwith Hill would never be used because sea-based missiles would be employed instead. Technical difficulties would mean that we would not have to worry about the matter for decades, because it would take decades to work—if not to undermine arms control. Russia would thus be forced into an ABM deal.

I am trying to conjure up the sort of seductive deal that Mephistopheles would offer Faust. The price would be our acceptance of national missile defence without further question or critical dialogue about its dangers. Would that be a truly Faustian pact? Perhaps not, because Faust was only asked to sell his soul, whereas we might be selling the future of every soul on the planet.

We must bear in mind that, unless we can find effective ways in which to reduce the threats that we face, absolute disaster could ensue in decades or perhaps centuries. We therefore have an awesome responsibility. A major nuclear war could destroy much of human life. The environmental aftermath, such as nuclear winter, could endanger the remainder. Is that the way the world ends—

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with bangs followed by gradually decreasing whimpers? That would be a terrible betrayal of all past generations and an even greater betrayal of future generations.

"Do not go gentle into that good night . . .

Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

5.38 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): There are two possible approaches to debating the great issues of defence and disarmament. One can theorise in a vacuum about the present, or try to learn the lessons of the past. If we do not try to do the latter, we condemn ourselves to making the same mistakes and paying the same price time and again.

I am not alone in believing that it is important that the record of past debates should not be airbrushed or forgotten; the BBC agrees with me. Last year, when the so-called Greenham Common peace camp finally passed into oblivion, the BBC helpfully included a subsection on Greenham Common in the in-depth section of its website. Part of it was entitled, "Timeline: key points". It tracked every development, no matter how piffling, petty, detailed or irrelevant that marked the Greenham Common women's campaign up to December 1983, when, it rightly recorded, the women encircling the base held their last big demonstration. Then, something rather curious happened. The next entry was dated August 1989:

"The first Cruise missile leaves Greenham Common".

The implication was obvious. The women's demonstrations had resulted in the cruise missiles leaving.

For those of us who were involved, professionally as I was or as volunteers, in opposing and undermining the movement for unilateral nuclear disarmament by Britain, so epitomised by those wretched women, there was a curious omission in that jumping from December 1983 to August 1989. What had been left out? Only the fact that, in 1987, several years after any significant protest by the Greenham women had fizzled out, a multilateral deal was concluded—the intermediate nuclear forces deal; the zero-zero option deal—which had been on the table from the Americans since 1981, and the achievement of which had been delayed only until after it had become obvious to the Soviet Union that the campaign for one-sided nuclear disarmament had failed.

The BBC, in its wisdom, had sought to airbrush out of existence the multilateral deal, which was the vindication of NATO's stance, and which led to the removal not only of nuclear weapons on this side of the then iron curtain, but of large numbers of SS20 nuclear missiles on the far side of the iron curtain. It chose to suggest instead that it had been a result of the unilateralist protests, which had somehow miraculously led to this happy outcome—the removal of cruise missiles—three years after the protests had finished.

Mr. Spring: Does my hon. Friend agree that probably the most fantastic misjudgment of global politics in the latter half of the 20th century was made by the party that is now in government, which embraced multilateral disarmament when the cold war had come to an end?

Dr. Lewis: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, except I think that he meant to refer to unilateral disarmament, embraced during the cold war by the Labour party. He is absolutely right, and I shall be coming to that in a moment. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members do not have anything to be pleased about because their record in this matter is something of which many of them should be greatly ashamed.

Dr. Starkey: I am attempting to follow the logic of the hon. Gentleman's exegesis, which clearly his Front-Bench colleague, the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring), failed to follow.

I note that the hon. Gentleman is, as usual, wearing his gold pound sign. Is he suggesting that if, in the fulness of time, the British people, presented with a referendum on the issue, decided that we should go into the euro, that that would demonstrate that all his efforts were entirely nugatory and foolish and that he should attempt to airbrush them from his record? It is perfectly possible to hold views that are not held by the majority but are entirely honourable and for one to have absolutely no desire to airbrush them out of one's record.

Dr. Lewis: I am happy to pay fulsome tribute—as I develop my argument, the hon. Lady will see this—to people who hold sincerely to the unilateralist views that they held at the time, and I have always done so. I shall not be drawn down the route of European defence or other European issues in that connection because I secured an Adjournment debate on those very subjects a little earlier this year. If the hon. Lady had been genuinely interested in those subjects, she could have attended that debate.

Dr. Godman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for showing characteristic courtesy in giving way. Might I point out to him that members of Scottish CND were delighted to see the departure of the American nuclear submarine fleet and the mother ship from Holy Loch on the firth of Clyde, but they do not claim that they were the principal decision makers in that departure?

Dr. Lewis: I am delighted to hear that Scottish CND does not make that claim. The hon. Gentleman had an honest commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament in the 1980s, when this issue was at the centre of everyone's attention, and still holds to it today, whereas other participants in that debate do not show anything like the same consistency.

I was intrigued by the remarks of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell). He said that he and the Liberals had not supported unilateralism. I shall read a few quotations.

"Let us be clear: this country does not need cruise and NATO does not need cruise. Cruise is the front end of the whole anti-nuclear struggle. It is the weapon we have to stop."

That was said by the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown) when he made his platform speech at CND's largest ever demonstration at the height of the crisis.

"Britain's Trident deterrent is 'a monstrous folly which we should divest ourselves of as soon as possible'."

That was the right hon. Member for Yeovil quoted in the *Morning Star* in July 1984 at the height of the battle.

"I remain wholly opposed to nuclear weapons. I remain of the firm belief that Britain could afford to get rid of its nuclear weapons tomorrow and would not suffer in consequence."

That was the right hon. Gentleman quoted in the CND magazine *Sanity* in December 1985.

"I agree with the Liberal Party, which is the only British political party that has always opposed a British nuclear deterrent."

That was the right hon. Gentleman also quoted in *Sanity* in December 1985. Finally, this is what the right hon. Gentleman said on "Newsnight" on the eve of the 1992 general election:

"I never took the view that this country did not need an independent deterrent."

When I made those points to the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife, his response was to say that because his right hon. Friend had a distinguished service record it was not appropriate to criticise his past views about nuclear deterrence. Today, everyone accepts that the people who supported disarmament and appeasement between the wars made a terrible mistake. Despite their best and sincere intentions, that stance did not lead to peace, but encouraged aggression and brought on a war that might have been avoided.

Many of those sincere people who advocated disarmament and appeasement had distinguished military records—even more distinguished than that of the former leader of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's party. That did not mean that they were right about the issues then, any more than the answer given by the right hon. and learned Gentleman should insulate the former leader of his party from criticism of his party's position in the 1980s.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: The hon. Gentleman clearly came prepared with those quotations; otherwise, he would not have been able to give them in such detail. In accordance with the conventions of the House, did he advise my right hon. Friend that he proposed to attack him personally?

Dr. Lewis: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is entirely wrong. I did not come prepared with those quotations. On the contrary, I left the Chamber for a short period during his speech to retrieve them from my desk, which is at the foot of the stairs leading from the Members Lobby.

As a result of that, the rest of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's criticism is misplaced.

However, the intervention by the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife illustrates a feature of the debate. Criticism of the individual records of parties and their leaders on policy issues is construed as a personal attack, but there is nothing personal in such criticism. I am sure that the number of times that Baroness Thatcher is criticised in this House now, as she was criticised in absentia when she was Prime Minister, is substantial. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has deployed a typical red herring.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman said that the Liberal party did not support unilateralism. I think when we look at the record of what he actually said, we will see that the wording was carefully chosen and that the right hon. Gentleman said that the Liberal Democrats did not support unilateralism. With that, there is no problem. From the right hon. and learned Gentleman's point of view, there is only one snag—the Liberal Democrats did not exist before 1988. By that time, the argument about nuclear weapons, peace camps and cruise missiles had been resolved. Indeed, the intermediate nuclear forces treaty of 1987 had already been signed, vindicating the stance taken by NATO.

It is frankly disingenuous to say that there is no blame to be attached to a party because it did not come into existence until after the key events had taken place. In fact, the blame that should be attached is to that party's predecessor organisation, which was most certainly unilateralist throughout the crisis.

Mr. Campbell: Will the hon. Gentleman point to a resolution of the Liberal party that embraced the code of unilateralism to the extent of saying that the United Kingdom should rid itself of all nuclear weapons? That was what unilateralism was commonly regarded as meaning in the period that the hon. Gentleman has described. I challenge him to point to a resolution of the Liberal party that said that.

Dr. Lewis: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has heard me state what the leader of the Liberal party publicly stated. Is he saying that the right hon. Member for Yeovil was wrong when he said that he agreed with the Liberal party, which he described as

"the only British political party that has always opposed a British nuclear deterrent"?

If so—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I think that I ought to tell the hon. Gentleman that, if he intends to dwell rather lengthily on what another Member has said, he would be advised to give prior notice to the Member in question—in this case, the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Paddy Ashdown). Therefore, I think that the hon. Gentleman has probably said enough on that subject.

Dr. Lewis: I thank you for that advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, I remind the House that I had no intention of raising the subject until it was falsely claimed that a political party that had been committed at a key time in this country's history to one-sided nuclear disarmament, had not been so committed.

Mr. Campbell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I can try to deal with this. I think that the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) would probably wish to say, on reflection, that in his view a mistaken impression may have been given to the House, rather than a false one. I think that that is parliamentary good manners. However, if one hon. Member is persistently going to quote, as the hon. Gentleman is doing, what another Member has said, notice is usually advised. That is the case even if the hon. Member doing the quoting did not intend to do so at the beginning of the debate.

Dr. Lewis: I thank you for that guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I fail to see how I could give notice about anything that I was going to say in a debate that I did not intend—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not test the patience of the Chair in a matter of this kind. I have given him considerable leeway, and I have tried to make it clear that he should not have introduced this matter into the debate if he was unable to give notice to the right hon. Member for Yeovil.

Dr. Lewis: I am grateful for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it was not me who introduced that matter: it was the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife.

In the course of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's remarks, the Minister of State, made a facetious intervention to the effect that anyone should be worried about any weapons system that I support. I was a little surprised by that remark because, only on 28 February, after I and the hon. Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) had made speeches in a debate on Sierra Leone, he praised our "outstanding" contributions. I begin to wonder whether we on the Conservative Benches can expect, when we happen to support the Government because we genuinely agree with something that they are doing, to be regarded as making outstanding speeches, but to be subjected to unworthy criticisms of the sort that the Minister made in his intervention when we happen to disagree.

I was therefore minded to look back at the Minister's stance at the relevant time. I was interested to see that, as late as February 1989, he said in *Tribune* that he had "spent a substantial segment" of his life

"arguing the moral and political case against nuclear weapons".

He lamented the fact, regarding it as a "tragedy", that "historic opportunities" to abandon British nuclear weapons had previously been "squandered", but disagreed with the view that

"a Labour government without unilateralism is not worth having".

In other words, he was reluctantly accepting that Labour's unilateralist policies would have to go if it were ever to get back to power.

One has to wonder about the contrast between the attendance in a debate on this subject, which several hon. Members have said is vital to the future of the planet in 2001, and the likely attendance in the 1980s when the Chamber would have been filled with hon. Members arguing fiercely about whether to go down the peace through defence and deterrence route, or the peace through disarmament route. That is what those debates resolved themselves into time and again.

There are two basic ways of looking at international politics: we can look at it either as a situation in which, as a result of mutual fear and suspicion, nations that would not otherwise be hostile to each other end up in an action and reaction cycle of rearmament, which culminates in war breaking out; or as something analogous to individuals threatening to fight, where the best way to keep the peace is to show that the person who is threatening to attack has no chance of doing so without massive and unacceptable retribution.

Several hon. Members have referred to commitments involving the non-proliferation treaty. Article VI is often referred to and evidence that this country should be committed to the entire abolition of its nuclear defences. It commits the signatories

"to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date"

—which has certainly been achieved—

"and to nuclear disarmament, and to a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control".

Nothing in the treaty states that the achievement of a nuclear-free world should be expected to arrive before the achievement of a conflict-free world. Listening to this debate, one might think that the Government, and Opposition Members other than Conservative Members, visualise a situation in which the problem is weapons themselves rather than the intentions of participants on the international stage.

The Government's view has been slowly shifting. When they were still in opposition, they were very resistant to giving up the policy of Britain alone getting rid of its nuclear weapons. Consequently, they tried to adopt a type of halfway house. They tried to say that, rather than giving up the British nuclear deterrent for nothing in return, they would negotiate away that deterrent in return for nuclear weapons being given up by the then Warsaw pact. It was only under the most intense pressure that they finally gave a commitment in which they said that they would keep some nuclear weapons as long as other countries have nuclear weapons. I should like the Minister to tell us today whether the Government stand by that commitment. Is it still the Government's position that they will retain some British nuclear weapons as long as other countries have nuclear weapons that could threaten us? I hope that he will address that issue in his summation.

The commitment that the Labour party made about that in its manifesto for the 1997 general election fell some way short of the commitment that it made in the manifesto on which it unsuccessfully fought the 1992 general election. However, although the Government say that we have reached the minimum capability necessary for nuclear deterrence, there seems to be some uncertainty about whether the Government would include nuclear weapons in arms reductions negotiations if other countries were prepared to reduce their nuclear weapons totals, but not to eliminate them. I want to be assured that we shall not be revisiting debates in the future that so many hon. Members in the Chamber do not seem happy to revisit now.

Paragraph 124 of the Select Committee report states:

"Britain as a nuclear weapon state, a permanent member of the Security Council, a leading member of NATO, and a member of the G8 and the EU has a key role and a key responsibility in trying to put all Weapons of Mass Destruction under international arms control regimes and in making progress towards their complete elimination. This must surely be one of the highest foreign policy priorities for the Government."

On the very last page of the Government's response to the report, they deal with that conclusion in a single sentence, which states:

"The Government agrees with the Committee's conclusion."

Let us therefore spend a little time examining that conclusion, which states that all weapons of mass destruction should be placed under international arms control regimes. What exactly do the Committee and the Government have in mind by that? I do not see how anything short of a world government, or a United Nations that is vastly different from the organisation that we have known, could properly take over the nuclear deterrents of the countries that currently possess nuclear weapons.

I am concerned that people who want the nuclear genie put back in the bottle fail to appreciate that the disinventing of nuclear weapons would be a thoroughly retrograde step. Does anybody seriously believe that more than 40 years of cold war—confrontation at a level of intensity that would undoubtedly have spilled over into something more active—could have successfully been concluded if it had not been for the mutual terror of the nuclear weapons held by the superpowers? We must not refuse to recognise what happened—a potential world war was averted because dictatorships knew that they dare not attack democracies on account of the retribution that

[Dr. Lewis]

would undoubtedly follow. The lessons of that must be absorbed, yet they are being denied by the very people who are now trying to rewrite history about their behaviour and that of their parties during that period.

I want a simple answer to two simple questions. Do the Government believe that nuclear deterrence helps to keep the peace by persuading dictators not to attack democracies? If so, do they commit themselves not to negotiate away our nuclear weapons as long as any other country has them, and certainly not to agree with the conclusion of this report that all nuclear forces should be placed under some sort of international arms control regime? That was nonsense when it was first proposed at the end of the second world war, it was nonsense when it was revived as a result of various skewed disarmament initiatives periodically in the latter half of the 20th century, and it remains just as nonsensical today.

6.7 pm

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) and the members of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs who produced the report that we are debating along with the Government response to it.

This debate takes place shortly after the death of a close friend, Peggy Westerway, who was a long-standing campaigner alongside me in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. She would probably have been the first to identify herself as one of those "wretched women" to whom the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) referred. Peggy would have said that that "wretchedness" was an expression of the best part of what moves society forward, when people without particular power were driven not by wealth or influence but by their conscience to make a stand in favour of peacemongering and to oppose the predominant culture of cold warmongering that prevailed then.

Peggy would also have been the first to point out where I should be starting from with the documents before us. The starting point would probably be not the Select Committee report but the Government's response to it. The Select Committee quite rightly expressed its concerns both for this country and internationally about the American proposals for national missile defence. The Government's response to that was, to me, quite confusing.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office states in paragraph (7):

"As the Prime Minister made clear on 24 July, the Government is strongly in favour of deeper, carefully considered international dialogue on this complex and difficult issue. The Government has worked hard to promote such dialogue both among NATO allies, and with Russia, China and others. We have of course articulated UK views in the course of such exchanges, and believe these views are well understood, not least in the US."

Peggy would tell me, I suspect, that they are not best understood in the United Kingdom.

It is important for the Minister to tell us what views the UK Government have expressed about the UK's position. Have we, for instance, simply told the Americans that they are mad—completely insane—to pursue the idea of NMD? Have we told them that it would tear the anti-ballistic missile treaty apart? Regardless of whether anyone—Henry Kissinger in particular—happens to believe that the treaty has passed its sell-by date, it currently exists.

Have we told the Americans that their star wars programme would unleash another nuclear arms race? Have we told them that it would result in the militarisation of space? Probably most important of all, have we told them that Britain would be no part of that?

A number of Members have said today that NMD would not work—that it would not work for a decade, or that in any event it would not work very well. Let me refer the Minister to an important point in the Select Committee report, which was recognised by the Government. Paragraph 41 says that representatives of the Acronym Institute

"warned that nuclear warheads could be delivered, for example, on cargo ships, in delivery trucks that can go across borders and in packing cases."

We also know, from current experience, that threats of massive disruption to developed and developing economies caused by disease are far more serious than the threats posed by missiles. We know what could easily be the consequence of the release of anthrax, and we now know just how devastating is the effect of foot and mouth disease in Britain and across Europe.

It is entirely right for us to repeat the message conveyed to the Select Committee that NMD would not eliminate the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction, because the nature of those weapons, and their delivery systems, are changing as we speak. The conventional notion of a grand intercontinental ballistic exchange that can be traded off, fended off or outforced is a military theology that has itself passed its sell-by date.

Moreover, we should recognise that in going down that path, we engage in some risky processes ourselves. A number of Members have talked about rogue states, the need to identify the characteristics of such states, and what happens when people see themselves as having been branded as members of that group. I think it reasonable to assume that the phrase refers to states that do not honour the international treaties to which they have signed up—and, moreover, engage in actions that are internationally and militarily destabilising.

The difficult question for the House to take on board is this: what if that definition applies to Britain itself? I want the House to consider two examples. One relates to the ABM treaty; the other relates to another treaty whose origins also lie in the cold war period.

We have often said that the ABM treaty is really a treaty between America and Russia—that it is for them to sort out, and that we are on the sidelines. Following exchanges with the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, however, the Select Committee recognises that Britain is at the very least a third party to the treaty. Part of it imposes the existing constraints on the role that RAF Fylingdales can play in international monitoring.

Everyone has recognised that either the ABM treaty can be changed by Russia and America or it can be abrogated by either side, which would change the position of Fylingdales, whose use is tightly prescribed by the terms of that treaty. For us to be a party at this stage to discussions about changing its role puts us in breach of what the ABM treaty stands for. We should reflect carefully on whether we are acting within the strict terms of that treaty, if not within the moral presumptions that were entered into when we signed it.

The treaty relating to the exploration of outer space had its origins in the cold war period. I know that a number of hon. Members were keen to revisit that period. In fact, some would appear to be keen to live in it. I draw the attention of the House to the important event that took place on 27 January 1967, when Britain became a signatory to the outer space treaty—a treaty that exists to this day. Its origins are extraordinarily important in the context of this debate on national missile defence.

The outer space treaty was the second of the so-called non-armament treaties. Its concepts and some of its provisions were modelled on its predecessor, the Antarctic treaty. Like that treaty, it sought to prevent a new form of colonial competition and the damage that could be caused by self-seeking exploitation. Its origins probably date back to 1957, even before the Soviet Union launched its sputnik in October. By that time developments in rocketry had already led the United States to propose international verification of the testing of space objects.

Between 1957 and 1962–63 there was a series of proposals, mainly made by western powers, about ways in which we had to agree internationally to restrict the use of space for military purposes. In September 1960, when President Eisenhower addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations, he proposed that the principles of the Antarctic treaty should be applied to outer space and celestial bodies. Three years later, the General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution welcoming the Soviet and United States' statements and calling on all states to refrain from introducing weapons of mass destruction in outer space.

There were further discussions about the details of that proposal, but the key consequence was that on 27 January 1967 the outer space treaty was produced in a form ready for signature. It was signed in Washington, Moscow and London. I urge the Government to reflect carefully on the nature of that treaty, even before we get into discussions about the workability or acceptability of NMD.

Article IV of the outer space treaty simply states:

"States Parties to the Treaty undertake not to place in orbit around the Earth any objects carrying nuclear weapons or any other kinds of weapons of mass destruction, install such weapons on celestial bodies, or station such weapons in outer space in any other manner.

The Moon and other celestial bodies shall be used by all States Parties to the Treaty exclusively for peaceful purposes. The establishment of military bases, installations and fortifications, the testing of any type of weapons and the conduct of military manoeuvres on celestial bodies shall be forbidden."

We were one of the founding signatories to that treaty, yet a breach of it is precisely what NMD requires; it is precisely what the United States of America threatens to do—which, I am afraid, is precisely what Britain currently chooses to ignore. Because of that treaty, Peggy Westerway would mount a challenge on the grounds of morality and conscience.

If the ABM treaty or the outer space treaty is abrogated, it really will not matter whether Russia and America came to an agreement to do that. It would still open up a whole new dimension within which an arms race—if not a nuclear arms race—would take place. We would have to bear the responsibility of being one of the parties that made that breach possible; it would take us into a dimension for which the world would never forgive us. That is why the real challenge in international leadership, which we must ask our Government to take on, is a series of commitments about the place that we will occupy on the international stage, where negotiations and discussions are taking place about whether we are willing even to entertain the current American star wars proposals.

We should base our position on five fairly clear principles. It would be fantastic for Members of the House, and enormously welcomed by members of the public, if the Government made a commitment that we will not, in any circumstances, entertain the prospect of being seen as a rogue state by violating the existing treaties that we have signed.

It would be important to make a commitment that we will hold no discussion whatever on extending the use of Fylingdales or including Menwith Hill, because that would violate our current obligations under the ABM treaty. It would break the constraints imposed by the treaty.

It would be helpful if the Government said, openly and clearly, that NMD will not eliminate the threat from weapons of mass destruction. We need to occupy a different platform. I am in favour of Britain making a commitment to take a unilateral role as a peacemonger. We can do that in the context of multilateral treaties. It does not require the agreement of someone else to take that first moral step—it requires us to have the courage to do so.

It is for Britain to lead the debate—to say that if the world is looking for stability and security in the uncertain century that we have entered, we shall have to find them through non-military means. If Britain does not want to be perceived as part of the problem, and as part of the threat posed by rogue states that sign treaties that they have no intention of honouring, we should not act as a rogue state.

Peggy would tell me that that is what she expected those of us who are currently active in the peace movement to say in the debate about the new peace movement that is needed for the 21st century. However, she would also say that she expected Parliament to do more than we do at present, by making a non-military, non-nuclear presumption that there are world solutions to poverty, instability and famine, rather than by adopting the notion of simply opening up space as a dimension within which we would be complicit in the perpetration of warmongering.

6.24 pm

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): I congratulate the Select Committee on producing such a well-rounded report that gets to the heart of this important issue. The report left no stone unturned; it looked comprehensively into the threat posed by the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and at the ways in which that threat could be countered; it looked into the major treaties and conventions, controls and agreements; and it looked into some new initiatives that are meant to counter the threat.

Hon. Members will inevitably have different views on aspects of the report. I recognise the refreshing honesty of the hon. Members for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) and for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson), and the genuinely held views of the hon. Member for Aberdeen, North (Mr. Savidge).

[Mr. Richard Spring]

No one can doubt the thoroughness with which the Select Committee approached these complex subjects. I therefore warmly applaud its work and especially that of its distinguished Chairman, the right hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson).

The speeches this afternoon have been universally thoughtful and reflect original thinking. We agree with many of the Committee's recommendations—for example, on the need to play an active role in international efforts to curb the proliferation of small arms. However, in the short time available I should like to focus my remarks on the broad issues of weapons proliferation and ballistic missile defence, especially in view of recent important developments—most notably, the new Administration in Washington.

Such a debate is not new. More than a decade ago, when talking about the need to counter the emerging threat of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them, former United States Senator Sam Nunn said:

"We ought to let the facts speak for themselves."

So what are the facts? The Select Committee notes scepticism in some quarters about the extent of the threat posed by the possible acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by so-called rogue states.

Overall, I agree with the view of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) that the threat of global nuclear war is now smaller than in the past. I certainly recognise that various treaties have played an important role in that, as the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South–West (Dr. Starkey) said. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the United States Defence Department has estimated that at least 30 countries now possess, or are in the process of acquiring and developing, capabilities to inflict mass casualties and destruction, using nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, or the means to deliver them.

The Select Committee notes some of the possible threats. Despite improvements on the Korean peninsula, to which the right hon. Member for Swansea, East referred, and irrespective of whether we label North Korea a rogue state or merely a state of concern, it is believed that the country has been building and selling long-range missiles, has chemical and biological warfare capabilities and may have diverted fissile material from nuclear weaponry.

Iran, with foreign assistance, is buying and developing longer-range missiles, already has chemical weapons and is seeking nuclear and biological capabilities. This week, Russia and Iran signed their first co-operation pact since the 1979 revolution in Iran. Does the Minister share the concern that that may open a door to Iran's acquiring advanced conventional weapons and sensitive military technology?

Mr. Savidge: Many hon. Members are anxious about the very fact that Russia and Iran are having those discussions, perhaps as a response to their concerns about national missile defence. That is why many of us are worried that NMD may increase proliferation, rather than reduce it.

Mr. Spring: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman makes, which he also made in his speech, but I disagree with him, and I shall address the issue in a moment.

Iraq, which had developed chemical and biological weapons and associated delivery means and was close to having a nuclear capability before the 1991 Gulf war, may have reconstituted those efforts since the departure of the United Nations inspectors from Iraq in late 1998. On 25 February, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported Iraq's success in systematically cheating international controls to build up an arsenal of chemical weapons and a missile capability that could hit targets in Europe.

I shall echo the extremely clear and articulate theme taken up by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) and say that also looming on the horizon is the prospect that such terror weapons will increasingly find their way into the hands of individuals and groups of fanatical terrorists or self-proclaimed apocalyptic prophets. The followers of bin Laden have, in fact, already been trained with toxic chemicals.

Regrettably, it is all too clear that a nation that wants to develop ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction can now obtain extensive technical assistance from outside sources. So, despite our counter-proliferation policies, our efforts have merely slowed, not stopped, such proliferation. When the anti-ballistic missile treaty was signed in 1972, only nine nations had a ballistic missile capability. Today, almost 30 years later, more than 30 nations have such a capability. The post-cold war environment has proved more open to proliferation activities.

Indeed, the Prime Minister has described nuclear proliferation as

"one of the most difficult problems that the world faces",

and said that

"we underestimate its significance at our peril."

The historical perspective and the dangers were well illustrated by my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis).

What is the Government's answer to the problem? The Foreign Affairs Committee states:

"By contrast with the USA, the UK Government acknowledges the threats generated by WMD proliferation but does not appear compelled to take defensive action."

That position is worth noting, but the other two positions are a great deal clearer. In Europe, as hon. Members have rightly observed, there is strong opposition to current US thinking on ballistic defence, notably on some of the grounds that we have heard in the debate—such as the alleged contravention of the ABM treaty. Indeed, some Ministers—notably the former Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, now the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, and perhaps even the Foreign Secretary—share such views. However, do they really believe that missile defences present a bigger threat to world peace than despotic states armed with weapons of mass destruction? The US position is also clear. Since the Select Committee wrote its report, the change of Administration in the US has led to an even firmer stance in favour of missile defence.

Ballistic missile defence—global missile defence as opposed to national missile defence—has significant potential advantages for Britain. It would provide protection for the UK civilian population from the growing dangers posed by missile proliferation, thereby providing insurance against the failure of our nuclear and conventional deterrents. It would provide protection for UK expeditionary forces in a much-changed security landscape and it would provide a similar assurance to our American ally. If Europeans wish the US to be committed to international engagement, it is in Europe's interest for America to feel secure. Ballistic missile defence could also provide the most promising element in a new approach to arms control.

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman pursue the logic of one of his points? Was he suggesting that, in the hypothetical case in which British troops are operating abroad and are threatened by a non-nuclear power, he would use our nuclear weapons against that state?

Mr. Spring: The whole point of having a deterrent is to deter. We have a global role and we wish to have the capability to back that up directly and indirectly. That is the point that I am making.

On this issue, I part company with the Select Committee's conclusions. Britain should seize the opportunity to influence US thinking and should do so in Britain's interests. However, the current UK Government remain attached to keeping quiet for fear of upsetting one faction or another within their own political party. Therefore, there has been no proper response to the dangers posed by the proliferation of missiles and weapons of mass destruction other than the promise to intensify the diplomatic means that have already proved inadequate.

The Government claim that they do not need to take a decision because the type of system that the White House wants still has to be decided. However, the issue is not the type of system but the principle of missile defence, on which the US is firmly decided. What is needed is a firm statement of support for this principle, and I hope very much that the Minister will provide that today.

The Foreign Secretary was reported as saying in *The Daily Telegraph* on 5 February:

"This is an American debate and it's for the Americans to come to conclusions as to whether or not they believe a"—

ballistic missile defence—

"system will enhance their security".

He was wrong. The developments that potentially threaten US security could also threaten UK security. It is for Britain to determine whether ballistic missile defence can enhance our security. It is irresponsible to continue to ignore the opportunity to shape and influence such a crucial debate. A programme will probably be developed, on which British lives and interests may come to depend. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) observed in a thoughtful contribution, we are not required to pick up the bill for all development work at this stage.

Conservatives have made it clear that we will take a lead in building support in Europe for co-operating with the United States on the development of ballistic missile defences.

Mr. Savidge: Is the hon. Gentleman supporting what the shadow Defence Secretary said on the "Today" programme when he acknowledged that the Conservatives expect to pick up a bill for the system in due course?

Mr. Spring: We have made it plain that we wish to co-operate with the United States Administration. We want to be closely involved in the discussions and the process. At this stage, the costs are subjective. However, it is important that we co-operate because it is in our national interest to do so. In view of the fact that the United States has serious doubts about the European Union's defence capabilities, it is crucial that this country co-operates closely with the United States at this critical stage.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: It would be disingenuous—or, perhaps, even worse—if we were to indulge in the discussion that the hon. Gentleman describes without having made the financial provision necessary to participate in a system of NMD, should that come about.

Mr. Spring: The right hon. and learned Gentleman knows that the Americans will go ahead with the system. They have made it clear that they will finance it. Conservatives will discuss the extent and quality of our relationship with them when we win the next general election.

Mr. Andrew Mackinlay (Thurrock): Look—even he is laughing.

Mr. Spring: I am not laughing. However, it is good to see laughter on such solemn faces and to hear the hon. Gentleman, who is not usually so quiescent. He has been uncharacteristically mute throughout the debate and I am pleased that he has sprung to life.

We have a golden opportunity jointly to face the threat of the 21st-century menace. It would be wrong to decline it. I conclude by paying tribute to a remarkably high-quality and informative Select Committee report, which, in many respects, will act as a benchmark for discussions on important issues.

6.38 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Brian Wilson): It has been a good debate, which was rounded off nicely by the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) referring to the outcome of the next general election, whenever that might be. It was worth waiting to see that laugh pass across his face when he spoke about winning it. That brightened up the evening.

I should like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) and members of the Foreign Affairs Committee. All Members who contributed to the debate agreed that the report is a substantial and penetrating work, which I welcome. I do not say that simply because almost every recommendation supports or commends the Government's policies, but

[Mr. Brian Wilson]

because in producing the report, the Committee has focused attention on one of the key security challenges facing the international community today. The debate has performed the same function, so I welcome it, too.

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is a key security challenge. It is important, when we debate the options, that we do not forget the circumstances. We are acutely aware of what we seek to counter.

The good news is that since the end of the cold war, one threat has been dramatically reduced—that of a strategic nuclear exchange between superpowers. Russia and the United States have made major reductions in their nuclear weapons stockpiles and continue to discuss further cuts. We see that as a very high priority, and we continue to urge other nuclear weapons states to follow our lead by reducing their arsenals to the lowest possible levels. Ten years after the cold war ended, we can also see more clearly the new security threats that are emerging. As many hon. Members have recognised, those threats are more complex but they pose no less of a challenge. The spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the missiles that can deliver them is foremost among them. We need to reinforce our efforts to understand and deal with this new security environment.

Inevitably, there have been several references to Iraq. That is scarcely surprising because Iraq's pursuit of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in many ways symbolises the new threats that we face. The Government and the Select Committee are of one mind about the continued importance of containing Saddam, and I do not need to spell out to anyone here what he is capable of, as the use of chemical weapons against his neighbours and the Iraqi people tells the whole story eloquently.

More than two years has passed since Iraq made it impossible for United Nations weapons inspectors to continue their work. No Member of the House is naive enough to believe that Iraq is not seeking to take advantage of their absence to pursue its ambitions to acquire weapons of mass destruction. It is a regime that belatedly and reluctantly admitted hiding chemical and biological weapons and missile parts in the desert, in railway tunnels and even in fridges in private homes. It is sobering to recall that UN inspectors remain unable to account for 4,000 tonnes of precursor chemicals used for chemical weapons, 610 tonnes of chemicals used in the production of the deadly nerve gas VX and some 31,000 chemical munitions. The list goes on. We cannot afford to ignore Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capacity. Britain will not abandon its efforts to persuade Iraq to meet its obligations under the relevant resolutions. To do so would not only expose Iraq's neighbours and its own people to renewed threats from chemical and biological weapons, but threaten arms control and non-proliferation efforts in the middle east more widely and around the world.

I said that Iraq is a symbol of the proliferation threat, but the Committee highlights other threats in its report. It mentions Iran, on which it shares the Government's specific concerns about reported Iranian efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. Iran is also developing long-range missiles. The Committee's view is that the reformist cause in Iran and progress in the middle east peace process are keys to ensuring that Iran abides by its non-proliferation commitments. The Government agree, which is one reason for our continued demonstration of high-level support for the reformist policies initiated by President Khatami's Government.

Mr. Wilkinson: Everybody shares the Minister's hopes, and I am sure that all those who have read the Select Committee's excellent report are in total agreement that diplomatic and political efforts to modify the extremely dangerous policies of regimes such as those in Iran and Iraq are essential. Is it not also the case, however, that wise democratic states, such as the United States and ourselves, ought to take precautionary measures of a defensive kind against the offensive technologies being designed by Iran and Iraq, and ballistic missile defence is therefore a wholly wise and sensible policy?

Mr. Wilson: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman expects, I shall come to that aspect of the debate. No one would suggest that it is not prudent to have defensive policies. Much of the debate has concerned the nature of those policies, and in a few moments I shall set out the Government's thinking.

I remind hon. Members that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office last month became the first British Cabinet Minister to visit Iran since the 1979 revolution. Her visit focused on drugs trafficking, but we hope that it will also be a major step in widening the range of contacts on issues of mutual concern. Discussion of non-proliferation issues with Iran is an important part of that dialogue.

The Select Committee expressed concern about the situation in south Asia. I am grateful for its recognition and backing for our efforts to support India and Pakistan in turning back from the dangerous path that they have chosen. We regret that progress, as measured against the requirements of Security Council resolution 1172, remains negligible. We are particularly concerned that neither country has yet made any move to sign the comprehensive test ban treaty. Britain, with like-minded countries, will not relax its efforts to promote compliance with Security Council resolution 1172. We shall continue to take every suitable opportunity to press our concerns on the Indian and Pakistani Governments. We shall also continue to encourage them to resolve the issues that still divide them.

Finally, on regional issues, the Select Committee highlighted North Korea, to which a number of references have been scattered through our debate. The Government have supported strongly the efforts of the United States to halt North Korea's nuclear and ballistic programmes, thereby putting an end to destabilising North Korean missile exports. With our European partners, we are providing practical support for those efforts through the European Union's participation in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation, KEDO.

Progress in relations between the two Koreas, and between North Korea and the United States of America, enabled us to establish formal diplomatic relations with Pyongyang last year. We have made it clear to the North Koreans that we expect our advanced dialogue with them to address proliferation issues. Recently, we have seen an increase in North Korean rhetoric against the new American Administration, including threats to unfreeze its nuclear programme and end its moratorium on missile

testing, which is deeply disturbing. We do not want last year's progress to be reversed, so we urge North Korea to choose engagement, not isolation.

I turn to missile defence, on which we have had a high-quality debate within a debate, especially in response to the Select Committee's in-depth examination of the subject. I should like to touch first on the threat, because we should not lose that focus. Our concerns about missile proliferation are significant and growing. Forty countries have some sort of ballistic missile, 19 countries produce cruise missiles, and 50 countries have acquired cruise missiles. Those lists continue to grow. Many of those countries have weapons of mass destruction skills and capabilities, including countries in regions of great tension. Yet missile capabilities are developing beyond levels that seem reasonable for purposes of self-defence. The pursuit of longer-range missiles is of particular concern because it raises the spectre of a truly global threat.

Since publication of the Select Committee report, the United States has elected a new President, who has made clear his commitment to a missile defence system. In response to the different views expressed by hon. Members in our debate, I should like to set out our position on American plans. In doing so, it may help if I put missile defence in context. President Bush has emphasised that his proposals for a limited missile defence arise from concerns about the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles. It is intended to counter threats from countries that cause concern and from accidental launches. President Bush has said that missile defence is one defensive element of the United States response to that proliferation. It will supplement, not supplant, other ways of reducing the threat.

We share American concerns about such proliferation and recognise the role that missile defences can play as one part of a strategy to obstruct and deter it. However, it is important to recognise that President Bush has made it clear that no decisions have been taken on the development or deployment of a specific missile defence system. He has emphasised that, before coming to a decision, the US will want to consult NATO allies, Russia and others.

We welcome that approach. The Prime Minister has made it clear that the Government will continue to work closely with the American Administration as they develop their thinking. We will do so as close allies with common strategic interests. Deeply felt concerns have been expressed today about the possible implications of missile defence which, of course, we recognise. The aim is to find a way through that addresses those concerns and United States objectives. In our view, such a way through is most likely to be achieved—this goes back to the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East at the beginning of the debate—through constructive engagement with the United States. That is the course that we are taking and urging others to take. Consultation, not confrontation, should be the way ahead. The same approach is urged upon us by the Committee.

Some Members have spoken today about a new arms race, and those fears are understandable. There were interesting comments from the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley), and concerns were expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) and for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) and others, but those fears need not be realised.

President Bush has spoken of his wish to reduce substantially the number of US nuclear weapons, and has directed the Pentagon to review that area of policy. Doubtless, the focus of that review will be to establish the defence rationale—to quote the phrase used by the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling—that underlies the proposal. That is a pertinent question. We applaud the review, which should be an important step in progress towards the Committee's hope for reductions by all nuclear weapons states to minimum deterrent levels.

The issue of the use of facilities in the United Kingdom was raised by several hon. Members. As President Bush has made clear, it is too early to determine whether US plans will involve sites in this country. Any possible request will not be identifiable until after the President has considered his options and determined which type of system, if any, to develop. It would clearly be premature to speculate on what the US may propose.

Missile defence gets the lion's share of media attention, but it is important to remember that there are other tools in the counter-proliferation armoury. Multilaterally, we support the missile technology control regime, which co-ordinates export controls against missile proliferation. It has been a success over the years, but export controls cannot do the whole job. Britain was therefore one of the initiators of work among MTCR members to develop a draft international code of conduct against ballistic missile proliferation.

The code, which was adopted by all MTCR members in October last year, offers a set of confidence-building measures, including verification, aimed at promoting transparency in respect of missiles. We are engaged with our partners in promoting the draft code more widely among the international community. We hope that it will be formalised and adopted before too long. It could eventually form the first step towards an international instrument against missile proliferation, joining the other multilateral treaties about which my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) spoke.

In its report, the Committee examined the performance of various international instruments, including the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, the chemical weapons convention and the biological and toxin weapons convention. It made a number of recommendations, and I am happy to say that the Government agree with the thrust of all of them. The non-proliferation treaty is the cornerstone of the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. It is easy to forget that in the 1960s it was commonly assumed that, by the end of the 20th century, the number of states deploying nuclear weapons would be well over a score. The fact that that nightmare has not come to pass is due in no small part to the non-proliferation treaty.

The achievement of last year's NPT review conference in reaching consensus on a final document was a considerable achievement. It was the first time that that had happened since 1985. I welcome the Committee's recognition of that achievement and the part played in it by the UK. I pay tribute to the personal role of my predecessor, now the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain).

[Mr. Wilson]

We are engaged in seeking to implement the agreements reached in New York last year. I have already referred to the need for further reductions in Russian and US arsenals. Our other priorities must be the implementation of the comprehensive test ban treaty and the start of negotiations in the conference on disarmament on a fissile material cut-off treaty. It is disappointing that discussions in Geneva remain deadlocked on that issue.

I am conscious that I should leave a few minutes at the end for my right hon. Friend the Member for Swansea, East, so I shall say a quick word about the chemical weapons convention and the biological and toxin weapons convention. The CWC remains a landmark arms control treaty—the first occasion on which an entire category of weapons was prohibited on a verifiable basis. It has proved successful. Only four years after coming into force, 143 states are party to it. The Foreign Affairs Committee urges the pursuit of universality and the Government agree. We continue to urge all non-signatories to ratify the convention, especially those in regions of tension such as the middle east. The European Union is conducting a renewed round of diplomatic lobbying to that end.

The chemical weapons convention is a good model. Its success has prompted the international community to open negotiations on a protocol to the biological and toxin weapons convention to improve confidence and compliance and to deter potential proliferators.

I have described the importance that we place on the international conventions, which have proved their worth over the years. However, we are not starry eyed. We support universality, but we realise that some states will always choose to remain outside the mainstream. We support robust verification provisions, but Iraq showed that the determined proliferator can evade the most intrusive inspections. We therefore continue to place importance on rigorous enforcement of export controls on items that are related to weapons of mass destruction and on multilateral co-ordination of such controls through, for example, the Nuclear Suppliers Group.

In answer to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde made about a successful outcome of the conference on small arms and light weapons, we firmly support Sir Michael Weston as the UK and EU candidate for the conference chair. That issue should be resolved soon—if possible, by the end of the third meeting of the preparatory committee in New York later this month. That is all I can say about small arms in my winding-up remarks.

We have had a good, comprehensive debate, with extremely informed contributions from all parties. Again, I pay tribute to the Committee's work. I undertake to write to hon. Members about any points that I have not tackled.

6.56 pm

Mr. Donald Anderson: There is no opportunity to refer to colleagues' specific speeches, but I am confident that the debate has fully justified the Select Committee's decision to embark on our project and update the work of our predecessors in 1995. The quality of debate has been high. Our job was to provide an informed basis for the debate, and I pay tribute to all who have participated. I shall enjoy reading many of the contributions.

There has been consensus, with perhaps two exceptions. The problem was clearly stated. The certainties of the cold war period have ended, and we face new, more complex threats. We must decide how best to respond to the gamut of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

National missile defence understandably dominated the debate. Its deployment is not imminent; the new proposals that are under review by the United States Administration will take considerable time. Indeed, deployment is not inevitable, although there is considerable steam behind the project in the US.

Such deployment would have substantial implications. With the end of mutually assured destruction, there is a danger that the US might consider itself invulnerable. It was pointed out in the debate that the US proposals do not cover a series of vulnerabilities. The Government can buy time because the US has not concluded its review or made a request to use RAF Fylingdales and upgrade its radar capacity.

There is hope of some convergence and movement, for example in the case of China and Russia. The Russian proposals that were made to the Secretary General of NATO a few weeks ago suggest that Russia is at least prepared to enter into debate.

Our final hope is that the Government have understood the anxieties. There is danger of general misunderstanding. Our report's conclusion on NMD states:

"We recommend that the Government articulate the very strong concerns that have been expressed about NMD within the UK . . . We recommend that the Government encourage the USA to seek other ways of reducing the threats it perceives."

The debate shows that that is relevant, and I hope that—

It being Seven o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *proceeded to put forthwith the Questions relating to Estimates which he was directed to put at that hour, pursuant to Standing Order No. 54(4) and (5).*

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That resources, not exceeding £410,620,000, be authorised, on account, for use during the year ending on 31st March 2002, and that a sum, not exceeding £508,690,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for the year ending on 31st March 2002 for expenditure by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

It being after Seven o' clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *proceeded to put forthwith the Questions relating to Estimates which he was directed to put at that hour, pursuant to Standing Order No. 55(1) and (3) (Questions on voting of estimates, &c.) and Order [27 February].*

ESTIMATES, 2001–02 (NAVY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That during the year ending on 31st March 2002 a number not exceeding 46,025 all ranks be maintained for Naval Service, a number not exceeding 17,340 for service in the Reserve Naval and Marine Forces, and a number not exceeding 250 for service as Special Members of the Reserve Naval Forces under Part V of the Reserve Forces Act 1996.

ESTIMATES, 2001–02 (ARMY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That during the year ending on 31st March 2002 a number not exceeding 128,195 all ranks be maintained for Army Service, a number not exceeding 84,000 for service in the Reserve Land

Forces, and a number not exceeding 6,000 for service as Special Members of the Reserve Land Forces under Part V of the Reserve Forces Act 1996.

ESTIMATES, 2001–02 (AIR) VOTE A

Resolved,

That during the year ending on 31st March 2002 a number not exceeding 57,485 all ranks be maintained for the Air Force Service, a number not exceeding 23,750 for service in the Reserve Air Forces, and a number not exceeding 430 for service as Special Members of the Reserve Air Forces under Part V of the Reserve Forces Act 1996.

ESTIMATES, EXCESSES, 1999–2000

Resolved,

That a sum not exceeding £447,616.60 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to make good excesses of certain grants for Civil Services for the year ended on 31st March 2000, as set out in HC 323.

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES, 2000–01

Resolved,

That a further supplementary sum not exceeding £2,327,637,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund to complete or defray the charges for Defence and Civil Services for the year ending on 31st March 2001, as set out in HC 255 and 256.

ESTIMATES, 2001–02 (VOTE ON ACCOUNT)

Resolved,

That further resources, not exceeding £120,516,064,000 be authorised on account, for use for Defence and Civil Services for the year ending 31st March 2002, and that a sum, not exceeding £120,348,528,000, be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, to meet the costs of Defence and Civil Services for the year ending on 31st March 2002, as set out in HC 251, 252, 253 and 254.

Ordered,

That a Bill be brought in on the foregoing resolutions: And that the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Andrew Smith, Dawn Primarolo, Mr. Stephen Timms and Miss Melanie Johnson do prepare and bring it in.

Consolidated Fund (No. 2) Bill

Mr. Stephen Timms accordingly presented a Bill to apply certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund to the service of the years ending on 31 March 2000, 2001 and 2002: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 65].

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order 119(9) (European Standing Committees)

Motor Vehicle Distribution and Servicing

That this House takes note of European Document No. 13889/00, a Commission report on the evaluation of Regulation (EC) No. 1475/95 on the application of Article 85(3) of the Treaty to certain categories of motor vehicle distribution and servicing agreements; notes its conclusion that the 'natural link' between sales and after-sales service seems no longer to exist; notes further its conclusions that the objective of increasing the commercial independence of dealers has been achieved 'to only a limited extent', that independent repairers are being denied access to technical information, and that they offer services at least as good and generally cheaper than dealers; notes further that car buyers still face difficulties when they try to purchase new vehicles in another member state; and, in view of the Commission's clear finding that the justifications advanced in 1995 for the block exemption are no longer valid, calls on the European Commission, in line with the views of the UK Competition Commission, to allow the block exemption to expire in September 2002.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Question agreed to.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Footwear Industry (Norwich)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

7.3 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): A publication in 2000 entitled "Norfolk Century", from the presses of the *Eastern Daily Press*, records that

"the rise and fall of the Norwich footwear industry is something that lingers in the memory of many, even at the turn of this new century."

[Dr. Ian Gibson]

Forty years ago, there were nearly 30 shoe factories in Norwich, but by the late 1990s, just three of any significance remained. A growing flow of cheaper imports from other parts of the world is generally blamed for the industry's demise. It is certainly not a symptom of Labour Government policy, as a Conservative spokesman recently implied in Norwich, South.

Women's and children's high-class footwear was the foundation of the Norwich footwear industry. The Norwich industry reacted well to the craze for dancing shoes, be they ballet shoes or shoes to enable the wearer better to quickstep or to waltz. The footwear was used in many dance halls across the country, and Norwich certainly had the market. Then came the fashion shoe. The Norwich work force, who were mainly women, rose to that challenge. To be a clicker was to be skilled, proud, a woman and employed.

In the late 1960s, when I first arrived in Norwich, some 10,000 people were employed in the footwear industry. Norwich was not just about Norwich Union, but about firms such as Start-Rite, Bally, Norvic, Shiglo in Thetford, Sexton and Everards. Through the 1970s, the work force was reduced to some 6,000, as imports poured into this country. Despite a rare showing of trade union militancy in Norfolk, where there were marches, sit-ins and factory occupations—which were often sparked off by the ebullient Clive Jenkins and the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs union—the industry went under. There was a famous sit-in by 12 women in Fakenham, a small Norfolk town. It gained admiration right across the world.

Pell Footware, Trimfoot, Sextons and K Shoes closed in rapid succession, and in the 1980s Norvic disappeared. Start-Rite, whose shoe factory is still in Norwich, survived thanks to a policy of concentrating on children's shoes at the top end of the market, for which there was a growing export trade. Florida shoes concentrated on wider fitting shoes, which were popular among older and better-off women.

I initiate this debate not as a true romantic, which I am certainly not, but in real anger that England's oldest shoemaker, Start-Rite, in a bid for survival, has just announced the redundancies of 100 operatives and workers in my constituency. It is hoped that that will save the remaining 250 jobs in Norwich and 350 retailing staff around the country.

The company said that it has to follow its competitors and place work abroad because of rising United Kingdom labour costs and falling prices in the marketplace. Another reason it gave, which I find fascinating, is the collapse of the infrastructure that supported the industry. It also made the brilliant deduction that children were becoming more fashion-conscious at an earlier age.

It is argued that it is difficult to get UK lasts and wax models used in the shoe manufacturing process. Nowadays, young people have mobile phones and computers, and are indeed fashion conscious. They wear Nike shoes and Dr. Martens. They are influenced by the David Beckhams of this world and the Spice Girls, and rarely by Cliff Richard, although other people may be. Cabinet Ministers may some day influence the fashion market with their shoes—who knows. A pair of Kinnocks might become quite fashionable—sturdy, reliable and solid.

Meanwhile, the work in Norwich has been moved to India. The attachment of uppers to the shoe sole—the making operation, as it is called—will stay in Norwich. I note that footwear bosses in Norwich say that their factories are third-world, that the factories in India are way ahead of those here, and that labour costs are much too high in this country. One wonders what that implies for the labour costs in faraway lands such as India, even if they deny that they use cheap labour.

The industry's traditional approach has been the "nothing we can do about it but lie back and take it" syndrome. Others in the shoe industry have taken a different approach. An article in *The Independent* yesterday refers to two entrepreneurs, Marc Verona and David Conibere, who in 1995 saw a gap in the men's shoe market in this country for Italian shoes, and are now selling 800,000 pairs a year with a turnover of £16 million. They said that they had identified ordinary guys who

"weren't fashion victims. They liked football and beer, and they didn't want their mates to take the mickey out of their shoes."

That was hardly rocket science. It is was a fairly obvious observation, and they took the initiative. They talked about getting a buzz when they sell a shoe through their clever advertising and clever promotion, and about having the right product.

I guess that the people who discovered Dr. Martens would say the same thing: they saw something in which many young people would be interested. There are crowds of people in shops trying on all the different Dr. Martens and hoping that they will be in the fashion arena.

There is nothing shattering about designing and making shoes if one has an entrepreneurial spirit. In Norwich, we have brilliant people—young and not so young—with street cred, some of whom work and make designs at the local art school. Have the captains of Norwich's footwear industry ever thought of putting such people on their boards, or on an advisory group or taskforce? Why does the East Anglia regional development agency always seem to talk about the entrepreneurial spirit in terms of biotechnology? The shoe and footwear industry would also benefit from the development of that spirit.

Where was the RDA when those 100 jobs were lost at Start-Rite? What did its members say? There was absolute silence from the RDA. What has happened with Start-Rite in Norwich amounts to a challenge for the RDA. I hope that it has not written off the footwear industry, and that it is prepared to devote some effort to its promotion.

Norwich produces bright people. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer learned about neo-classical endogenous growth theories from a Norwich-born lad, who has thus helped to develop the stable economy of which we are so proud today.

There is no need for the footwear industry to leave Norwich, but it needs support. Britain leads the world in fashion and the design of clothes and other goods. We have bright and creative people who could do the same in the shoe industry, but their talent is not being used in Norwich.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will step in and ask the RDA to sit down and work out a plan for the whole industry. The industry is capable of creating products that would certainly be fashionable. Their manufacture would utilise the skill of the work force in

Norwich and Norfolk, and the industry would benefit from the risk-taking adventurism of our young and talented Norfolk people.

Not everything to do with fashion has to happen in London. It seems to me that Norwich's time has come. The Government should say as much and take the initiative by pulling together all the relevant groups. In that way we could exhibit in the footwear industry the entrepreneurial, innovative spirit that is evident in the biotechnology being developed in Norwich.

There are many talented people—many of them women—who are crying out to use their ingenuity in the design of the sort of shoe that people want to wear. People do not wear three pairs of shoes a year any longer; they wear 12. Why are they labelled "Made in Brazil", "Made in Italy" or "Made in North Korea"? Why have we lost the label that used to say "Made in Norwich"?

7.12 pm

The Minister for Small Business and E-Commerce (Ms Patricia Hewitt): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important and timely debate on the future of the footwear industry in Norwich. He has explained most eloquently the problems facing the industry in general, and the companies in Norwich in particular. He made special reference to the Start-Rite company.

I represent a constituency in the city of Leicester. In the past, that city was also a centre of the United Kingdom's footwear industry. Like my hon. Friend, I have witnessed the decline of employment and production in the industry. Footwear is still manufactured in Leicester and Norwich, but it is increasingly difficult even there to buy a shoe that is made in Britain.

I am especially sorry to hear about the job losses announced by Start-Rite in Norwich. Like many parents both in the House and outside it, the first pair of shoes that I bought for both my children were Start-Rite shoes. I continued to buy my children shoes from Start-Rite and other well known British manufacturers until they—like the young people described by my hon. Friend—insisted on a variety of high-fashion designs, in which fashion and styling were more important than the source of the product.

I stress that the Employment Service, the local council and other agencies will do everything that they can to ensure that workers facing redundancy secure new jobs—and, if necessary, the new skills that will enable them to secure new jobs—as quickly as possible. I understand that the Employment Service in Norwich has already contacted Start-Rite to discuss the possible redundancies.

I am glad to say that a wide range of vacancies is available in the city. The Employment Service stands ready to help any staff member who will be made redundant if Start-Rite proceeds with the proposed restructuring. The Employment Service will offer a range of services, including advice on benefits and information and help with available vacancies and training if that will open new possibilities for re-employment.

Anyone who is made redundant will have immediate access to work-based learning for adults, which would normally be made available only to people who have been unemployed for more than six months. Of course, if any of the redundant workers are aged between 18 and 24, they will have early access to the new deal.

The other practical offer that the Employment Service has made in Norwich is to look at the suitability of staff who might be made redundant for jobs in two local companies that are currently recruiting. We will also ensure that help from other agencies for people who face redundancy is co-ordinated through the local redundancy advice network.

I know only too well from personal experience, as well as from the experience of many of my constituents, how painful and stressful it is to face redundancy. I hope none the less that my hon. Friend will be able to reassure those of his constituents who face possible redundancy that good-quality help is available—help that has been proven in redundancies in many parts of the country—and that re-employment prospects are good. The Norwich economy as a whole is thriving. There, too, as in the rest of the country, significantly more people are in employment than four years ago. Therefore, unpleasant and painful as any redundancy is for the individuals concerned, there is every indication that people such as his constituents with very good work experience and solid technical skills will be in strong demand.

Having said that, I hope that Start-Rite will continue to be an important employer in Norwich and to contribute to the local economy and that it will develop its investment, products, design and marketing so as to remain an important feature of both the British and global footwear market.

Unfortunately, in business life, firms have to reduce the work force, just as, on occasion and more happily, they are able to increase their work force. I understand that Start-Rite says that it has taken a number of years to come to that decision, which suggests that it was not lightly taken and that it was taken to protect the remaining 250 jobs in Norwich and the larger number of retail jobs that depend on the company. I was pleased that, more positively, the company announced a new business opportunity connected to the nationwide distribution of its shoes within Adams Childrenswear shops.

As my hon. Friend has said, the Start-Rite brand is part of a very old British heritage. Start-Rite still has, and, I hope, will continue to have, many enthusiastic customers both here and worldwide. It has a strong brand to build on. I wish it every success in its efforts in continuing to compete in what is an increasingly competitive marketplace.

I am pleased to be able to tell the House that Norwich City council has already contacted the company to offer it a meeting with the main local and regional organisations offering services that are relevant to Start-Rite: for example, those relating to training, innovation and exports. An official from my Department will attend that meeting, so that we can ensure that the company is aware of all the measures available to it within its industry.

It is fair to say that the company has taken advantage of and benefited from some Government programmes already. In particular, it enjoys the support that is made available by Trade Partners UK for exhibiting at overseas trade fairs. In a related sector, textiles and clothing, we have already been able to expand the support that we give for overseas trade shows, to help it to build up its export markets.

Start-Rite was also one of four British footwear manufacturers that was benchmarked against the Italian footwear production system in a recent Department of

[Ms Patricia Hewitt]

Trade and Industry-supported project. I am glad to say that that project's findings and recommendations have positive implications for continued United Kingdom manufacture for Start-Rite, the other three companies that participated in the study and other United Kingdom footwear manufacturers more widely. Through their trade association, we are ensuring that they all receive copies of the report and the encouragement to learn the lessons from that.

As my hon. Friend said in his very vivid account of footwear manufacture in Norwich, the route to success these days is for companies to upgrade their design so that they combine an excellent quality of manufacture and particular attention to the needs of children's growing feet with the type of leading-edge, fashion-conscious and modern design and styling that children demand at an increasingly early age.

That is one of the routes to success; another is in finding those niche markets where British companies continue to succeed. My hon. Friend referred quite rightly to the manufacture of ballet and dance shoes, of which Freed—another company from his city—is one of the world-leading manufacturers. Similarly, the Florida Group is investing heavily in machinery, a new product range and, I am particularly glad to say, e-commerce. I wish those companies as well as Start-Rite continued success.

As my hon. Friend said, there has been a very long process of contraction in production and employment in the UK footwear industry. Despite that, and despite the very difficult exchange rate against the euro, the sector continues to be buoyant. There has been an increase in exports, which are now more than half of total United Kingdom production. In addition to the two Norwich companies that I mentioned, other companies are surviving and in some cases thriving quite well by concentrating on high-added-value niches—such as designer, street fashion, Goodyear Welted and children's fitted shoes.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the importance of design, and I entirely endorse those comments. Our fashion and arts colleges continue to produce a steady stream of absolutely world-class designers. There are high-profile graduates from Cordwainers college—which is now part of the London college of fashion—including Patrick Cox, who is one of our highly successful younger footwear designers.

We have strengths also in manufacturing, from Dr. Martens to high-bracket City shoes such as Church's, Crockett & Jones, Edward Green, Grenson and Tricker. Goodyear Welted construction is world renowned. Clarks, like Start-Rite, has a very strong reputation particularly for high-quality children's shoes. Recently, I had the opportunity to meet representatives of Griggs, which is the company behind the Dr. Martens brand, and I was able to discuss with them its strategy for dealing with the competitive environment in which it—like every other company in every tradeable sector—finds itself.

We also have strengths in technology. Two of the leading computer programmes that provide technology for footwear production are of British origin.

Therefore, my hon. Friend's comments on the long-term contraction of the industry are right. Clearly we are not going to be able to go backwards in this or any other industry. At the same time, industries and companies that are facing those enormous changes from globalisation and technological change, and from changes in the consumer market itself in the United Kingdom as well as abroad, need constantly to be reviewing their own strategy and their own investment to find the parts of the marketplace in which they can continue from a British manufacturing base to succeed both in the UK market and abroad.

As I indicated with the examples that I have given, footwear manufacturers can continue to succeed and be profitable by concentrating on design and quality, particularly when they are in those high-value-added sub-sectors or niches.

We have to recognise that 90 per cent. of demand in our footwear market is currently met by imports. Manufacturers have difficult decisions to make about how they spot the trends in taste in their consumer market and about how much, and which parts of their manufacturing, to source in the United Kingdom. Of course, footwear is by no means the only sector in which those difficult decisions have to be taken. One of the most competitive markets is in trainers, in which most of the best known brand names originate from outside the United Kingdom. Even there we have in New Balance in Cumbria a manufacturer—the only UK manufacturer—that is succeeding in the trainer market and has been increasing its production for sale in both the United Kingdom and Europe.

Other companies have succeeded with street fashion styles and retro-styled models. My hon. Friend may remember winkle-pickers from his earlier days; I understand that they are selling extremely well in Japan, even if they have rather a small following in the United Kingdom.

We will continue to work closely with the footwear industry in ensuring that companies are helped to identify those niche markets, to find where they can add value, to improve their styling and marketing and to adopt strategies that will succeed. We have been working with the industry-led footwear liaison action group and also with manufacturers and the unions, particularly the National Union of Knitwear, Footwear and Apparel Trades—KFAT—to develop an effective strategy for the industry. That includes looking at how we can more effectively link our outstanding designers with our manufacturers. That is relevant for the textile and clothing industries as well. If the footwear industry wants to make proposals for grant aid from my Department for programmes that could more effectively link our designers with our manufacturers, we will be happy to consider them in the normal way under the Department's innovation budget.

As I indicated earlier, there have been successes in the industry, including the success in expanding export markets. We will continue to ensure that support is available and made known to the footwear companies to get them into those trade fairs overseas where they can grow new markets.

Finally, let me return to the broader labour market in Norwich. There are, I am glad to say, a number of firms in a variety of sectors that are investing in my hon. Friend's city. Virgin One is recruiting 250 extra workers as part of its expansion programme. Marsh, the Norwich-based insurance company, will be creating 100 more jobs in the

city, with recruitment beginning shortly. A call centre for Central Trust, another expanding financial services firm, will create 200 new jobs over the next 10 months. Other companies in my hon. Friend's constituency have recently created many more jobs as well.

There is the proposed expansion of Norwich airport and there are plans for the retail sector to expand in the coming year. Norwich research park has a concentration of expertise in plant and food science, to which my hon. Friend referred. Indeed, it contains western Europe's largest concentration of expertise in plant and food science, bringing together the university of East Anglia, the John Innes Centre, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's research laboratory and the British Sugar Technical Centre. More than 1,000 scientists, researchers and technicians are undertaking world-class research in the connected areas of food, nutrition, human health and the consequences of climate change. I am pleased to say that the East of England development agency is supporting the foundation of an incubator centre for small businesses on the research park.

I have never been one to argue—as many have over the last year—that the new economy is replacing the old, that high-tech industries and services are the only ones with a future or that our traditional manufacturing industries, such as footwear, are doomed to an inevitable decline. I do not accept that for a minute, and I believe that the examples of the many successful footwear companies to which both my hon. Friend and I have referred underline the fact that, in this fast-changing world, companies in every sector of the economy are having to adapt to new ways of producing things and the need to create, design and market new products.

The companies that are succeeding and will succeed in footwear, as in other sectors, are those that innovate—those that have entrepreneurial drive. We will back them, and ensure that they continue to succeed.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Seven o'clock.

House of Commons

Friday 16 March 2001

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BILL PRESENTED

RATING (FORMER AGRICULTURAL PREMISES AND RURAL SHOPS)

Mr. Secretary Prescott, supported by Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Nick Brown, Ms Hilary Armstrong, Mr. Michael Meacher and Ms Beverley Hughes, presented a Bill to make provision about non-domestic rating in respect of hereditaments including land or buildings which were formerly agricultural and in respect of food stores in rural settlements: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Monday next, and to be printed. Explanatory notes to be printed [Bill 68].

Orders of the Day

Christmas Day (Trading) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

9.34 am

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is important to realise that the changes that have occurred within our lifetime have not always automatically improved the quality of our day-to-day existence. It is thought that assumptions such as the one that we have become a nation of people who want to shop until we drop are more important than considerations of either the quality of life that we create for ourselves and our families or the general standards that we set. Although my Bill is simple, it reflects the fact that, through the law of unintended consequences, we have unthinkingly changed something that was quite precious and the end result is to the advantage of no one.

The Bill is necessary to correct an anomaly in the Sunday Trading Act 1994. That Act does not allow trading on Christmas day when it falls on a Sunday, but does allow trading when Christmas day falls on any other day of the week. Until the 1994 Act was passed, it had not been thought necessary to impose a restriction on Christmas day trading, because it was not considered likely that anyone would want to do it. Even in 1994, no one thought Christmas day trading would become commonplace. However, considerable changes have occurred in the past few years.

First, to an increasing extent, small convenience stores began to open on Christmas day. Those were, in the main, corner shops staffed by their owners which offered a range of small facilities to a local neighbourhood. Then, a chain of stores began to open on Christmas day—Spar shops, selling mostly groceries, which believed that a number of their customers would benefit from the service. Unfortunately, that sort of example began to be followed by the larger chains. In 1999, for the first time, J. Sainsbury and Co-op shops opened on Christmas day, although in the case of Co-op, the shops that opened were the smaller ones, which were regarded as local stores. Last Christmas, more large chains opened on Christmas day: to J. Sainsbury and Co-op shops were added some Woolworths and Budgens stores. Various members of the shopworkers union USDAW—the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—felt that they were being forced to work on Christmas day.

Woolworths opening its stores should be examined quite carefully. It is not a food retailer, and certainly not a retailer of essential foods, so the argument that it was opening simply to provide the odd packet of turkey stuffing to those who had forgotten it did not really wash. I know that some Members of Parliament object to the Bill because they will not be able to rush out on Christmas day and buy batteries for the various toys that they have bought for their children, but in my view anyone who is sufficiently incompetent as to spend a large sum on a toy without realising that it needs batteries to work probably should not be a father and certainly should not be a Member of Parliament—although that might be a cruel and unnecessary judgment on my part.

[Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody]

Once some of the chains begin to open, it becomes more difficult for all the chains not to open. We sometimes fail to realise that many large grocery stores compete for as little as 3 per cent. of the market. These days, so many superstores and hyperstores provide all the services that people need that their profit margins can be quite slender, so they argue not about the bulk of the goods that they sell, but about the tiny percentage that makes them different from the opposition. If that is to be the basis on which we decide when our entire trading system should operate, we have lost our sense of what is important.

I do not think that large numbers of shopworkers will rush to their local churches on Christmas day, although I think that they would probably enjoy the experience and benefit from it. However, they should have the right to make that decision for themselves.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): The hon. Lady mentioned trade unions in passing a short time ago, and she has now mentioned churches. Will she tell us a little more about the provenance of the Bill? Does it have a trade union input or fingerprint, or is it much more about church attendance, or something else? It would be helpful if we knew that.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I shall give the right hon. Gentleman a simple example. Of course the Bill has trade union fingerprints on it because I am a trade unionist, and have been since I was 16. However, I am not a member of the trade union to which he thinks he is referring.

We must understand that trade unions represent people, and not only men but women. Many women are still among some of the lowest paid groups in the country. I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that many of us still think that it is important that Christmas day should be observed as a Christian festival, and that people should have the right to go to churches, chapels or whatever form of religious observance they think important to celebrate one of the holiest and most important days of the Christian year.

If the right hon. Gentleman regards the Bill as a deep plot on behalf of the trade union movement that is designed to influence the way in which large grocery chains operate, he is wide of the mark. Of course, those who represent shopworkers are concerned to ensure that they should not be forced to do things that they do not particularly want to do. Everyone who agrees to longer opening hours for shops must understand that that impinges upon the working conditions of those concerned. They want to know what Parliament has decided and the reasons that it has given for its decisions.

I have been a shopper for as long as I can remember, and I am a bad shopper. I am busy and I have no brand loyalty. I rush into whatever shop—

Mrs. Llin Golding (Newcastle-under-Lyme): Moorcroft.

Mrs. Dunwoody: My hon. Friend tempts me, because I have strong brand loyalties to certain porcelain and pottery works in her constituency, but their products are not my average buy of the weekend.

It is important to realise that, over my lifetime, the trading pattern has changed. There was a time when we were forced to get into a shop before 5 or 5.30 pm. It is now possible to leave this building at an ungodly hour and find a shop somewhere in an urban area where we can buy whatever we like. However, that does not improve the profits of the chain concerned or the facilities that are available. I spend exactly the same amount. I may spend it at a different time of the day or night, but I do not spend more because shops are open for longer.

Mr. Forth: Setting aside that the hon. Lady has admitted, with her usual charm and modesty, to a degree of shopping incompetence, for which she was criticising others, does she think that the judgment as to whether it is profitable for a shop to stay open is a matter for the shopkeeper or shop owner, and not for us?

Mrs. Dunwoody: If the shopkeeper intends to open on his own, he has my blessing; I have no problem with that. Why does the right hon. Gentleman think that the Bill excludes shops with a floor space of less than 3,000 sq ft? If the shopkeeper wishes to open to greet joyously all his neighbours as they come in to spend their money on Christmas day, I see nothing wrong with that. I think that it is rather nice. One of my daughter's neighbours once said to her, "Support your Paki shop." When she pointed out that he was a Sikh, he said, "Support your Sikh-Paki shop." I have nothing against smaller shops opening if they so desire.

The reality is that large chain stores dictate the conditions under which their workers operate. One large chain announced on Christmas eve that it wanted to open on Christmas day, and asked for volunteers. Many of these volunteers often feel that they are more pressed men and women than they are volunteers. It is no use saying that it is a matter for them.

Dr. Stephen Ladyman (South Thanet): I assure my hon. Friend of my support for the Bill. Is it not the reality that if Members had realised, when the Sunday Trading Bill was passing through the House in 1994, that they were creating an anomaly, they would almost certainly have filled the gap and we would not be discussing these matters now?

Mrs. Dunwoody: That is right. I do not believe that the House intended that there should be protection for shopworkers when Christmas day fell on a Sunday, but not when it fell on any other day of the week. There is no logic in that. I believe that the House would not want shopworkers to work on Christmas day, and that is the essential point that lies behind the Bill.

As someone who has always been involved with families who provided emergency cover over the Christmas period, I know that it takes a toll on family life. It is no use pretending that it does not. In many general practices, the trick is always to offer to work on Christmas day because people try not to disturb doctors on that day—but they cheerfully telephone their GP on Boxing day.

It would be wrong if shopworkers felt they were under pressure, whether or not they wanted to be with their families, to turn in for work on Christmas day. However, that is happening more and more. To a large extent, Spar

shops open on Christmas day. The midlands Co-op opened 14 stores in 1999, and 4,000 customers passed through the doors. It opened 15 stores last year. The Co-operative Wholesale Society opened 36 of its stores, Sainsbury opened three of its smaller stores, and Woolworths opened three of its stores for the first time in what it called areas of high ethnicity. I suspect that it then considered opening more stores the following year. The list includes Budgens, Tescos, McColl—that is the newsagents—and some Tate's stores. Their branches opened, and more and more firms are joining the list every year.

I do not believe that major retailers are fighting to have Christmas day as one of their trading days. Most of them would prefer to remain closed, but once competition is introduced, all the retailers feel that they must play the same game. If their competitors are opening in their areas, automatically they will do the same.

What provisions in the Bill might concern some people? The House will be aware that 280 sq m is slightly larger than the area of a tennis court, and equivalent to 3,000 sq ft. That means that anyone who is running a small corner shop will not be caught by the Bill. Why do I think it is necessary to make the differentiation? I think that volunteers for Christmas day working feel that they cannot resist attempts to encourage them to work. Therefore, they frequently lose the advantages of being with their families on Christmas day.

The House frequently gets its ideas in a muddle. There are some who suggest that the Bill should not go forward because there are non-Christian areas in the United Kingdom. It does not matter how many groups of people live in particular areas, we are still a Christian country. We must think seriously about Christmas being the one Christian festival of the year that the majority of the British people want to support.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): I am keen that the Bill should receive its Second Reading and be considered in Committee, although I think that that consideration will be brief.

I take up the point about the United Kingdom being a Christian country and workers being allowed to have Christmas day as a day off, whatever the composition of any community might be. In the 1960s, I worked for two years in Tanzania, which had a substantial Christian population and a substantial Muslim population. We took off both the Christian and the Muslim holidays, not that there were many during the year. It was a matter of having respect for the religion of many people in the country in which I happened to work. We need to follow that practice here.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am sure that my hon. Friend is right. I know that people in some parts of the Commonwealth cheerfully support all the holidays connected with different religions. In areas such as Singapore, one can happily go from a Christian holiday to Muslim and other holidays throughout the trading year. That does not seem to cause undue pressure among the various groups.

Christmas day is important, particularly for mothers. It is no use saying that they can combine work commitments with providing the same facilities for their families and children that they usually provide. Of course they can; they can delay Christmas lunch until 4 pm if necessary, rush in at the last minute and join in. Frankly, that is not a civilised way of proceeding.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) feels that it is wrong to consider the needs of low-paid women working in a large industry. That is not my attitude. It is an anomaly which I believe the House of Commons did not intend in the first place. We should put it right because that is in the interests of those in the retail industry and also of the United Kingdom. If we consistently allow small but important cultural differences to be shaved away, we change the way that society lives, which would be a great loss.

I hope that the House will allow the Bill to proceed. It is a little restitution of justice, which we ought to support. It is not a deep, dangerous or worrying piece of legislation. I believe that it will be in the interests of the many, not the few.

9.52 am

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I congratulate the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on introducing a Bill which, as she said, sets out to correct an anomaly in the Sunday Trading Act 1994. Before we came into the Chamber, I told her that I was delighted to support her cause, and I repeat that now. Many of us opposed the 1994 Act and we are likely to reiterate some of our arguments this morning, which remain the same.

If I take issue with any of the hon. Lady's opening remarks, it is with her statement that we are in danger of losing something quite precious. My only quarrel with her is that is not quite precious—it is very precious indeed. Some people may feel that the Bill does not go far enough. It does not bother me in the slightest that the Bill is marked by the fingerprints of USDAW or anybody else. For me, it is a matter of deeply held principle, for which I was prepared to vote in the 1990s and for which I shall go on voting for as long as I have the opportunity to do so. I was proud to be a Conservative Member whose name was on a list in the handbag of the then Prime Minister. If that lists still exists, I hope that it is framed and given a place of honour somewhere in the House.

Members on both sides of the House who opposed the 1994 Act did so not simply because we were trade unionists and observers of the Lord's day, but because we believed that one day of the week should be set apart from the rest. It was argued then that the change would not make any difference—nobody would be forced to work, those who wanted to work could do so, and those who did not want to, would not have to. Shops that wanted to open could do so, and shops that did not want to open would not have to. Nobody would make anybody go shopping, but on a Sunday; people should have the right to buy batteries for toys, armchairs, carpets and all the other things that it is quite impossible to buy on the other six days of the week.

All that is quite apart from the fact that, as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich rightly said, every household budget is finite and there is only a certain amount of money to spend. If one cannot spend it between Monday and Saturday, I do not see why it should suddenly be possible to spend it—or an even greater sum—on Sunday. All those arguments were trundled out in the 1990s, and I suspect that some Members will tell us this morning that those dire predictions did not come true. However, we said that there would not be a big bang or a sudden collapse of society. I still believe that such things do not happen overnight; they are corrosive.

[Mr. Roger Gale]

Twenty or 30 years down the line, we will suddenly realise that we have lost something very precious. However, we cannot get it back because it is gone.

Lord knows, the House has spent far too much time trying to mend things that are not broken under the guise of modernisation, although many of us do not believe it is modernisation at all. Much of what has been done is in a peculiar way—in some cases it has been very peculiar—very retrograde indeed. Some of us still feel strongly that if this place is about anything, it should be about democracy. We resent our traditions, customs and practices going out of the window. We do not regard that as modernisation; we regard it as vandalism. I apply the same train of thought to the way in which we live our lives in this country.

The hon. Lady said that Britain is fundamentally a Christian country, and long may it remain so. Christmas day is the most precious day of the year for those of us who are proud to be Christians. Many other days are also precious, such as Easter day. Easter Sunday is especially important. However, there is an anomaly. Christmas day can fall on any day of the week, whereas Easter Sunday falls on a Sunday.

Trade unionism has been mentioned, so I had better put my pedigree on the record. I am proud to be a paid-up member of three trade unions. I am a member of British Equity, the National Union of Journalists and the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union, which I still regard as the Association of Cinematograph and Television Technicians. Some members of those trade unions have to work on Christmas day because the nature of their trade and craft means that their services are required. Of course, those arguments were deployed in the 1990s, and I accept that many people, such as doctors, nurses, the police, train drivers, bus drivers and those who keep gas, telephones and so on working, have to work on Christmas day. However, I do not accept the gratuitous spread of something that is unnecessary and which is not, has not and does not need to be part of our lives.

I had better conclude because there is little more for me to say. I very much hope that the House gives the hon. Lady's Bill a Second Reading this morning. We all know that this Parliament is running of time. I cannot tell any more than the hon. Lady whether an ungrateful electorate will allow her to sit on the Opposition Benches after the General election; neither do I know whether I shall be in the House. If, having given the Bill a Second Reading, the House cannot find time for its remaining stages in this Parliament, I hope that those of us who are still here will be able to pursue it in the next Parliament and make sure that that anomaly is corrected and an important part of our lives protected.

I close by echoing a remark by the hon. Lady. She said that we have lost the sense of something that is very important. She is right. We have an opportunity this morning to regain a fraction of that sense. I hope that we take it.

9.58 am

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on her success in the ballot and on the subject she has chosen. Those of us who know her well and admire her would also congratulate her on her presentation of an extremely important issue. I also warmly congratulate the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) on his clear commitment. Those of us who know and work with him on many issues have a high regard for the principles that he holds and freely expresses in the House.

I am in no doubt that the principle underlying the Bill would be supported by the vast majority of people They would warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich on the presentation of her Bill, as I do. Like her, I recall the discussions that we had on Sunday trading. I certainly did not support the changes. Whatever our religious beliefs, many of us consider, as I do, that Sunday is a special day and a day of worship.

There are certain days of the year that are special to the people of this country, and especially to families. Christmas day is undoubtedly one of the most special. Through her Bill, my hon. Friend seeks to ensure that on whatever day of the week Christmas day may fall, working people will have the legal right not to work. I, like her, belong to a trade union. Whether we are trade unionists or not, as Members of Parliament we have a right to seek to introduce legislation to protect working people on special occasions, such as Christmas day.

As my hon. Friend rightly said, we live in a world that has changed greatly. I remember when Good Friday was a very special day. To many people it still is, but to others it has ceased to be special. Shops and businesses now open on Good Friday—once, we might have thought that that would never happen, but it now does. That would be the case, as my hon. Friend said, on Christmas day if the decision was left to companies, many of which now trade on Sundays. As I said, I am still opposed to shops being open on Sundays.

The Bill would protect shopworkers who may have no wish to work on Christmas day. How many hon. Members would wish to work on Christmas day? Why should we not ensure that others in our communities are not put under pressure to work on Christmas day? We have a duty to ensure that workers are protected, which the Bill would do. I find it hard to believe that many companies would exert pressure on their work force to work on Christmas day, but there are such companies.

My hon. Friend outlined the number of companies that have started to open on Christmas day. Major supermarkets open 24 hours a day, six days a week. No doubt some of them would like to trade seven days a week, and if they were allowed, to I am sure that some of them would open on Christmas day. That would put an intolerable pressure on workers and their families. If a worker said, "I am sorry, I am not willing to work and I will not volunteer," that could present problems as he or she continued to work in that job or profession.

On Christmas day, there are two special aspects that people like to celebrate. There are the religious aspects, but equally important is being able to spend time with our families, our children, our loved ones and our friends. If people were forced to work on Christmas day, that would put increasing pressure on them.

As I said, shops now open 24 hours a day. Many of us in the Chamber would have doubted that that would come about, but we see the trend growing month by month. With shops open so many hours a day, do customers

really expect them to be open on Christmas day, so that they can slip out and get something that they had forgotten? I find it hard to believe that that is what the general public want.

My hon. Friend and I, as well as many other hon. Members, have been in the House a long time. I was a Government Whip during the premiership of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan. I have seen some excellent private Members' Bills introduced in the House, irrespective of the party to which the hon. Member introducing the Bill belonged. I have seen such Bills killed off by the Government of the day. I have seen them killed off by other hon. Members who objected to those Bills. I hope that that will not happen to my hon. Friend's Bill.

What is the Government's attitude to the Bill? I have no idea, and my hon. Friend made no mention of it. I shall be disappointed if we do not hear from the Minister full endorsement of and support for the Bill.

Mr. Forth: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He knows as well as I do that on a Friday such as this, fortunately for all of us, it does not matter a toss what the Government think about a Bill. What matters is whether there is a sufficient number of Members of Parliament who care sufficiently about the issue to be in the House of Commons on the day to support the Bill. Is the hon. Gentleman reassured by that?

Mr. Cox: I take note of what the right hon. Gentleman says, and he is right. I spoke in a debate about three weeks ago on the Road Transport Bill introduced by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray). I supported the Bill but, sadly, it was not carried because there were insufficient Members present when a vote was called.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point, but it is also true that if a Bill, regardless of the party of the hon. Member introducing it, has clear Government support, that will greatly help the Bill if it reaches Committee. Moreover, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, the number of hon. Members who may be in the House at any one time is not determined by the number of hon. Members in the Chamber. Members may be in their offices. If a vote is called today, I shall certainly be in the Chamber to support my hon. Friend's Bill.

Our Prime Minister has a clear commitment to family life, for which I applaud him. That suggests that the Government should support what my hon. Friend is trying to achieve through her Bill. I am proud to belong to the Labour party, because we now have a Government who are committed to working to introduce legislation for the benefit of the family. We saw that recently in the excellent Budget presented by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, which will be of enormous benefit to families throughout the country.

My hon. Friend's Bill will provide similar benefit. I support it and I am sure that it will have widespread support in the House. If Second Reading is agreed to and it passes on to Committee, we will once again see Parliament at its best, as it will be introducing legislation for the benefit of all people who have to go to work. They will now have the right to spend Christmas day, a special day that occurs once a year, with their families and loved ones. I hope that the Bill is successful and that all hon. Members support it.

10.10 am

Mrs. Llin Golding (Newcastle–under–Lyme): I, too, support the Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody).

I remember volunteering to work over Christmas when I was a student radiographer at Cardiff royal infirmary. People who volunteered for such work were usually on call from noon on Saturday until 9 o'clock on Monday morning, including all Sunday and Sunday night. They would have already worked every night from 5 pm until 9 am, from Monday to Friday. Only two students covered all the accident and emergency work for the hospital and the city during those hours—and people think that they work long hours in hospitals these days! We certainly did so then, but we recognised that the work had to be covered.

The superintendent radiographer kindly agreed to stand in for me for a few hours on Christmas day while I went home to see my family. I remember to this day my feeling of absolute despair when I arrived at Cardiff station to realise that the only train of the day had gone, that I had missed it and that on Christmas day I was stuck in Cardiff with not a soul around. My large family had already gone to church and had started to celebrate Christmas without me. There was a happy ending, however, as my father drove down to Cardiff, picked me up and took me home, but I can still remember my feeling of emptiness and isolation as I stood outside Cardiff station thinking that I would have to spend Christmas without being with my family for any part of the day.

I recognise that some people have to work on Christmas day, but they should not do so if their work is not necessary or if they have been forced into volunteering for work. In these days of fridges and freezers, it cannot be beyond the wit even of the most disorganised people, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich, to manage for one day without having to shop.

I remember when the Sunday Trading Bill came before Parliament. It was decided by a free vote. The organisers of the proposal to free Sunday trading refused to concede anything, as is usual with people who are obsessed with their aims. Those of us who were opposed to wholesale deregulation therefore tabled a series of amendments and forced all of them to Divisions. As so often happens with free votes, hon. Members went into the Lobby without reading every amendment.

Mr. Forth: Oh!

Mrs. Golding: Those Members merely voted against those tabling the amendments, as the right hon. Gentleman will recognise. That is how we ended up with Christmas day trading. Hon. Members who would never have dreamed of making people work on Christmas day voted for a measure that allowed that to happen, having seen opponents of Sunday trading standing in the Lobby.

As we were so fed up with the lack of discussion on any form of compromise, we tabled an amendment to restrict garden centre trading on bank holidays. We did not want the amendment to be agreed, but hon. Members blindly entered the wrong Lobby when they saw us opposing our own amendment and so the proposal was included in the Bill. When hon. Members cannot buy things in garden centres on certain days of the year, they will know why.

[Mrs. Golding]

I support my hon. Friend's Bill, as I think that it is important for people to spend time with their families on this very special day of the year. They should be able to go to church if they wish to do so. They should especially be with the children, as it is their special day. When mothers or fathers are forced to work, it is the children who feel it most desperately. We need to be present to see the joy on children's faces and to be kind to all family members, whether we like them or not. Christmas day is a very special day for us all, so I hope that my hon. Friend's Bill is agreed to.

10.15 am

Ms Ann Coffey (Stockport): I, too, would like to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on introducing her private Member's Bill, which deserves the support of the whole House. I am conscious of time, so I wish to make only a short contribution.

Mr. Forth: Why? We have all day.

Ms Coffey: My speech will be briefer than some of those made by the right hon. Gentleman.

I am a member of USDAW. I should like to congratulate the union on its efforts on behalf of its members to keep Christmas day special. I believe that its campaign has wide public support, as most people want to ensure safeguards for family life. Every hon. Member knows the difficulty of balancing work and home, and our families sometimes have to be very understanding. I think, however, that I would have reached the limits of tolerance if I went home and announced that, unfortunately, I was cancelling Christmas because I was working. If the House does not introduce regulation now, shopworkers may face those exact circumstances in future. Other employees would also be affected if economic life took over every aspect and every day of our lives. I do not think that people want that to happen, so I believe that we must draw the line now.

The larger stores' Christmas day opening pilots and experiments of last year, which they are reporting as a success, are worrying, because retail is a highly competitive market in which huge efforts are made to retain customer loyalty. Once one large retailing chain opens, competitors will also feel pressure to open. People might ask why that is bad. Retailers will argue that it is a matter of individual choice and that nobody is forced to open on Christmas day. They will also point out that some people may be happy to work on Christmas day and that some people already do. That is bad; I agree with the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) that it represents a slow eating away of the concept of national holidays as days of special celebration when there is a national break from economic activity.

Ensuring shopworkers' rights is the basis of keeping a special national day that the rest of us enjoy, but the issue goes beyond that protection. There is a larger question: where it is right to draw a line under the economic life of the nation. We signify that line by having public holidays on special days when the nation takes a break.

The debate in 1994 on Sunday trading focused on that exact question. It concentrated on how to preserve Sunday as a day of rest and a traditionally special day. The Sunday Trading Act 1994 reflected hon. Members' view that a balance would be achieved by restricting Sunday trading so as to recognise Sunday's specialness in terms of family activities. We also decided to preserve Easter day and Christmas day by not allowing trading on Sundays in respect of those days.

I have revisited the debate on the Sunday Trading Bill. It was clear where the House wished to draw the line. I do not think that it occurred to any of us that we needed to protect Christmas day when it did not fall on a Sunday. It certainly did not occur to me. I voted for Sunday trading and for keeping Christmas day and Easter day special. We did not anticipate that the larger shops would open on Christmas day. Indeed, the House never intended to deregulate Christmas day. We assumed that the tradition would be kept and that it would be a special day that people could celebrate. Perhaps that reflected a naivety among some of us and an assumption that was clearly not shared by retailers who opened their shops on Christmas day last year.

I share USDAW's concern about the consequences that will arise if Christmas day opening becomes more prevalent, and about the pressure that may be exerted on its members to work on a day that they want to spend with their families. It should be a concern for all of us who want to preserve special days as national holidays. I believe that we should draw a very firm line. If the big retailers cannot be trusted to keep special days special, we should regulate. Clearly, voluntary regulation is not working. I believe that the majority of people want to keep Christmas day special. The big stores' actions are important because what the shopworkers do today, the rest of us do tomorrow.

10.19 am

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on promoting the Bill, but for reasons different from those expressed by other hon. Members. I do not believe that the measure is as brilliant as others suggest, and I support it not on principle but because of what happens in practice.

Others claim that the measure is a good idea for several reasons; I do not agree with most of them. I agree with only one reason that has been advanced. I am sure that my hon. Friend will not mind my describing her as a traditionalist in the Labour party and more generally. She would probably wear that badge with pride. However, there is a danger of viewing tradition through rose-coloured glasses.

Hon. Members have given three main reasons for supporting the Bill: family, religion and protection of employees. I find the family reason difficult to accept. I often had to work on Christmas day, Sundays and bank holidays. I did not mind too much because there were only eight hours in my working day, and I could always squeeze some time into the children's holiday. It was disruptive but possible. I also had the benefit of enhanced rates for working on those days. There was no shortage of people in the railway industry who were willing to work on Sundays or bank holidays if they knew that they would get double time and a day off in lieu.

Many of the predictions that we made about Sunday trading have not been realised. Rates have certainly not been enhanced to encourage people to work on Sundays and bank holidays. People work Sundays for normal rates. The Sunday Trading Act 1994 introduced provisions to protect workers, but the brutal truth is that they are not working.

I do not want to shop on Christmas day, but I do not want to stop others doing it. What is a family Christmas? My family Christmas is different from someone else's. Many families enjoy going shopping on Christmas day. I think it is mad to spend the day in do-it-yourself stores or wandering around shopping centres, but people should have the right to do that if they wish. The family argument is therefore a little bogus.

I am not a practising Christian; I do not go to church regularly. However, I do not want to prevent people from going to church on Sunday or on Christmas day. If the regulations were enforced to ensure that people had a choice, I would not worry about the matter. However, I am worried about giving preferential treatment to the established Church. We take pride in being a multicultural, multi-faith society. Why should Christmas or Easter be singled out instead of Eid or Diwali? The Government should make some bank holidays statutory holidays. People should have a right to those holidays; currently, they do not. Perhaps another measure would effect that.

I support the Bill because of its provisions to protect workers. I have figures for those who have brought cases of unfair dismissal for refusing to work on Sundays. They are divided into categories of "main jurisdiction" and "secondary jurisdiction". I am not sure what that means, but in 1999-2000, there were six cases in the main jurisdiction category and five in the secondary jurisdiction category. At least half were resolved fairly easily by the current processes. However, I do not believe that only 11 people in this country have been intimidated into working on Sundays or dismissed for refusing to.

The Government have increased the compensation for unfair dismissal to £50,000. However, in some cases, a tribunal instructs employers to take employees back. Some do not do that, while others take them back but make their lives such a misery that they pack in the job after a few months. The figures do not reflect those cases.

Mr. Forth: If such cases were much more prevalent, would not a trade union have got hold of some lurid figures and primed the hon. Gentleman and other hon. Members to produce them? Is the trade union failing to fulfil its responsibilities? If not, perhaps the figures reflect reality.

Mr. Heppell: The figures show the number of people who have gone to a tribunal, but many people do not believe that they will get protection if they do that. When I worked weekends, I knew that if I did not do the Sunday shift, a colleague would have to do it. People had a loyalty to those who worked with them, and did their share. However, there was some pressure to work Sundays. As I said earlier, people wanted to work because of the enhanced rate, but some pressure was exerted.

I do not understand why people prefer to work Sundays without enhanced rates, unless they are put under some pressure. There are exceptions that prove the rule: for example, the Donald Dewars who say that Christmas is humbug. I am sure that Donald Dewar did not really believe that, but the last thing some people want is to spend Christmas day with their families. However, they are a minority.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Some people in essential services will always have to work on Christmas day. I have never had a Christmas without some members of my family working, because they all work in the national health service. However, there is a difference between providing an essential and an optional service. People do not have to shop on Sundays or Christmas day. That is a fundamental difference.

Mr. Heppell: That is true, but I worry about the idea that I should decide when people do their shopping. I do not want to do that, and I honestly disagree with my hon. Friend on the matter. If people want to shop on Sundays, fine. I have no problem with small or even large shops opening, as long as there is adequate protection for workers. I do not believe that people are protected in practice, however.

To answer the point of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) about the unions, they are not doing enough to educate the work force about what it should ask for. That is not always the union's fault. My union is the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers; it used to be the National Union of Railwaymen. It once had a policy of stopping all overtime. I supported that, because it meant that when we negotiated wage increases, they were based on a basic rate rather than average earnings. We could then show how low our wages were. It meant that, because overtime was not being worked, extra work would be available, creating extra jobs for people who were unemployed. The union pushed that policy hard, but it fell to bits on the first weekend it was supposed to have been implemented because none of the workers would agree to give up their Saturday or Sunday morning's work, since it meant extra money to them.

In some respects, the same applies in these circumstances. USDAW needs to say loudly to its members, "Do not work Sundays unless you are getting decent, enhanced rates." Failing that, the market and the law of supply and demand will rule, and if people are willing to work, the shops will be willing to employ them.

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): Many shop workers are not unionised. They are women working for low pay, who are totally dependent on what little they receive to keep their families going. They do not have equal economic bargaining power with their employers. We are concerned here with the exploitation of a work force who are not part of a strong, manual craft union, but consists largely of low-paid women workers.

Mr. Heppell: I agree completely with my hon. Friend. In some respects, that is my point. We have a work force who can be exploited, are exploited and will continue to be exploited, unless we take some action. Perhaps there could have been a more suitable legislative vehicle to deal with the problem, but I do not have that option available to me at the moment. I shall therefore support the option proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich.

10.31 am

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I had not intended to take part in this debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but as there is not a great array of colleagues on this side of the House anxious to catch your eye, I shall say a few words.

The House owes a great deal to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). She is an exemplary parliamentarian, who has done much in the struggle to preserve the reputation of Parliament when it has been under assault from many quarters. Of all the services that she has performed, I do not think that any would rank above this one. She is fighting to preserve something very precious to many people, and I give her my wholehearted support.

Before I came into the Chamber, I was chatting to the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner). He and I agree on many things, and we disagree on one or two as well. He said to me that if this Bill does not pass, we shall soon have full-scale Sunday trading and total deregulation.

Mr. Forth: Good.

Sir Patrick Cormack: My right hon. and libertarian Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), with whom I could not disagree more, says "Good." However, I believe that it would be bad. It would be bad for Britain and bad for the people who work in shops, service industries and elsewhere.

I was one of those who resolutely opposed Sunday trading but I did not do so for religious reasons. I happen to go to church on Sundays, but that was not the reason for my opposing Sunday trading. I opposed it because I believed it was right that there should be one day in seven that was special for most people, and one that people could keep special without being under great pressure.

When we had those debates, I and many others said that if Sunday trading came about, Sundays would replicate Saturdays, and we should soon have the high street Sunday. Anyone who drives into London on a Sunday knows that that prophecy has come true. In many of our big towns and cities, there is no difference between the middle of the day on a Saturday and a Sunday. Indeed, I am told that, in some places, Sundays are even busier.

I do not believe that Sunday trading has advanced the welfare of the people of this country, nor do I think that it has added anything to the cherished values of this country. Like the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich, I am an unashamed traditionalist, and I believe that one of the traditions worth fighting to keep was the special Sunday. That has gone, but we should, at the very least, attempt to keep certain days special.

Easter day is always on a Sunday, and it is right that it should be special. Although the hon. Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) rather denigrated the Christian ingredient, this is still basically a Christian country. We do not need to make any apology for that. Christmas day, however, can fall on any day of the week, and the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich is saying that we should keep that day—which is still, for most people, the family day above all others—special, too, and enshrine that speciality in legislation.

Of course, some people, such as those in the emergency services, will have to work on Sundays. We all accept that. I have a son who was, for several years, the manager of a hotel. Of course, he worked on Christmas day. He knew that that was part of the job. It was the part that he most regretted, but, nevertheless, it was part of it. However, the vast majority of people do not have to work on Christmas day, but if the shops are open, the pressure is there for people to work.

I agree with the hon. Member for Nottingham, East that the cases that have come to court are the tip of the iceberg, and the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) was right to say that many people who are among the least protected and the poorest paid in our community need the money and feel under pressure to work. We ought to relieve them of that pressure on Christmas day, at least.

The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich has performed a signal service in introducing the Bill. I hope that the Minister will say that the Government support the measure, and I hope that no one will be so curmudgeonly as to oppose it.

10.36 am

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I, too, support the Bill and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on introducing it. It has the support of many shopworkers in my constituency, and also that of many people who are not shopworkers but who recognise the need to preserve Christmas day as a day of family celebration, and to keep its traditional character.

The Bill is necessary to stop the trend whereby large stores open on Christmas day and to prevent that from becoming a major problem and getting out of hand. Like other hon. Members who have spoken, I was surprised to discover that legislation was necessary. It had for so long been the convention that large stores did not open on Christmas day that, when the Sunday Trading Act 1994 was passed, no one thought it necessary to deal with the question of Christmas day because they did not envisage that convention ever being broken. However, it has been broken, and it is now necessary to stop Christmas day opening creeping in because there is no protection for shopworkers unless Christmas day falls on a Sunday.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich said, there is now an increasing tendency for larger stores to try Christmas day opening. Sainsburys did it last year, and, according to her, Woolworths did it in what it called areas of high ethnicity—an argument that would carry more weight if it did not fail to recognise that there are large numbers of black Christians in this country. Furthermore, such stores also originally planned to open in places such as Kendal and Llandudno, which shoots holes in all their arguments.

The Bill is modest in that it simply seeks to extend the restrictions that apply to large stores when Christmas day falls on a Sunday so that they apply when Christmas day falls on any other day of the week. It also retains the exemption in the Sunday Trading Act 1994, so it will not apply to small corner shops, for example, or to shops operated by those who profess the Jewish faith.

It is necessary to preserve Christmas day as a family holiday, and to end the gradual erosion of that day as a special day in our calendar. The attitude of most large retailers is clear. They do not particularly want to open on Christmas day, but, if their rivals do so, it is such a cut-throat business that the others feel obliged to open to preserve their brand loyalty, and the whole thing will spiral upwards, as happened with Sunday trading.

Over the years, there has been a significant erosion of the concept of public holidays. When I was a councillor in Chester, we had a long debate about whether we should allow the market to open on Good Friday. We did not do so at that time, but now Good Friday has become almost a normal trading day.

When Sunday trading was introduced, we were told that no one would have to work on Sunday unless they wanted to and that those who did so would receive premium payments, yet within a year those payments started to go and few shopworkers still receive them. Shopworkers in my constituency feel under great pressure to work on a Sunday, otherwise they may not get a job or hold on to the job that they have. They are vulnerable, low-paid workers. We do not want the same to happen with Christmas day.

I am not just making a religious point; we are a multi-faith, multi-ethnic society. Although many of our public holidays occur on Christian festivals, there is a strong argument for people to have days away from commercial pressures and days when families can be together without the pressure of one or other parent having to work.

It is true that people in essential services and continuous processing plants work over Christmas, and we are all extremely grateful to those who keep our emergency and other essential services going during that time. However, it has always been recognised, even within that sector, that if possible, people with families should be allowed to go home on Christmas day. My father worked in a steelworks that always ran during Christmas, but the agreement among the men was that those without young children worked on Christmas day to allow fathers to go home to their families, and at new year it was the other way around. My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) may not have minded working on Christmas day, but I suspect that he had a wife at home to do most of the organising for him. It is slightly different for women who have to work on Christmas day.

The argument about essential services does not apply to large supermarkets. There has been no recorded instance of anyone starving to death because Sainsburys was not open for one day of the year. If I forget to buy the stuffing or the cranberry sauce, it is a minor inconvenience—people can eat something else. I do not see why the families of shopworkers should have to sacrifice their Christmas to avoid a minor inconvenience to someone like me. That is what the argument is about.

As a society, do we want to pay the public price of Christmas day opening? As more and more shops open, more pressure will be put on public transport workers to work, we will require street cleaning because there will be more traffic on the roads, and we will need more emergency services because there are likely to be more accidents. We will all, as taxpayers, pay the cost of Christmas day opening.

Moreover, Christmas day trading would mean an end to a day of peace and quiet for people who live in town centres or near major out-of-town retail stores. My constituents in Callands in Warrington already suffer greatly on a Sunday because of the traffic going to large stores in their area. Surely they should be allowed at least one day of peace and quiet on Christmas day.

The trend towards a 24-hours-a-day, 365-days-a-year society is fundamentally bad. We should not define ourselves by the way we shop. If we do, there is something wrong with our sense of values. There needs to be time away from the pressures of commerce, and time for families to be together. The Bill is a modest step towards preserving a special day. I hope that the House will allow it to go into Committee, and that the Government will support it.

10.45 am

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I oppose the Bill because it is yet another example of hon. Members taking it upon themselves to dictate the life style and behaviour of, and facilities available to, our citizenry. The arguments take a variety of forms, which is how it should be, but I disagree with almost all the arguments that have been advanced.

The main argument is rather confusing, and the hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) reflected that. Labour Members especially—I do not think that this applies so much to my colleagues—cannot decide whether this is, or they want it to be, a Christian society or a so-called multicultural society. That is not my problem—it is theirs—but in approaching such an issue, Labour Members should get their thoughts more in line.

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): Would the right hon. Gentleman allow that it is possible to favour a multicultural society that respects each of the multifarious traditions within it, and that respect for Christmas day would be one way of respecting part of a multicultural society?

Mr. Forth: Yes to the first bit and no to the second is my answer to the hon. Gentleman. I think there is confusion about the role of the established Church and whether we claim this to be a Christian society, and about the extent to which the fact that our people voluntarily attend church can be used as a rough measure of whether it is a Christian society. Most of the figures that I have seen suggest that fewer than 10 per cent. of our population are regular Sunday church attenders. That is not a bad measure of people's adherence to their Christianity or their chosen religion.

We must pick our way through the confusion surrounding the role of the established Church and its relevance to Christmas day, and the extent to which people express their adherence to the Christian religion by their regular church attendance, and then factor in multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism, which Labour Members always want to speak about. That complicates the matter, because the question then is whether we think we have an obligation to legislate regarding Christmas day, which, whether we regret it or applaud it, may become less important to more and more members of our society.

I am not sure that I can accept even the basic premise of the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), which is based on the assumption that Christmas day is so special that it requires the law to single it out and impose that distinction on all members of society, whether they are occasional Christians, never go to church or are of a completely different faith so that Christmas day has no relevance. I am not sure that we have got that argument as clear as it should be.

[Mr. Forth]

We must consider the regional and local variations that come into play, and be careful about the excessively loose use of terms. Bandying about words such as "ethnicity" or "culture" is all very well, but we have to be careful. In this country, we now have communities consisting largely of different ethnic, cultural and religious groups that, one could argue, could be dealt with differently within a local authority context. I might have been more attracted by such a measure—I doubt it, but I might have been—if it had said that local authorities should have certain powers to delineate certain days of the year to reflect the nature of the communities that they serve.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I would be much less in favour of the Bill had such a provision been included. I am nervous about references to multi-faith societies and certainly would not want requests for Diwali to be recognised with a holiday. Does my right hon. Friend acknowledge that there is a secular acceptance of Christmas, whereby families come together for a public holiday irrespective of any religious belief that they might hold?

Mr. Forth: That is the case, but whether we should use the law to back that up or impose it is the point at issue. I will not irritate my hon. Friend any more by pressing the point about local discretion. However, if one accepts the argument about multiculturalism, using a blanket, uniform approach becomes more dangerous and less relevant. Like him, I do not necessarily go a bundle on multiculturalism, but I am trying to tackle the argument of Labour Members. If they are serious about multiculturalism and all that it means, they must try to reflect it accurately in the measures that they propose to the House. I fear that the Bill fails that test.

I am a great believer in choice, which is one of the things that underpins the essential freedoms of our society. Every time I see a Bill that seeks to limit choice based on what hon. Members think, it makes me nervous and suspicious. I was honoured when my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) referred to me as a libertarian. I try to be a good libertarian. I rarely succeed, but the fact that he has recognised my attempts is encouraging. I would rather take the risks involved in choice than have this House legislate for the imposition of what some of its Members think to be the appropriate behaviour.

Mrs. Dunwoody: This is the greatest load of hogwash I have ever heard in my life, even from the right hon. Gentleman. He is suggesting that this is a great imposition from the House of Commons when in fact we are simply underlining what the House intended in the first place, as was clear from the original debate. It is nonsense to suggest that this is an enormous decision to impose Christian beliefs on vast numbers of people. Even he cannot pretend to believe that, although he pretends to believe all sorts of things.

Mr. Forth: I sense that the hon. Lady is trying to charm me into supporting her Bill. She will have to try better because she has not quite succeeded yet. Of course I am not going to pretend or claim that this is a huge and heavy-handed measure. However, it seeks yet again to restrict choice and determine behaviour in a way that is not necessary and would cumulatively, with other measures, have the damaging effect that I fear. I see it as part of a pattern, although, in itself, it is perhaps not the ultimate threat to societal freedom.

Sir Patrick Cormack: I just wanted to clarify that I did mean it when I called my right hon. Friend a libertarian, but I certainly did not mean it as a compliment.

Mr. Forth: My hon. Friend obviously went to the same charm school as the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich. I feel swamped by seduction and persuasion.

Ms Coffey *rose—*

Mr. Forth: Perhaps the hon. Lady will add to it.

Ms Coffey: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that if one section of the population exercises its choice, it might have the consequence of taking choice away from another section? We all have a responsibility to balance that.

Mr. Forth: That was exactly the point I was coming to next. I recognise that consumer choice has implications for other people. The hon. Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) said that schedule 4 to the 1994 Act was designed to provide protection for those who worked on Sundays. If that is not working adequately, I would be prepared to look at it again. If the much-vaunted trade unions—of which Labour Members still seem so fond—are not doing their job properly, that is a matter for them and their members. If allegedly low-paid—in spite of the minimum wage—and exploited women choose not to join a trade union, or if that union cannot give them adequate protection, that is a matter for them, also. It is not, I suggest, a matter for this or any other Bill. We may well have a role to play in reviewing existing legislation, but that in itself is not a reason for legislating in this way.

There are a number of exemptions in the 1994 Act, which the Bill would not affect: farm shops, off-licences, shops selling vehicle or cycle supplies, pharmacies, shops situated in airports, railway stations and motorway service areas, petrol filling stations, exhibition stands and shops occupied by those who observe the Jewish religion. That is a substantial list and I am happy to see it. However, it puts in context the argument that we should have only a relatively limited number of shopping opportunities on Sundays and Christmas day. We have acknowledged in that comprehensive list not only that there is an important social function to be performed, but that a lot of people choose or wish to exercise their consumer choice by using such outlets. The argument that the purity of Sunday or of Christmas day is still important is undermined by the existence of that list in the 1994 Act.

In passing, I wonder whether the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich is confident that the fine proposed by clause 1(3) is sufficient. It is entirely possible that some shops affected by the Bill—large ones, by definition—might well choose to open on Christmas day because they do so well from the many people who have forgotten their batteries or cranberry sauce and flock to them to spend money. It might be worth paying a fine of only £50,000 to allow shopping on Christmas day. I may be arguing against myself here, but the point is relevant.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) and the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Mrs. Golding) argued that shopping on Christmas day was not necessary. That is their judgment. They are entitled to make some moral judgment about whether it is necessary to shop on Christmas Day. Why cannot people buy batteries for toys beforehand? If they know that they are going to have turkey, why cannot they obtain cranberry sauce beforehand? That may be all true, but why is it that hon. Members feel that they can impose such a judgment on people at large? The fact that it may not be necessary to shop on Christmas Day is a highly judgmental matter. Many people, whether they forget, are careless, stupid, immoral, lax or whatever, may still want to shop on Christmas day.

Mr. Win Griffiths: I apologise for not being here at the start of the right hon. Gentleman's speech and thank him for giving way. Is not the thrust of his argument that there should be total deregulation? He has already accepted that, in certain elements of the 1994 Act, it was acceptable to have some regulation. Surely the issue is that the public at large and shopworkers in particular would be very happy to have Christmas day as a day exempt from shopping, along the lines of the Bill.

Mr. Forth: The direct answer to the hon. Gentleman, who has known me for longer than he would probably like to have, is that I am, by nature, as he would acknowledge, a deregulator. My ideal world would have no regulations. It would probably have no governance and it would certainly have no politicians. I constantly strive to work towards that, being only a reluctant participant, as he knows. I start from the point of view that, in an ideal world, the fewer regulations there are, the better.

I would like responsible citizens to take responsibility, to make decisions for themselves and to get on with their lives, unencumbered by people such as us. That would be my starting point. Therefore, for me, the burden of proof is on those who wish to regulate. I do not start from the assumption that regulations are good and we should deregulate; I start from the other end of the argument.

The other thing that the hon. Gentleman is assuming is that no one wants to work on Christmas day. I do not know that that is true; I suspect that it probably is not. Some people might for various reasons want to work on Christmas day: they may find it mind-blowingly boring; they may find the celebration of Christmas has become trite, trivial and over-indulgent; or they may want to earn some extra money. There could be a variety of reasons why people might not want Christmas day to be denied to them as a working day, so, again, it is properly a matter of choice. The hon. Gentleman makes his judgment. He may not know lots of people who want to work on Christmas day.

I wonder—it is a rather dangerous question for me to ask, but I will pose it nevertheless—how many individual constituents, unprompted by trade unions, have written to the hon. Gentleman in the past five or 10 years begging him to legislate in the way that the Bill does. None have written to me. I suspect that most right hon. and hon. Members here have had very few or no unprompted letters from constituents saying, "Please release me from the bondage of working on Christmas day." I suspect that genuine unprompted impetus for the Bill is limited.

Mr. Gardiner: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that individual trade unionists who feel aggrieved about a particular practice in their workplace make representations through their trade union? Far from being a bad way for it to be brought to the attention of the House, it is an extremely effective way.

Mr. Forth: I am not sure that I agree, but, even if that were true, fortunately in this country, trade union membership is still very much a minority thing among working people because many sensible people choose not to be members of trade unions. I would be much more impressed if ordinary, responsible, or even low-paid and exploited people chose to approach their Members of Parliament individually to express their views. All I am saying is that I suspect that very few people have chosen to do so.

Mrs. Dunwoody: How many unsolicited letters did the right hon. Gentleman receive before the last general election demanding the fragmentation, sale and privatisation of British Rail?

Mr. Forth: I recall getting very few indeed. At the time, I was a member of Her Majesty's then Government. It may be that constituents take a somewhat different view, depending on whether one is in government. The Minister might have interesting observations to make on that, if you allowed him to do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I do not want to be unduly diverted. I am making a simple point. Although I concede that we should be careful about judging things on the basis of our postbag, I am putting it the other way around—I am challenging whether there is a groundswell of opinion in favour of, or a demand for, the Bill.

We have had one or two references already to what happened this most recent Christmas past. It is relevant to the argument that was advanced by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich, which has been echoed by others. She suggested that if one store opens, others feel obliged to do the same because of competitive pressure. I do not think that that has ever been the case. I lived and was brought up in Scotland, where Sunday trading has always been possible. By choice, relatively few shops opened on Sunday in Scotland. It was one of the things that I had in mind when I voted enthusiastically for the liberalisation of Sunday trading in England.

On the same basis, as my brief tells me, on Christmas day just gone, Sainsburys and Woolworths had three stores open, and Co-op and Budgens opened several stores nationwide. Woolworths commercial marketing director said:

"Our decision to open three stores in is recognition that we live in an increasingly multi-cultural society".

which goes back to the point that I made earlier. He continues:

"The stores that are opening serve a diverse local community—all colleagues who are working in these stores are volunteers."

That wraps up a number of different points, including those relating to stores seeking to serve the community in which they are located and the fact that employees are

[Mr. Forth]

volunteers. If anyone is going to challenge that and say that those working on Christmas day in those stores were being strongarmed, exploited or worse—

Helen Jones: It is very easy to say that all people are volunteers while ignoring the pressures on them to volunteer. If the House were to sit on Christmas day, which I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would probably like because he does not appear to have a home to go to, would he believe that all of us here had volunteered for the task?

Mr. Forth: Since very few people volunteer for the task now, I can imagine that even fewer will do so on Christmas day. I invite the hon. Lady to look around the Chamber and see how many volunteers there are on a non-Christmas day, so my optimism about hon. Members being here on Christmas day is limited, although I would be prepared to contemplate the possibility. If the House were sitting on Christmas day, I would want the people of Bromley and Chislehurst to be properly represented. I would want to do my best on their behalf.

A spokeswoman for Sainsburys said that it was opening only three small outlets on petrol forecourts as "an experiment". Referring to a prior Christmas opening experiment, she said:

"There are many people who do not celebrate Christmas or recognise Sunday and the staff we had on Christmas Day said they were happy to get away from the chaos at home."

Those are not my words, I hasten to add, but Sainsburys' words. It reflects another of the aspects of the matter that we ignore at our peril. It is not for us to judge individual family circumstances, what people want or do not want to do, or how they view Christmas day. We may have our view, but I resist the attempt to put in statute the attitude that people should take to something, albeit something as important to many people as Christmas day.

By contrast, a spokesperson for Asda—so we have had a spokesman, a spokeswoman and a spokesperson; it is all very inclusive—emphasised that the company had no plans to open stores on Christmas day:

"It is a very important time for families and for friends—our staff work tremendously hard and we give them at least two days off",

so there is an encouraging spectrum of opinion from responsible, large retail store managements.

I have tried to explain why I find the Bill unsatisfactory. I do not agree with the analysis that underpins it. With all respect to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich, it is flawed and inadequate. I do not agree with its principal thrust, because I am opposed to further regulation. If existing provisions are not adequate to protect employees, we should focus on that. The role of the trade unions is, quite properly, to protect and promote the well-being of their members and those whom they seek to attract as members, but my suspicion that the Bill is the creature of one or more trade unions does not recommend it to me.

For all those reasons, I hope that the Bill will not make any further progress.

11.10 am

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): They say that Christmas comes earlier each year, but I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) must hold the record, for introducing it to the public consciousness on 16 March. I congratulate her on her success in the ballot and on introducing the Bill, which I support.

Ten years ago, I was invited to give a lecture to a group of civil servants in Moscow. I was talking about product liability insurance and used the example of a problem that had recently been reported in the Moscow press: exploding televisions and the fires that they caused in apartment blocks throughout the city. I said that product liability and product liability insurance would be extremely effective in controlling such problems. An angry civil servant rose to inform me that all Russian citizens had a right under their legal code to have televisions that worked perfectly, so there was no need for product liability insurance. I said that to have a right without having any means of enforcing it is to have no right at all.

That is precisely what undergirds the Bill: there are workers in large retail companies who may have a right, but we all know how difficult it can be to exercise it on certain occasions. We all know of the trade-off between workers and management and how hard it can be to refuse a manager who has been co-operative and helpful on other occasions and is having problems filling the roster for a particular day.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), for whom I have great respect, talked about how choice underpins our fundamental freedoms, which is true, but we should always ask whose choice. The choice of shopworkers is sacrificed to give the wider public the choice to which he referred.

Christmas day trading can be seen as part of an on-going process, going back many years, starting with Sunday opening and going on to bank holiday opening, 24-hour opening and Sunday browsing time. The Bill would prevent the continuation of that process. That is not to say that all those measures have been detrimental. I agree with Lord Bassam of Brighton when he says that, on the whole, the nature of Sundays has not changed greatly since Sunday opening was introduced in 1994, but I believe that the nature of Christmas day would be changed fundamentally by trading on 25 December. The burdens on those who would inevitably be forced to work would not be outweighed by the benefits to the wider public.

Christmas day is special because it is about gift, not about consumer consumption. That is precious, and we should preserve it. In the run-up to Christmas, the stores market toys and consumer goods with vigour—it is their most profitable time of the year—on the basis that Christmas day is special. They try to maximise sales by persuading us that our families' Christmas will be special and memorable because we have bought their product, but they undermine the logic of their own position by then saying that Christmas day should be just a normal trading day like any other. We are reflecting that internal inconsistency in our support for the Bill.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said that we do not need any more regulation. Indeed, he is a keen deregulator and would like all regulation to be abolished. I always respect what he says, and his position is consistent and rigorous, but the same rigour and consistency were shown by the Jesuits in the Spanish inquisition, often leading to a false conclusion.

It is true that the retail industry can regulate itself and that one can point to pilot schemes for Christmas day trading that have shown higher-than-expected sales, but I do not share the view that such trading is something for the future. The research, too, shows an internal inconsistency. As any good researcher knows, the first question to ask is not what conclusions are reached but who is doing the research. When the stores say that they have had great success trading on Christmas day and how wonderful it would be if they could do it every year, one has to exercise a little scepticism.

Mr. Forth: Presumably, the hon. Gentleman would apply the same principle to the Bill, in so far as it is the creature of a trade union.

Mr. Gardiner: I would apply the principle universally, because we must consider any argument on its merits and be sceptical about the motives of anyone who advances it. That is the only way of arriving at a clear view.

By its nature, a Christmas day trading experiment is an isolated instance. Hon. Members have shown that there have been very few such instances—enough to prompt concern in the House, but none the less very few. That they should have been claimed as a success is therefore hardly surprising. The law of supply and demand applies, and if only one or two major retailers are open on a particular day, everyone who wants to shop on that day will end up shopping in those stores. However, that is not to say that if all the stores were open on Christmas day they would achieve the same success. Therefore, it is a false argument to use such experiments as an illustration of why Christmas trading should be allowed.

I welcome the fact that the present Government have introduced a great deal of legislation affecting the retail trade. It includes that on the national minimum wage, the working time directive, holidays and maternity and paternity leave. I acknowledge that it has necessitated a degree of administrative work for many retailers. Retailers have complained that it has caused their attention to be distracted from the real business of serving their customers, so I am delighted that the proposed Bill, which would limit trading on Christmas day, would not create more administrative work for the retail trade.

The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst expressed his willingness to work on Christmas day, if the House were open. That is commendable, but I wonder whether the managers, the directors, and in particular the finance directors of the major trading companies and retailers, would be as willing to use Christmas day as a day of normal trading were they also required to be in their offices.

Mr. Forth: I shall write and ask them.

Mr. Gardiner: That is a valuable intervention. I would be interested to see the responses that the right hon. Gentleman gets.

I believe that it is the Government's duty to serve all the people and to balance the choices that are available within society because some of those choices conflict. If employers begrudge employees the better rights that they have achieved under this Government, I am pleased to say that they will have to grin and bear it. I am pleased that employees are happy about what we have done. The basis of the legislation was to formalise working practices in this country and to eradicate the bad working practices that existed in some industries. The Bill is an honourable contribution to that process.

It is certainly true that Christmas has changed for a large number of the British public and although many would subscribe to the traditional Christmas day, the universally shared experience that I remember as a child no longer applies. I remember Christmas from a very particular perspective because, like the right hon. Gentleman, I was fortunate enough to grow up in Scotland. When I was a child, my mother, who was a doctor, never spent a single Christmas day with us. She was not a general practitioner, but a doctor in public health in Paisley, I remember, year after year, my mother never being present on Christmas day. We moved to England when my mother changed jobs and worked in public health in Hertfordshire. I remember the change in our household when, for the first time, my mother was able to join us on Christmas day and we celebrated a family Christmas. We did not have that option in Scotland, where the law allowed Sunday working. Indeed, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, the only public holiday was new year's day. That is one import from Scotland into England that I am very pleased about and I am sure that the English are extremely grateful. It used to be the case that in Scotland, new year's day was a public holiday, but Christmas day was not; in England, the opposite was the case.

I am delighted that the Bill will give other families the opportunity to have a shared Christmas experience. Although something of the nature of Christmas day has changed and its importance for the vast majority of people may no longer be one of religious significance, that does not mean that they do not want to preserve something special about Christmas day. I have only one thing to say to the right hon. Gentleman or anyone else who does not—bah humbug!

Mr. Swayne: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am a supporter of the Bill, but we should not get carried away by our own rhetoric with respect to the shared collective experience of a Christmas day of yore. Pendulums always swing. He will recall that Scrooge would have been unable to have the prize goose delivered to Tiny Tim and his family had the butcher not been open on that day.

Mr. Gardiner: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who makes his point in his usual elaborate and flamboyant fashion. It has already been said this morning that essential services continue on Christmas day. The Bill seeks to give workers providing non-essential services the right to the protection that the House took for granted in previous legislation.

Rather than making the case for Christmas day opening, the arguments that we have heard about pilot schemes and so on have underlined the need for legislation to prevent Christmas day trading. We are well aware of the highly competitive nature of the retail trade, especially the supermarket trade, which is the focus of the Bill. Whenever one store decides to try a pilot scheme, its competitors will always reciprocate and the practice will mushroom. Christmas day trading will certainly slip in through the back door and I believe that it needs to be

[Mr. Gardiner]

checked. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich has introduced an eminently worthy Bill and I am delighted to support it.

11.28 am

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): I have one or two points to raise in the context of the speech by the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). First, I got the impression that while he is in favour of deregulation, he accepts that in practical terms there needs to be some regulation. Indeed, he supported the Sunday Trading Act 1994, which allowed for a certain amount of regulation. He appeared to be praising that in his speech earlier this morning. Given that he appreciates the need for some regulation, I should have thought that he would have wanted the Bill to be examined in more detail, unless of course he is in principle against giving anyone the choice of staying closed on Christmas day. The pressures of the market will push towards Christmas day opening.

The right hon. Gentleman implied that, just because one or more trade unions support the Bill, it must be wrong and bad. I cannot believe that he is so unintelligent as to believe that no trade union can ever say anything responsible or helpful. If he did believe that, he would hold the sort of view that leads to the polarisation of states and their becoming fascist or communist. If we are to discover the reasonable points on which agreement can be reached, we must be able to hold debate with those with whom we would normally disagree.

Mr. Forth: I know the hon. Gentleman to be a kindly and tolerant man, but is he suggesting that if I express doubts about the views or the role of trade unions, I must be something called a fascist? What happened to a free, open society in which people like me can express our views about trade unions without being abused by the hon. Gentleman?

Mr. Griffiths: I did not mean that at all. The right hon. Gentleman has obviously misunderstood me. I said that to be against trade unions per se, and to believe that a trade union could never say anything reasonable—which seemed to be the implication of his speech—would be to take the road towards a polarisation of society. I do not believe that he is totally convinced that a trade unionist can never say anything reasonable. He has many trade unionists in his constituency, and I am sure that he does not mean to condemn them all to perdition.

Mrs. Dunwoody: There are even some Conservative trade unionists.

Mr. Griffiths: Indeed, there is even an organisation of Conservative trade unionists, so even the Conservative party cannot be all bad.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): Come off it.

Mr. Griffiths: The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said that I was a tolerant man, but I may be being too generous on that point.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about public demand and how those who work in shops might feel about the Bill. We have not had an overwhelming response to the Bill, though he himself said that we should not let the size of our mailbags persuade us to vote one way or another on any issue. The point is that the Bill will deal with a situation that could become difficult in future. I happen to do the weekly shop for my family, and I always do it at the Co-operative superstore in Pyle, which used to be known as Leo's and is still popularly known by that name. I shall make it my business tomorrow afternoon to conduct a little poll of the workers there to find out whether they would prefer to have the opportunity to work on Christmas day or a statutory right to a holiday.

Given the right hon. Gentleman's apparent keenness to know how people feel about the Bill, it would be useful to have an opportunity to debate it in Committee. The wider public could then give their views and, though it stretches my tolerance a bit, I should be happy to join him in drawing up a questionnaire for shopworkers and the public on what they feel about Christmas day shopping.

Mr. Forth: The first test of opinion occurs in the House of Commons on Second Reading, a simple procedure that we all know well. If, as has been claimed, the Bill is supported by Members of Parliament, we shall soon know it. I assume that many Members will have been approached by their constituents, who will know that the Bill was on the Order Paper today. We can judge the amount of support for the Bill by the number of Members who are here to support it on Second Reading. If it achieves support, we can consider it in detail in Committee.

Mr. Griffiths: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will think about how the process should work. The Bill should be given an opportunity to test his feelings about Sunday trading.

I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) for bringing before us a Bill to correct an important anomaly in the 1994 Act. I look forward to its progress in Committee.

11.35 am

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I support the Bill and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on introducing it. The main reason for supporting it is that it addresses an oversight. Had Parliament realised that when it drew up provisions for exemptions in the Sunday Trading Act 1994, it would have dealt with the oversight. It is unfortunate that it has taken another seven years for us to do so, but better late than never.

That said, the more I have thought and read about the Bill, the more I have realised that it throws up as many difficulties as it resolves. I do not know whether I may be talking myself into a place on the Committee by saying that, but there are a few difficulties.

First, I have concerns about the original definitions of large and small stores. It strikes me that more and more stores may simply reconfigure their space or open smaller branches to get around the law. Research has told us about several stores that already open—Budgens is cited—as small convenience stores. Big supermarkets, such as Sainsbury, now distinguish between large out-of-town

shopping centres and strategically placed convenience stores on high streets. Stores might try to get around the Bill by opening more outlets of that type. The Bill would do nothing to prevent that, so perhaps we should turn our attention to that point.

Secondly, I fear that the Bill may contain a restrictive, anti-competitive element. I cannot see why a small store should have privileges that a larger store must be denied. I am not sure that that is fair.

Thirdly, as far as I understand it, the 280 sq m specified in legislation relates to floor space where products are on sale. Could a larger supermarket simply section off areas to get around the intention of the Bill?

Mrs. Dunwoody: In drawing up the Bill, I have followed the original Act. That is why 3,000 sq ft—I still use that measure—is the cut-off point in my Bill. Anything smaller would be a family shop and anything larger a chain or bigger store. The figure used is nothing new; it simply follows the 1994 legislation.

Mr. McCabe: I appreciate that, but my point is that although there has as yet been no challenge of this sort, it seems possible that a big store could simply section off some areas.

Mrs. Dunwoody: That is not the main issue.

Mr. McCabe: I hear what my hon. Friend says, but it could be tested. Supermarkets are different from how they used to be. At one time, they used floor space in a predictable way, but great advances in technology mean that they know exactly what sort of thing people might want to buy on Christmas day. It is possible to reconfigure a store with greater ease. I simply make that point because I wonder whether people will try to get around the provision. I hope that they will not.

We should congratulate ourselves on what we are trying to do here. I have to say in passing that my hon. Friends may have missed a trick. If I was them, I would have written to the 4,000 shopworkers in Bromley and Chislehurst and made sure that the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) was clear about the strength of his argument. Perhaps it is not too late for them to organise that. Perhaps he would then give greater support to the Bill.

Mr. Gardiner: Is my hon. Friend aware that USDAW has 310,000 members? On the most recent figures to have been produced by the Conservative party, that is 10,000 more than it has.

Mr. McCabe: I am sure that that would not be difficult. I take the point.

What USDAW is trying to do is right, but we should be careful about what we are saying. I do not know why we find it so easy to make a case for protecting shopworkers while we forget about the other people whom we oblige to work on Christmas day. The notion of our family Christmas forces people to work. We seem to think that no one can have a family Christmas now without access to all those wonderful television programmes that require umpteen people to work when they do not really need to. Those programmes are hardly essential. Many extra people have to work to provide all the electricity that we use on the day, which is not essential.

Perhaps we should look at the matter more broadly and ask why we are confining ourselves to shopworkers. Perhaps we should make it easier for people not to work on Christmas day, and then concentrate on what the exemptions should be. That would make me a lot happier.

There is a danger that we are creating an exception for Christmas because we have a nostalgic and rosy view of it. My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich described it as a chance to escape completely from the daily grind. I am not sure that too many women would regard Christmas day that way. Most of my female relatives tell me that it is a day that they approach with trepidation and that by the end of it, they feel that they have been completely through the daily grind. I am not sure that Christmas is quite the relaxed, wonderful time that we are inclined to make out.

I am intrigued about the things that we regard as essential exceptions. Why is it that shops that sell intoxicating liquor are exempted? There is nothing vital or essential about them. I am not sure either why anyone desperately needs cycling supplies or accessories on Christmas day. I also have difficulty with the idea that service station shops, which seem to be able to sell almost anything these days, should be exempted. I find it difficult to see exactly what we are achieving in that. One of the weird consequences of the Bill is that we will require local authority inspectors to work on Christmas day. In protecting one group of workers, we put additional pressure on another.

As I said to my hon. Friend, I intend to support the Bill because it corrects an oversight, but we should look more carefully at what we are trying to say about Christmas day. It would be much better if we designated it a public holiday and gave people a statutory right not to work. That would affect the vast majority of workers and we could then deal only with the exemptions—emergency and essential services, and other people who need to work. That would be a fairer approach and more consistent with the idea of Christmas day as a special family day. It would be a more logical way to proceed.

Much as I am prepared to support the Bill because it corrects an oversight, to single out shop workers and say that there is something special about their rights as opposed to other workers does not make a great deal of sense. If I find myself on the Committee, I shall argue that we should try to strengthen the provisions to include other workers. That is my fundamental doubt about the Bill. It corrects the oversight in the 1994 legislation, but recognises only the interests of shop workers on a day that we argue is a special event and a tradition that should be protected. If we are right about that, we should think about all the other people who find themselves forced to work on Christmas day. Otherwise, Christmas day will end up not being a holiday for the vast majority, but by some weird quirk of Parliament we shall have singled out a section of the work force and protected their rights without concerning ourselves with everyone else.

[Mr. McCabe]

That problem highlights an obvious inconsistency in our thinking. I would prefer to see that inconsistency dealt with, but as we are not there yet, I am happy to accept the limited provisions that the Bill offers because it corrects an oversight in the 1994 legislation.

11.46 am

Mr. Peter Atkinson (Hexham): I congratulate the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on winning a high place in the ballot and introducing the Bill. Whether it will be successful, time will tell, but it has produced an interesting and timely debate, and good points have been made by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House and of the argument.

When Sainsburys and the other shops opened on Christmas day, it came as a shock to me and many other people who thought that it was illegal for them to do so. I voted for liberalisation in 1994, and I thought at the time that we were protecting Easter Sunday and Christmas day. It is manifest that we did not, and that has raised considerable concerns.

At the heart of the issue is an argument about whether we should be free to go out and buy things on Christmas day and whether shop owners should be free to meet that demand, or whether by allowing that freedom we destroy something that the majority of people value—a peaceful family Christmas and a day that is special.

The hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox), who is no longer in his place, mentioned Good Friday and how it had changed over the years. Like him, I am old enough to remember what Good Friday used to be like. I was working in London at the time and I had to work some of the Easter holiday so I could not go away for Easter. Good Friday was a nightmare because nothing happened. Even the pubs did not open. They used to open at lunchtime on Christmas day, but they did not open on Good Friday. For most of us, the liberalisation of Good Friday came as a welcome relief. We liked to be able to go and do things on Good Friday and attend football matches or other events. It could be argued that with the changes came the danger of Good Friday becoming a normal working day—indeed, some offices open on Good Friday, preferring to give their staff an extra day at the other end of the Easter holiday. Perhaps the changes have gone too far.

The Opposition understand the concerns about widespread Christmas day opening, especially the concerns of those who want to keep Christmas day special and fear that the expansion of Christmas day trading would spoil it. However, official Opposition Members have a free vote, as the subject gives rise to many difficult ethical and religious issues. We shall not oppose Second Reading—indeed, I hope that the Bill goes into Committee. As one who, with the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich, has been a member of the Chairmen's Panel for some time, I look forward to her being in Committee on the other side of the dais. She is a firm and robust Committee Chairman, so I hope that when she is a member of the Committee, the Chair will have an equally firm and robust occupant.

That is the view of the official Opposition. I now ask the House's indulgence as I make my personal views known. In part, I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth), in that I do not think that it is for Parliament to tell people how to live their lives. My lines have been stolen by my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne), for I, too, am reminded of Charles Dickens's Scrooge going out on Christmas morning to buy a large turkey to give to Tiny Tim and his family—[HON. MEMBERS: "Goose."] Obviously, Charles Dickens never cooked a turkey, but I have. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) mentioned the problems that women face on Christmas day, but I always cook the turkey so I know that had I purchased a large turkey at 10 o'clock on Christmas morning, Tiny Tim would have been long in bed by the time it was cooked.

Mrs. Dunwoody: The point that is being made firmly by those sitting in this corner is that the bird in question was, of course, a goose.

Mr. Atkinson: I am not sure that the hon. Lady is right about that, but I shall go and look it up and apologise if I am wrong.

The problem identified by the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) is that Christmas has changed. For many people these days, it is a holiday: they go abroad or go ski-ing, and instead of sitting around the log fire at home, they go out for their Christmas meal in a hotel or restaurant. Things are changing and we have to accept that change.

Last Christmas day, shop openings were on a minor scale: only Sainsburys, Woolworths and one or two others opened their stores. I am sure that the supermarket companies are sufficiently aware of public opinion to realise that widespread Christmas opening would be both inappropriate and deeply unpopular. However, there may be merit in shops opening in areas in which there is clearly demand. In our inner cities and city centres in places such as London, there are many people who live on their own and do not have families to go to; they might welcome the opportunity to go out and do something on Christmas day.

I do not think that we should tell people what they should do. If there were a growing problem and legislation were to become necessary, I think that it should take the form of giving local authorities the power to make the decision and should not involve central Government. That is my personal view; the official Opposition's view is that the matter is one that should be decided by a free vote.

11.52 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Mike O'Brien): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) on her success in the private Members' ballot. It is clear that her Bill has touched a nerve.

Christmas day is important to most of us, and there are real fears that it might be eroded by commercial pressures. Last year, USDAW mounted a vigorous campaign to protect Christmas day, and I have discussed the issues with the union. In addition, the hon. Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Sayeed) and some of his constituents have met me to spell out their concerns. It is right that Parliament should now have the opportunity to debate the issues.

The Government are neutral on the Bill. We believe that it is a matter for Parliament to decide and we are content for the Bill to go into Standing Committee if that

is what the House decides. However, my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) and for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) and the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) have raised some important issues that require detailed debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich has acknowledged that the purpose of the Bill is not to remedy any serious current problem that has arisen from the Christmas day opening of shops. It is intended more as a pre-emptive strike against any widespread opening of large shops in future. The protection of shopworkers and the preservation of the significance of Christmas day are laudable aims.

Christmas day has a special role in the life of this country: it is important for both religious and family reasons, and it is often valued by people of other religions or even by those of no faith. The Government want Christmas day's unique place in our lives to be preserved, but the House should think carefully about whether legislating to prevent some shops from opening is the right way to achieve that aim.

Oliver Cromwell did his best to put a stop to Christmas day. Not only did he ban mince pies, but he declared that Christmas day must be a working day. Thankfully, Christmas day survived Oliver Cromwell.

Mrs. Dunwoody: My hon. Friend might like also to observe that Oliver Cromwell was not too keen on Parliament, a view that has been held from time to time by others, but not one that we normally support.

Mr. O'Brien: At one point Cromwell was in favour of Parliament, and at another point he was against it. That is almost like Conservative tax guarantees these days. There is a policy one day, which is given up the next.

It seems that Christmas day has long been accepted as a holiday. Even Scrooge, who has featured in the debate, relented on this point. Obviously not everyone has been able to take advantage of a Christmas day holiday. Boxing day is believed to have developed in the middle ages to allow people who had to work on Christmas day to take the next day off. Today some people inevitably have to work—most obviously medical staff and those in essential services.

If we look back a few decades, other groups also worked on Christmas day. For example, people were needed to run some public transport services. If we go back a bit further, the country was even blessed with postal deliveries on Christmas day. Interestingly, in those days church attendance and religious observance were much greater than now. The suggestion that the religious significance of Christmas day is undermined by work is therefore one that cannot be taken at face value.

I recognise that there are concerns about shops and stores being open for business on Christmas day. The retail sector is one of the most important sectors in the UK, comprising more than 300,000 outlets. It employs about 2.5 million, about 10 per cent. of the work force. Like it or not, nowhere is the importance of the retail sector more apparent than in the run-up to Christmas. Last year, £26 billion was spent in the shops during December. That was 13 per cent. of the total spend for the year.

The spectre of the mass opening of large shops on 25 December does not, in this context, seem realistic. Whether or not people engage in religious celebration, Christmas day remains the focus for all the pre-Christmas shopping activity. People overwhelmingly want to enjoy the day in the traditional way with their families. Most will not have the energy, time, money or inclination for yet another major round of shopping. It seems that there is little serious evidence of large-scale demand for Christmas day shopping in large stores.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey) suggested that the Bill is to some extent the residue of the Sunday Trading Act 1994, and that the issue of Christmas day shopping should have been dealt with in that measure. Indeed, that view has been expressed by several Members.

The absence of any law governing the opening of shops on Christmas day is not a recent development. It is not something that arose out of the 1994 Act or other legislation. It has simply not featured previously in a serious way in shops legislation.

It has always been recognised that some shops need to open on Christmas day. Most of us have had to make that last-minute dash for something that we desperately need. We might need batteries for toys that were bought sometimes not by the parents but by relatives or friends who may have forgotten to buy batteries, perhaps assuming that the family had them.

I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich was unkind to those Members who might have recollections of having to buy batteries for their children on Christmas day, irrespective of whether or not they bought the battery-operated toy. We should not put undue restrictions on children enjoying their Christmas by my hon. Friend seeking to restrict their access to batteries. Shortage of milk and disasters with the turkey can drive us reluctantly to the shops.

Customer demand and the wishes of staff, who are usually volunteers, dictate how long shops may stay open. With the growth in the number of convenience stores, especially those run by non-Christians, the number of small shops open on Christmas day has undoubtedly increased in recent years.

However, at the moment there is little evidence that the larger supermarkets are picking up the baton. In fact, the information suggests that there has not been a great deal of movement. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) talked of a trend to open on Christmas day, but the evidence for that is unconvincing. Asda says that it opened none of its stores last year. Sainsburys opened none of its large stores—those over 3,000 sq ft—but it opened three smaller stores, which is fewer than in 1999.

Mrs. Dunwoody: I have a slight problem, as I am not sure whether the Minister is for or against the Bill. Is he seriously suggesting that stores excluded from it should be treated differently? I am sad that the Government are not protecting low-paid women workers, but that is a matter for them. They should be more enthusiastic. However, is he genuinely saying that because only half a dozen large stores opened last time, we should assume that no more will open this time?

Mr. O'Brien: The Government take a neutral position on the Bill. My hon. Friend, although normally persuasive, has left me unconvinced about the Bill at the moment. She will have to exercise her persuasive powers to a much greater extent if she is to convince me that

[Mr. O'Brien]

there is a problem that requires the sort of legislation that she is seeking to introduce. I did not vote for maintaining the restrictions on Sunday opening. I believe that, by and large, shops should be able to decide when they wish to open. Sunday trading has largely benefited our economy and families. I therefore believe that I took the right approach in voting to allow Sunday trading. Most families who shop on Sunday—about 56 per cent.—find it a benefit and they would not like it to be taken away.

There is little evidence that large stores are seeking to open as my hon. Friend fears. Safeways, which has 480 retail outlets, says that it opened no large stores. Only 50 small shops attached to petrol stations were open. Budgens opened 91 of its 207 stores, but all were under 3,000 sq ft. The Co-op opened 85 of its 4,653 stores, three of which were over 3,000 sq ft. No doubt, my hon. Friend will wish to take up with the Co-op any concerns that she may have.

Ms Coffey: The Minister is producing evidence which, he says, shows that there is little inclination among large shops to open on Christmas day. Should that trend increase and more shops open on Christmas day, what would be his view?

Mr. O'Brien: To some extent, the stores would have to determine whether they wanted to open. In a moment, I shall come to the area about which I have concerns, which were reflected in a number of contributions to the debate. Forcing workers to work on Sunday is a significant concern, which was reflected in the contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for Hall Green and for Nottingham, East and other hon. Members.

I want to inform the House of the approach of some stores and the evidence about whether the trend is truly significant. At the moment, although there is a little movement, I do not believe that the trend is significant. We need not fear the spectre raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport. According to the evidence, the sort of move that she fears is not taking place. The spectre is imaginary, so the question is whether we should follow the route suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich. Should we block the risk before it increases or should we wait and see?

I have been asked what I would advise hon. Members to do. The Government are neutral. We are happy for the Bill to go into Committee, where we can debate the issues. Hon. Members will have to decide whether to pass legislation to prevent something that may or may not happen. It is a matter for hon. Members to decide.

One company that has decided to open on Christmas day is Woolworths, which for the first time opened three stores. It is significant that those were in Southall, Balham and Slough. All were over 3,000 sq ft. The list that I have given is not exhaustive, but it is clear that only a tiny proportion of the shops that were open last year were large shops. The others were overwhelmingly smaller convenience stores. It remains to be seen whether retailers will find Christmas day opening of large stores financially viable, given the attachment of most people to their traditional Christmas.

Some retailers, like Woolworths, have targeted the opening of shops in specific areas where they believe that that is welcome, given the local religious and ethnic mix, particularly in non-Christian communities. Britain is still a predominantly Christian country and it is right that, to some extent, the law reflects Christian traditions. However, we must also recognise that an increasing number of our citizens have different faiths and that they wish to express those faiths in different ways. We need to be conscious that we live in a multicultural society.

Recent estimates suggest that there may be up to 3 million members of non-Christian communities in the United Kingdom. There is also a sizeable number of people who say that they are of no faith at all. The Government have made it clear that we wish to promote respect for and understanding of religious belief, including, obviously, Christian religious belief. We are working with faith communities on ways to tackle and overcome all kinds of religious discrimination. The Home Office recently published two reports dealing with these issues. We are also planning to introduce a new law to combat religious discrimination in employment and training.

It is for Members of Parliament to decide whether we should pass new legislation that would require observance of religious festivals in which not everyone can share. The unintended consequence of the Bill would be to close those large stores which last year could serve minority communities. Those communities may well want to participate in celebrating Christmas day in this country, and of course that would be a matter for them, but they may take a different view. The question is whether that should also be a matter for them, or a matter for the law.

Small corner shops would be unaffected by the changes proposed, and most of the stores that are open on Christmas day are convenience stores. The House must consider the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich and decide whether there is a need for her limited proposal in respect of large stores, or whether we should say that the case is not yet proven and await developments before proceeding.

Mrs. Dunwoody: That is the greatest load of muddled nonsense that I have heard in my life. Unless my hon. Friend can produce to the House specific statistics showing that only large numbers of members of non-Christian communities were using the stores that opened on Christmas day, his argument is dodgy. I should have thought that he would have had enough common sense to strike out that part of his speech. We need a clear answer from him. The Bill protects women workers, predominantly, from being forced to work on Christmas day. Does he accept that principle? A simple yes or no will suffice. I understand that perfectly.

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend has already been commended for the charm with which she handles interventions, so I do not need to commend it again.

The protection of women workers is extremely important. As a result of Sunday trading—this argument would not necessarily apply to Christmas—some women can work at weekends, which for various reasons is much more convenient for them than working during the week. We are also aware that students and younger people might benefit from working on Sunday. My hon. Friend asked

me whether it is right that we should protect women. The deregulation of Sunday trading has brought added benefits to some women workers.

Mrs. Dunwoody: What about this Bill?

Mr. O'Brien: As has been pointed out, the rosy spectacle that she presents of a Christmas for women at home is not always as pleasant as she might want it to be. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hall Green said, people sometimes find that they have to work very hard to prepare the Christmas meal. I am not necessarily speaking about women; as he told us, men also find that they have to work hard. I have done the same job, so I sympathise with him and with women who work very hard throughout Christmas, even if they do not choose to work in a shop or elsewhere.

The issue is one of choice. Should we prevent women from choosing, for whatever reason, to work on Christmas day? My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich said that there was an argument for doing so in particular circumstances, but she presents the matter in a limited way. The restriction would apply only to shops that are more than 3,000 sq ft in size. I think that there is an argument for such proposals, which is why I advance my arguments in an entirely neutral way, as I hope that she will appreciate.

Introducing legislation to regulate the times when shops can open is never a simple matter. The debate on opening hours raises issues relating to individual freedom, the role of religion, protection of employees and respect for family life. Those are legitimate interests, but they sometimes conflict. Numerous attempts were made over the years to change the Shops Act 1950, but they all came to nothing. Everyone agreed that something should be done, but they did not agree on what. The provisions in the 1950 Act that prescribed how long shops could stay open during the week and dealt with half-day closing were finally repealed in 1994.

Only Sunday shopping, which was always the most controversial aspect of that Act, has remained subject to restrictions, which are now contained in the Sunday Trading Act 1994. Many hon. Members will remember the discussions about that Act, which was fiercely debated, as there were strongly held views on all sides of the argument. The Sunday trading provisions of the 1950 Act had become badly outdated. Anomalous rules on the legality or otherwise of selling tea as opposed to beer, fresh rather than dried milk, or tripe instead of steak, had brought the law into disrepute. The restrictions were increasingly ignored.

In reforming the law, Parliament chose to adopt the approach of partial deregulation. It sought to allow people greater freedom to shop while ensuring that Sunday remained different from other days. The 1994 Act contains no restrictions on shops whose size is 280 sq m or less. Shops of more than 280 sq m in size may open for six continuous hours between 10 am and 6 pm, and are required to close completely on Easter Sunday and on Christmas day when it falls on a Sunday. That requirement was the result of an amendment tabled by Lord Alton. During the passage of that Bill, it was pointed out that Easter is the most important date in the Christian calender. Hon. Members felt it appropriate to acknowledge that in legislation. When the restriction was extended to Christmas day, it was understood that it would not be affected when it did not fall on a Sunday. That is more restrictive than any provision in the Shops Act 1950, which did not subject Easter Sunday and Christmas day to specific controls.

Some anxiety was expressed that the 1994 Act might prove unworkable. Broadly speaking, that has not been the case. Shops have generally abided by the Act, and there have been relatively few complaints.

A survey by Healey and Baker in 1999 showed that 56 per cent. of people shopped at some time on a Sunday. The average increase in sales was only 3.4 per cent. and profitability increased by 0.6 per cent. That suggests that, for most people, Sunday shopping remains primarily a matter of convenience. Hon. Members must consider whether they believe that shops should open on Christmas day because that fulfils a need or whether the Bill should receive a Second Reading.

Helen Jones: As north-west women Members of Parliament are renowned for their charm, I want to ask my hon. Friend a question. If he believes that it is acceptable to restrict trading when Christmas day falls on a Sunday, why is not it acceptable to do that when Christmas day falls on another day of the week?

Mr. O'Brien: My hon. Friend will appreciate that I have simply set out the argument that was deployed when we considered the Bill that became the 1994 Act. When hon. Members considered that measure, they took the view that they did not wish to restrict shopping on Christmas days that fell on week days. My hon. Friend may wish to ascertain why hon. Members took that view then. I cannot recollect all the details of the arguments that were deployed, but the 1994 Act specifically provides for Christmas days that fall on a Sunday. Hon. Members believed that trading should be restricted in those circumstances, but not when Christmas days fell on week days.

Ms Coffey: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I give way to my hon. Friend, who was active in the debate.

Ms Coffey: I did not participate in that debate, although I voted for restricted Sunday trading. However, I remember the debate, and I do not believe that my hon. Friend gave a proper summary of the view of the House. Hon. Members did not consider restricting trading on Christmas days that fell on a week day because that was not in the Bill's remit. If Christmas had been debated, it would not have been logical for the House to ban the larger shops from trading on a Christmas day that fell on a Sunday and not consider doing that for week-day Christmases. However, the subject was not considered in the context of the Sunday Trading Bill.

Mr. O'Brien: Doubtless hon. Members would be happy to read the debates in *Hansard* and ascertain the reasons for the House's view at that time. It took a clear view, and there are restrictions on trading on Christmas days that fall on a Sunday, but not on those that fall on week days. Perhaps there were procedural reasons for that, concerning the long title of the Bill.

[Mr. O'Brien]

Let us consider an important issue, which my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East and other hon. Members mentioned. My hon. Friend made the most telling speech of the debate. He expressed strongly his anxiety about the Sunday trading laws, which sought to protect people from being forced to work on a Sunday but are not always effective. I share many of his anxieties about workers being forced to work on Christmas day or Sundays.

I also share my hon. Friend's scepticism about some of the other arguments that were deployed about the Bill. In a multicultural society, in which freedom and free trade should not be unnecessarily restrained, some of the arguments were unconvincing. He made strong arguments about employment rights, and we should consider them with great care.

USDAW and other trade unions have been worried about protection. The 1994 Act included protections for employees. Shopworkers have the right to refuse to work on Sundays, or to opt out even if contracted to do so. They are protected from detriment and from dismissal. It has been claimed that, in spite of this, many shopworkers now feel pressurised into working on Sundays. I think that there is some truth to that, and that is a matter of concern. The rights afforded by the legislation are meant to be comprehensive. However, the number of complaints made to industrial tribunals has been relatively small: 15 during the year 1999-2000.

Christmas day working, and working on any bank holiday, is a matter for negotiation between employers and employees. Employees who do not wish to work on Sundays may be able to take action against their employers if their contracts are varied without their consent. That might apply, for example, if an employee was required to work on Christmas day and that had not previously been the case. The terms of a contract might have been explicitly agreed or incorporated by custom and practice. An employee who was dismissed for refusing a contractual variation to work on Christmas day might well be entitled to complain of unfair dismissal to an employment tribunal.

The point has been raised by my hon. Friends that if a right is not accessible, it is tantamount to not having that right at all. There is a great deal of truth in that. It is important that we ensure that we protect our workers from being obliged to do anything that is against their conscience in certain circumstances. The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said that schedule 4 of the Sunday Trading Act 1994 was meant to protect workers and that if it failed to do so, there could be grounds for revisiting that part of the legislation, rather than banning trade altogether. I think that he made a strong point.

That point was reinforced to some extent by my hon. Friend the Member for Hall Green who said that an alternative to a complete ban on opening might be a stronger ban on forcing workers to work on Christmas day. That might be a more family friendly approach than a complete ban, because some people might want to volunteer to work on Christmas day. The House will want to consider those issues in its own time, and, no doubt, in Committee.

Mr. Gardiner: What is my hon. Friend's view of those retail companies that, subsequent to the 1994 Act, changed their employment contracts so that the question of choice does not arise when someone is doing a job, but predates the commencement of employment? In such circumstances, a person would have the choice between signing a contract that committed them to working on a Sunday, or not signing a contract at all. That would mean either taking the job and agreeing to work on Sundays, or not taking the job. That would mean having absolutely no choice once one had started working. The Minister should consider that issue.

Mr. O'Brien: I hear what my hon. Friend says. I have had a constituent complain to me about precisely that point; it was a matter of concern to me and I took up my constituent's case. However, the Government do not have any plans to introduce legislation at this time that would prevent employers and employees from entering into employment agreements, which they are entitled to do under the free process of entering into jobs.

The Government want to ensure a proper balance. We need to ensure a level of employment protection that gives workers reasonable rights, but we also recognise that over-regulation is damaging to business and to the economy, and that is not something that we want to introduce. Getting the balance right is an important part of our strategy, and we intend to ensure that we do not over-regulate the business community, while ensuring that we give basic protection to workers. The legislation that the Government have introduced since the 1997 election shows that we are achieving that balance between the proper deregulation of business and the proper protection of workers' rights, including the protection of the rights of women workers.

The Bill would enshrine in law the right of one sector of the work force not to have to work on a particular public holiday. I ask whether that would be an entirely satisfactory arrangement. Members will have to decide for themselves whether there is a case for treating Christmas day differently. Other days, such as Good Friday, may be thought to have equal or better claims, in Christian terms, than Christmas day. However, I do not want to deter people from supporting the Bill. The Government are neutral on this issue and we want the Bill to proceed into Committee.

Mr. Win Griffiths: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. O'Brien: I have been on my feet for quite a long time and I have taken many interventions, but I have not yet given way to my hon. Friend, so I shall do so now.

Mr. Griffiths: The Minister mentioned the relative merits of Good Friday and Christmas day, but theologically they are indivisible.

Mr. O'Brien: I defer to my hon. Friend's greater theological knowledge, and I take his point.

I understand the concern that staff may feel obliged to work on Christmas day. If that became a reality, it would clearly not be to the benefit of individuals or their family life. Given the public's attitude towards Christmas day, the likely pattern of shop opening and general employment law, it seems unlikely that major stores would readily adopt such a policy. As trading on Christmas day is unlikely to happen on a large scale, do we want to legislate to prevent it now? That is the fundamental issue before us.

The Government have sympathy with the concerns that have prompted the Bill, but as I have made clear, we also have some reservations. There is so far only limited evidence that the Bill is necessary.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. O'Brien: No. I am sorry, but I will not give way as I am concluding my remarks.

The widespread opening of large shops seems unlikely, but Members will have to decide whether they want to prevent it in anticipation of some future change in practice. The Bill would create new regulation where none previously existed. That is not wholly consistent with the Government's policy of reducing regulatory burdens. It would also have the effect of prohibiting something that is currently permitted.

Mr. David Maclean (Penrith and The Border): Like hunting.

Mr. O'Brien: If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I shall not get involved in the hunting debate.

The Bill would inhibit the freedom of business to some extent, and Members will have to consider whether that is necessary. The Government have sympathy with the Churches and others who are alarmed at the possible incursion of commercialism into Christmas day. Family life is important, and undermining Christmas day is undesirable. The Government hope that the House will give careful thought to these issues when considering the Bill. I hope that the House will allow it to go into Committee so that we can debate in detail not only the strong arguments for the Bill, but the strong reservations about some parts of it.

12.29 pm

Mrs. Dunwoody: I am speechless. For once in my life, I am deprived of the power of speech. I have never heard such an extraordinary speech. That may be a slight exaggeration, as I have heard some very extraordinary speeches from Front-Bench Members.

The Bill would correct an anomaly that the House of Commons, in the original debate, did not realise would arise. I would be delighted if the Bill were proposing some marvellous charter to protect the rights of poorly paid women across the United Kingdom, but that is not so. It would merely rectify something that is wrong. It is not a complicated argument about a multi-faith society versus a Christian society. It is not about people who want to buy themselves three-piece suites versus people who want to buy batteries. It is straightforward and uncomplicated.

Frankly, I am disappointed—I am being tolerant—at the attitude of Ministers, who seem to think that it is all right to protect the rights of rich women, but not those of poor women. To say at the end of the speech, as my hon. Friend the Minister did, that the Government hoped that the Bill went forward was, frankly, sailing pretty close to a charge of disingenuousness.

The Bill ought to have been thought of and was not. The House got it wrong; the House can put it right.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 37, Noes 0.

Division No. 156] **[12.30 pm**

AYES

Anderson, Rt Hon Donald *(Swansea E)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Betts, Clive
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Cann, Jamie
Clwyd, Ann
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Gale, Roger
Galloway, George
Gardiner, Barry
Heppell, John
Hopkins, Kelvin
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
McCabe, Steve
McIsaac, Shona
Mackinlay, Andrew
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Öpik, Lembit
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Skinner, Dennis
Soames, Nicholas
Soley, Clive
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Swayne, Desmond
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Llin Golding and
Mr. Win Griffiths.

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Eric Forth and
Mr. Edward Leigh.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

Transplant of Human Organs Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

12.40 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Official statistics show that, over the five years from 1995 to 1999, about 1,000 patients died in this country while on the waiting list for an organ transplant. The British Medical Association, to which I am indebted for its support and advice on this matter, would go beyond that and say that the figure understates the number of people who died for lack of an organ transplant operation. More people died who were not yet on the waiting list, and one must also consider the thousands of people who die because dialysis facilities are not available.

The Bill addresses a serious health problem. In the House, we more often debate matters of organisation and money, but this is a straightforward human problem of being unable to provide in our health service the facilities for medical treatment that could save life and dramatically improve quality of life.

The situation has not been getting better for some years. The general tendency is for the list of those waiting for organ transplants to get longer, while the number of operations being carried out has tended to drop and is currently lower than it was 10 years ago. The Bill is designed to minimise the waste of human life involved in the failure to get treatment for those who need it.

The problems that lie behind the stark statistics and the needless deaths go much wider than the law. Everyone knows that we need to campaign to get more people to volunteer to be donors if they should fall victim to a tragic accident or disease, but the number of people carrying donor cards or on the register is not the most important factor. My only mild criticism of the Government on the subject is that, at their recent organ summit—which was a welcome step that they took to ensure that no one misunderstood the implications of the Alder Hey tragedy and discouraged the transplant programme, which is an entirely different issue—they concentrated too much on imploring people to carry donor cards or put their names on the register.

I, too, want to encourage people to carry cards and put their names on the register—the vast majority are in fact willing to be donors, but only a minority get around to carrying the card—but the problems go way beyond that and turn on a whole range of issues, including medical procedures and arrangements for using the register, that lie outside the scope of the Bill. The Government, especially following the recent summit, are addressing those issues and reviewing both the law and the practice on the subject. I hope that that leads to some clarity about the role of transplant co-ordinators and provides some assistance to hard-pressed staff in intensive care units and elsewhere by putting in place facilities to enable those who are in possession of a body of someone who has tragically died and who has suitable organs for donation to get in contact with surgeons who have patients and facilities waiting for organs to become available.

The scale of the changes required could be considerable. I would commend to the Government the recommendations of the Royal College of Surgeons, which include

"the establishment of a National Transplant Service for the UK in order to ensure that organ donation and transplantation is viewed as a national service rather than being governed and operated at a local level . . . the new service . . . would take over the existing work of the UK Transplant Support Service Authority and . . . would take on responsibility for: a national strategy for delivery of transplant services; designation of transplant units; evaluation and maintenance of standards; organisation of multi-organ retrieval; recruitment, training and administration of donor transplant co-ordinators; development of initiatives to increase cadaveric donors; development of patient protocols; encouragement and facilitation of multi-centre trials; independent audit and determination of policies concerning practice; co-ordination of education and publicity; and national representation."

I broadly support those recommendations which indicate that the Government should undertake a major review of the field and come up with some substantial and worthwhile proposals to make sure that the provision of organs and the carrying out of operations match the considerable humanitarian demand.

Let me make it clear that the Bill addresses a small part of the process because the legal problems involved are quite tiny. There are, however, legal doubts surrounding the issue because the legal position is based on the Human Tissue Act 1961 and from time to time doubts have been raised about the ability of health authorities, trusts, doctors and others carrying out surgical procedures to be absolutely certain that they are within the law.

There has been no legal challenge so far, but as we live in an increasingly litigious age we all understand why absolutely everyone in any of the clinical professions is more aware now of the risk of someone, however cranky, bringing a legal action against them in certain circumstances. Any doubts about their legal position will create further doubts, delays and hesitation. Therefore, having found myself in the ballot for private Members' Bills, I wished to draw the House's attention to the issue as many right hon. and hon. Members feel strongly about it, but the one matter that I could address was the comparative footnote of sorting out some minor problems in the law to make sure that no risk of litigation will arise in future.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Let me emphasise what my right hon. and learned Friend has said and put it to him that were there to be challenge, there would almost certainly be an absolute stop to transplants until the law was clarified. Even if that took only a month, the chaos that would be caused for people looking for a kidney transplant, eye grafts or other transplantation would be horrendous. That is why he is absolutely right to try to sort out this minor problem as well as getting across the more general point that the gift relationship of giving consent to organ transplants is vital.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I am sure that he is right. In the present circumstances, there has to be only a hint of a possible legal problem and the slight possibility of litigation in this highly sensitive area for everyone to be seriously deterred from carrying out transplants.

As I am tackling a very small difficulty, the Bill does not open up any of the wider issues that would arise from a thorough review of the subject. Big ethical issues

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surround organ transplantation, and I have no doubt that if the Government decide to change the law after their review, they will find themselves considering such difficult matters as the presumed consent of those who have died, so that organs may be taken unless there is evidence that consent has not been given. They will have to address the law on living donors—those who willingly donate a kidney to a relative or friend. When the Government finish their review, they will find themselves in a difficult position, and I trust that they will introduce legislation to advance on the provisions of the Human Tissue Act 1961. That will not be easy.

I took the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 through the House as Secretary of State for Health, and laws of that kind give rise to wide and far-ranging debate. They cut right across ordinary political divisions, giving rise to endless free votes and anxious discussion in the House. I have not addressed such wide issues in this Bill. It would have been reckless to do so, and the legal change that I propose falls strictly within the confines of present practice.

I emphasise that the Bill does not touch on present practice. No organ transplantation can take place from a cadaver unless those taking part are satisfied that the person who had died would have been willing for that to happen. No transplantation can take place unless reasonable steps have been taken to ensure that consent has been obtained from close relatives. That can be difficult and sensitive in itself, of course, as the relatives involved are normally at their most distressed and least clear-thinking at the time when a doctor, nurse or other member of hospital staff must explain matters to them.

The Bill addresses narrow points and does not change present practice at all. Clause 1 tries to address a slight doubt about the wording of the 1961 Act. The Act refers to what a "person lawfully in possession" of a body may do to facilitate transplantation. That has never been challenged in court, but continual doubts are raised about who the person lawfully in possession is. In practice, it is usually thought to be the health authority, until someone asks for the body to be placed in his or her custody as the closest relative. There is no reason for any doubt to exist. My Bill would substitute the words

"health authority or NHS trust"

for the uncertain concept of the person lawfully in possession of the body.

Clause 3 covers a similar point. The 1961 Act rightly says that reasonable steps should be taken to ensure that those who carry out the procedure have the consent of surviving relatives. In practice, that gives a surviving relative the legal right to stop the process going ahead. That sounds fine, until one realises how wide the term "surviving relative" goes. Does it include uncles, aunts and cousins? Does it include relatives who fell out with the deceased some time ago and may have had no contact with him or her for many years? Does it include a relative who may have been antipathetic to the person who has died?

The point has not yet arisen, but it is possible that some unfortunate medical team will find themselves challenged by, say, a long-lost brother who had fallen out with the deceased but who may make his own ethical objection to the procedure being carried out. In theory, that brother could override the wishes of the deceased.

Clause 3 makes a simple change by saying that consent should be sought from a co-habiting spouse or partner, or, in the absence of a spouse or partner, a parent or child of the deceased person. That does not mean that any other close relatives or friends must have their wishes ignored. There is nothing to stop any sensible medical team from listening carefully to the wishes and views of anyone who presents himself or herself. The law should specify the position of the surviving spouse or partner or, in the absence of any spouse or partner, the parent or child.

The one change that I seek to make in the law, although not necessarily in practice, is in clause 2. Otherwise, I regard the Bill as a clarification of the present position. Clause 2 deals with the position when a patient's heart is not beating. I will not go into the full medical details, but in practice nowadays, most donors whose organs are used are people who died when they were being ventilated in an intensive care unit. Relatives are faced with the distressing situation that the patient has been conclusively established to be brain dead, but the body is still breathing and warm in an intensive care unit. In such circumstances, once consent is properly obtained, organs are available that can be transplanted to a patient in need. In practice, due to the problems that I have described, even then only about a third of such cases lead to organ transplantation. That gives rise to the need for the wider review to which I have already referred.

One practice can sometimes be carried out on non-heart-beating patients, when someone suffers a cardiac arrest and dies. Although the heart ceases beating, the organs are perfectly usable. They need to be preserved in a usable condition while steps are taken to find out whether the person was a willing donor and whether the relatives are content for the operation to go ahead. A simple practice can be adopted in accident and emergency departments and elsewhere of inserting a catheter into the kidneys which cools them and preserves them for a sufficient period for them to remain usable. The time is needed to allow sensitive inquiries to be made about whether the dead person was a willing donor and whether the relatives will consent to the operation.

The practice is carried out in a few places in this country and it has been carried out overseas. A successful programme in Leicester near my constituency provides about 25 per cent. of the organs used for kidney transplant. Occasionally, legal doubts have been raised about the practice. Insertion of the catheter is a medical procedure that is not for the benefit of the patient who, alas, is by definition dead and not able to benefit from it. I regard that as a slightly fanciful legal argument. Given the fairly liberal view that the British courts take of these things, it would be unlikely to succeed if it were ever pressed. Yet doctors are deterred by the fact that someone with strange views may take legal action against them. Clause 2 deals with that possibility by allowing the preservation of organs at the appropriate stage to give time for consent to be obtained.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Precisely that argument was used by the Department to bring to an end the programme of elective ventilation that was undertaken by Professor Feest. It is not a fantasy of doctors' imaginations that that legal argument might be used against them; it has been used in the past.

Mr. Clarke: It has not been used in cases of catheter insertion, but my hon. Friend is right to say that the

[Mr. Clarke]

Department often takes an extraordinarily cautious view of the law on these matters. No doubt it would argue that it has to protect itself against a possible scandal in which it allowed procedures to go ahead about which someone chose to complain.

I have explained the purpose of the Bill. I have the support of the British Medical Association ethics committee. Everything that I have said is in line with the BMA's publications. I have discussed the Bill with the General Medical Council, which is extremely supportive. I am not aware of any opposition to my proposals. I have deliberately kept them exceedingly modest, which no doubt explains the lack of opposition to them. If one comes seventh in the private Members' Bill ballot in a Parliament that is not likely to last more than a few weeks longer, to be modest in one's ambitions is the only sensible way to proceed.

I am not sure whether the Government harbour the slightest objection to any of the changes I propose making; a meeting I had with one of the Minister's colleagues leads me to anticipate that they do not, but remain likely to hesitate about the Bill. If I may, I shall anticipate the argument that the Government are likely to advance. They are likely to say that they are reviewing the whole subject, including the 1961 Act, and that it would be premature to go ahead with any changes until the review is completed. That will not be the first time I have heard such a Government response to a modest private Member's Bill, but the argument has never struck me as sensible.

The fact is that when the Government have finished their review, they will produce a Bill for which they will have great difficulty finding parliamentary time. Whichever party is in power, the Leader of the House and the Whips Office will say that the Bill will take up weeks of parliamentary time and upset some hon. Members who have big issues about the subject. Once that Bill enters the parliamentary timetable, it will indeed take time, because Members of Parliament are greatly divided on the issue of presumed consent, for example, which has been raised in connection with previous private Members' Bills.

If the Minister rises to say that, although the Government are terribly sympathetic, they want to wait for the results of the review and for fresh legislation to be introduced in due course, my guess is that the whole process will take years. I will not regard that as a wholly satisfactory reply to a Bill that makes such tiny changes to the 1961 Act. It will certainly not be an adequate reply if no one has thought of any reason to oppose the changes and cannot find an opponent to any of my proposals.

I see that the Minister wishes to intervene. Although I look forward to hearing her speech soon, if she wants to intervene before I resume my seat, I am happy to give way.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): Before the right hon. and learned Gentleman concludes his speech, I should be grateful—the answer might help me to reply to the debate—if he clarified whether he is fully aware of the distinction between non-heart-beating donations, which, in the Leicester example, provide a broad window of 40 minutes in which kidneys can still be donated, and elective ventilation, whereby a body is simply ventilated for no purpose other than to use it for transplant operations. We draw a clear distinction between the two and we oppose the latter. It would be helpful if he stated whether he sees the clear distinction between them that we perceive.

Mr. Clarke: Personally, I do not draw that distinction and I am not sure why either procedure should be made wholly illegal. The circumstances in which either procedure is carried out should be carefully governed, but I should prefer that to be done by the ethical code of the profession and the guidance of the Department. If the Department in its wisdom chooses to continue to issue guidance stating that elective ventilation should not be carried out within the health service, so be it. Foremost in my mind was the insertion of catheters in non-heart-beating patients, but I am not sure that, in the right circumstances, I would oppose elective ventilation. Certainly, that point does not provide an adequate reason not to clarify the law on the circumstances in which it is right to preserve organs while consent is being sought.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: The Minister's question is helpful. Perhaps the Department's view is based on an interpretation of the law. I do not think that it should necessarily be a burden on the Department to decide on the ethics of the situation; that matter is better left to the medical profession in association with public opinion. My right hon. and learned Friend's response should allow the Department to accept the Bill and thereby allow the responsibility to pass to the GMC and doctors in general.

Mr. Clarke: I am grateful for that intervention. If a practice is excluded by law, I am not certain that that was intended by Parliament in 1961. When the 1961 legislation was being debated, medical science was less advanced and I suspect that it is mere accident that doubt now hangs over procedures that have been developed since that time which enable organs to be preserved in the way that is now possible.

That is the full scope of my Bill. I am astounded by the modesty of my ambitions. The Bill deals with only a small part of the subject, but I do not apologise for that. The subject is an extremely large one to which I hope the House will again turn its attention in the not-too-distant future and as frequently as possible thereafter. Needless deaths are occurring. The entire medical profession wants to do more and the public are highly supportive, so I hope that the House will take a small step in the right direction by giving my Bill a Second Reading today.

1.5 pm

Mr. John Heppell (Nottingham, East): I had not intended to speak, but I introduced the Human Organ Transplants (Amendment) Bill of 1993, which related to presumed consent. I fully appreciate why the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) has introduced his Bill. We are faced with a growing problem. Donor numbers are gradually decreasing while waiting lists grow longer. No sensible Government can sit back and wring their hands in these circumstances. We must consider practical measures to try to improve the situation, and the Bill is an attempt to do just that.

I have one or two reservations, which I probably would not have had when I introduced my Bill. First, we make assumptions about the number of people who are willing

to be donors, and I am not sure whether they are always correct. If my memory serves me correctly, the results of a survey in July 1999 seemed to show that more than 50 per cent. of the population were in favour of keeping the present system. If the results of a public opinion poll suggest that it is right not to change the system, that does not necessarily mean that that is the right approach. However, we must take into account the views of the general public.

Something even more significant has happened since the 1999 poll was conducted—I refer to the events at Alder Hey. I know that those events are not related to the Bill. Research undertaken by the national health service shows that the Alder Hey scandal has not significantly altered the amount of organ donation that is taking place.

I am happy to donate all my organs, if any of them are of use to anybody by the time I go. I am willing for my organs to be used for medical research or scientific research once I have gone. I take the view—I am sure that it is shared by many Christians and people of other religions—that the body is merely a container and that, when I am dead, it does not matter what happens to my organs. So long as those concerned make sure that I am dead, it does not really matter what happens to my body afterwards.

The Alder Hey events, among other things, have made me realise that other people do not take my view, and that their views should be respected. I understand that NHS research shows that one in four families has a principled objection to transplants.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Does the hon. Gentleman accept a reversal of the presumption? The Bill does not seek to do it, but I am following his argument. Would a reversal of the presumption of donation fulfil his requirements? If people who had an objection to donation carried a card saying, "Please do not use any of my organs", would that meet the problem that he is outlining?

Mr. Heppell: Not quite. I promise that I shall come on to that.

There are levels of revulsion about what is happening. I would have no problem with my body being used, but I have tried to put myself in the position of others. For example, if I knew that the organs of one of my children were being used for research, would I take the same view? I think that I would, but I think also that I would be the exception that proves the rule. I believe that most people would have some sort of revulsion about that. In some instances we are talking about natural revulsion.

I shall not dwell on the tragedy of the Marchioness because my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has to deal with the matter. It was discovered that the hands of those who had died had been removed so that fingerprints could be taken to identify the bodies. I think that people have a natural revulsion to that, but I would not have it. I have learned that I need to be much more sensitive to the arguments about transplants than I have been in the past. I took the view that the presumption should be that people are willing to be donors. Even though there is a presumption that people are willing to donate, I would still like relatives to be consulted.

That is not just because of the extra sensitivities, but because of the practicalities of organ donation. I am worried about the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe narrowing the definition of who can object to organ donation to someone's spouse, daughter, son or parents. In countries such as France, where organ donation went ahead despite the fact that people objected to it, that reduced organ donation. There was a groundswell of opinion. If someone objects and is not listened to, that can work against the number of donations. It is not just about being sensitive to people's wishes; it is also about the pure practicality of what increases the number of donors.

I am torn on whether to support the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I, too, am impressed by his modesty; indeed, I am impressed by his modesty about his modesty. The Minister will have to reassure me that the Government's plans on organ donation will improve the situation if I am to be persuaded not to support the right hon. and learned Gentleman.

1.11 pm

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I want to say briefly how strongly I support the Bill of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). I have only a couple of reservations. First, I should declare a kind of interest as, for most of my life, I have had only one kidney, so, possibly, I may stand to benefit more than most others from his proposals—although, fortunately, I have not yet had to.

Were I ever to come high in the ballot for private Members' Bills, this is exactly the sort of issue that I should seek to promote. I would probably make the mistake of going much further than my right hon. and learned Friend and, in my enthusiasm, jeopardise the chance of my Bill succeeding. I am sure that he is right to restrict the scope of his Bill to trying to ensure that, in a small but important way, any obstacles to organ donation are removed. That is one of the most important things that we can do, and is ideal territory for a private Member's Bill.

My right hon. and learned Friend has deliberately tried to ensure that his Bill is not controversial; even so, the hon. Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) challenged it. In the context of its subject area, it must be seen as extremely modest. I am sure that it is right at this stage to seek to minimise any possible objections but, at the same time, to promote the cause of the availability of organs for transport.

It has always struck me as a great tragedy that, although we now have the capability, techniques and technology to save and improve the quality of lives in many different ways, that process is unnecessarily inhibited by a combination of our laws, people's attitudes and, as the hon. Member for Nottingham, East eloquently said, people's frequent reaction to the subject. The difficulty is that, very often, those who, under the existing provisions, can prevent the use of an organ for transplant do so at a time when their emotions are heightened. The odds are that they will react against the possibility, rather than have a more favourable disposition.

Mr. Heppell: The right hon. and learned Gentleman has just reminded me of something that I meant to say. By all means, one should register for organ donation and

[Mr. Heppell]

carry a card. However, the crucial point is that one should discuss the matter with one's close relatives so that they understand one's wishes, should one die. I have made sure that my close relatives know what my wishes are; indeed, I know the wishes of my close relatives. If, heaven forbid, there was a tragic accident, I would know what they would like me to do. That cannot be drummed into people enough; they must have those discussions now.

Mr. Forth: I am sure that that is right. Research has shown that relatives who refused permission at the time, when asked some time later, say that, given their attitude in less stressful circumstances, they probably would have, and rather wish that they had, given permission. That factor must be borne in mind.

I shall not say more, as I do not want to jeopardise the progress of my right hon. and learned Friend's Bill. I wanted to record my enthusiastic support for it. Given the circumstances, the Bill is pitched at exactly the right level, which is no more than I would expect from him. I hope very much to see it make progress today.

1.15 pm

Mr. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton, North): I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) on introducing the Bill. Unusually, I find myself in total agreement with the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). I enthusiastically support the Bill and hope that, even though there may be a general election in the offing and the Bill may not make much more progress, the Government or another private Member's Bill immediately after the election will bring the proposal into law soon. It will save some people's lives.

I speak somewhat emotionally. A good friend of mine waited four years for a heart transplant that never happened, and he died waiting. Many other people in this country die because the rules governing consent are too restrictive and make it difficult for consent to be obtained, so that organs cannot be secured for transplant.

I strongly support this sensible measure. I would like it to go further, but the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe is right to draw it fairly tightly, so that it stands a chance of progress in anticipation of the wider review being undertaken by the Government. I hope that the Government will not follow the suggestion of the right hon. and learned Gentleman and take the Bill in with the review, but will allow this measure to come into law soon.

I carry my donor card everywhere and try to persuade everyone else to do so. Many people have no objection to carrying a donor card; they just never get around to it because their lives are too busy. It is like filling in a tax form: we would not do it unless we were compelled to do so. Door-to-door canvassing might even persuade more people to sign up to donor cards. Even so, when someone dies, it is a difficult time to get the relatives' consent, and as a result others die or do not get their transplants because consent cannot be achieved.

I know that other hon. Members want to speak on other matters, but I wanted to express my strong support for the right hon. and learned Gentleman's Bill, which I hope will soon become law.

1.17 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): I support my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) and his Bill. The question of the lawful possession of the body is vital, and if anyone doubted that, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) made it clear in his timely intervention.

As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe pointed out, the background to our debate on the Bill is that the number of transplant operations being carried out presents a rather flat profile. Nevertheless, the list of those awaiting the procedure is growing and, as my right hon. and learned Friend pointed out, that is an understated list. At the same time, a number of high-profile appeals have been covered by the national newspapers recently, as the relatives go public in their search for an organ for a loved one, and the public wait for days afterwards to see whether an organ is forthcoming. In one recent case, it was, and in another case, tragically, it was not.

The sadness, anger and frustration that that can occasion is a result of the fact that, at a time of rising demand for organs, so many useful organs are being buried in our churchyards or cremated in crematoriums. It is not a question only of high-profile cases. Thousands of people are dying. The hon. Member for Luton, North (Mr. Hopkins) referred to his personal knowledge of that silent tragedy, which demands urgent action and a proper agenda.

We are indebted to the British Medical Association for its manifesto, which sets out demands of election candidates and political parties. All hon. Members have received copies of the document, which states:

> "The BMA calls on the political parties to support a radical review of organ donation procedures to ensure that we have the most effective way of regulating and organising organ donation in this country."

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe has not waited for a review, and I congratulate him on taking effective action now. I assure him of Front-Bench support, but I shall not attempt to reiterate his arguments. He stated them effectively and, in the light of the strength with which he made his case, it would be impertinent of me to repeat them. However, I remind hon. Members that he pointed out that the agenda is wider than that which the Bill addresses. The Bill is narrow in scope, but wider issues must also be dealt with.

I have spoken of the anger, sadness and frustration that many people feel about organ donation. Their feelings arise from an impression of inactivity. I recently attended two all-party group meetings in which people made their cases about the legal and practical changes required to ensure a greater number of transplants. They stressed the urgent need for action, but when they turned to the parliamentarians at the meetings, we merely sat and looked at them. I suspect that their impression of inactivity is justified.

Hon. Members may recall a Westminster Hall debate on organ transplantation that was held on 14 December 1999. The discussion was a high-profile one for Westminster Hall, as it occurred immediately after the initial aftermath of the launch of the Alder Hey inquiry. It was attended by the Front-Bench spokesmen of the two Opposition parties—my hon. Friend the Member for

Woodspring (Dr. Fox) and the hon. Member for North Devon (Mr. Harvey), who spoke for the Liberal Democrats. The debate covered a number of issues that have been mentioned today. The first item on the agenda was uncertainty in the law with regard to possession of the body and preservation of organs. I am glad that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe has now taken action and that a measure has been proposed to address those issues.

Other important issues were raised in that debate, not least among which were novel ideas about raising the profile of donor cards and of registration on the national register of donors. It was suggested that annual electoral registration forms should contain boxes that people can tick to add their names to the register of donors. I am glad that my local authority, New Forest district council, has adopted that suggestion, and I hope that more authorities take the same action. My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring called for a month of activity in which anyone who spoke to any health professional would be presented with the form needed to obtain an organ donor card. That useful suggestion could have been adopted.

The debate dealt also with the number of intensive care beds, and questions were asked about what could be done about that issue. There was also discussion of revisiting elective ventilation. Presumed consent was once again reviewed, and we spoke about possible improvements in the national register of donors and co-ordination of the business of transplants. That legitimately leads to questions about the purpose of those Adjournment debates. As my hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring said in that debate, we hold debates in Westminster Hall because we want to discuss what should be done and we legitimately expect consequent action.

More than a year later, we can legitimately ask what has happened in the meantime. What has arisen from the agenda that was brought to Ministers' attention in Westminster Hall? On 11 February 2000, the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Dr. Palmer) presented a ten-minute Bill. Hon. Members voted by 113 to 23 to allow him to introduce a Bill on presumed consent. In June, the British Medical Association published a useful document entitled "Organ Donation in the 21st Century", to which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe has already referred. One of the first items with which it deals is lawful possession of the body. My right hon. and learned Friend has addressed that matter.

What else has been done? Following the Alder Hey report, a summit comprising those involved in transplants was held on 27 February, in a climate of fear that a reduction in transplants would ensue. Mercifully, all the signs suggest that that will not be the consequence of the Alder Hey report. However, we now expect action. The national press reported that the summit issued several new targets for 2005 and 2010. They include doubling the number of those on the register of organ donors from 8 million now to 16 million by 2010; establishing a national service framework for those suffering from renal failure; doubling the number of kidney transplants by 2005, and increasing lung and heart transplants by 10 per cent. by 2005.

However, I am reminded of the words of Florence Nightingale—

Ms Stuart: Again?

Mr. Swayne: Indeed. Florence Nightingale pointed out that reports do not implement themselves. Action must arise from the summit. I ask the Minister to assure us that the national consultative body that will be set up as a result of the summit will have an agenda. I shall suggest some items for it.

The first item is how to increase the number of people who make their organs available for transplant. One method is to use the electoral registration process, which some local authorities are already doing successfully.

The consultative group will have to consider presumed consent. I am not an advocate of presumed consent, and many of my hon. Friends have grave reservations about it. I have a philosophical reservation, just as I had a reservation about the motion that we considered on Monday, when we "deemed" something to have occurred in a Standing Committee that clearly had not happened. I have reservations about presuming that something has been done, when it clearly has not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Woodspring pointed out that presumed consent may make matters worse. Let us imagine the case of a close relative who might legitimately have expected to be asked whether the donor would have had any objections. If the relative was not asked, and an issue was subsequently made of it, we can imagine the tabloid treatment of the case and the damage that it might cause the organ donation programme. There are, therefore, dangers in the process. However, the proposals about presumed consent with safeguards that the BMA has put forward in its document deserve close examination. Those proposals do not differ much from existing practice, and a debate on that issue is worth having because it would raise the profile of the issue and perhaps generate a great many more organ donors.

I would also like the consultative group to review the work on elective ventilation. I make no secret of the fact that I am an enthusiast for elective ventilation. The programme was highly successful: Professor Feest's work doubled the availability of organs available for transplant during the time that he carried out elective ventilation. There are difficulties associated with the practice, and they are covered in the BMA's work. However, the programme was effective, and it was stopped because of the doubts about its legal position, to which my right hon. and learned Friend has drawn attention. That doubt could be clarified by a change in the law, and if that does not happen, we may be passing over a very effective way of increasing the number of organs available for donation. I would certainly ask the consultative group to review that work.

I would also like the consultative group to review the co-ordination and organisation of the transplant infrastructure. Many health professionals believe that the Department of Health's review of the United Kingdom Transplant Support Service Authority that took place in 1998 and 1999 was a missed opportunity. The Royal College of Surgeons has subsequently called for a national transplant service. We should like that case to be reviewed again.

In supporting this narrow but very important Bill, I also call for urgent action on the other fronts that I have mentioned. I remind the House that we have been waiting some time. At least in one respect we shall have to wait no longer, as a consequence of my right hon. and learned Friend's important Bill, which I commend to the House.

1.32 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I recall—indeed, I shall never forget—the occasion on which I went to record the death of the woman who had taken care of me for 20-odd years of my life. There was a question about my relationship to the deceased on the form that I had to fill in. In answering that question, I said that she had been my nanny. The registrar said, "I am terribly sorry. That is not a subsisting relationship. You will have to be the person who causes the body to be disposed of." I shall never forget that. All hon. Members, and all those who draw up official forms, would do well to remember that, in circumstances such as these, when we try to set up a procedure and put in place a form on which it is necessary to capture a relationship, it must be done with great sensitivity.

I do not believe that any hon. Member would say that the aims of the Bill introduced by the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) are not sound and good. The Bill aims to ensure that more organs are made available for donation and, therefore, that more lives will be saved. That is entirely commendable.

If I may be so audacious as to say so, I think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has shown his great experience in the House by producing such a brief and short Bill, which has as few traps as possible. The older and the wiser the head, the more one is capable of putting a case with extreme brevity, and the Bill certainly has done that.

Doctors, health care trusts and medical professionals have a grave responsibility towards the relatives of patients who have been in their care and people, like me, who are not relatives. On occasions, most notably at Alder Hey recently, they have shown contempt and a complete disregard for the nature of those relationships. Clearly, medical professionals had forgotten that the patient was a person or a child, and not a specimen, a cadaver or a series of organs that had to be disconnected and taken elsewhere.

My reservation about the Bill, I put it no stronger than that, is that it would reduce the need to consult the people who are extremely close to the patient—they may not be blood relationships or marital relationships—and it would enable hospitals and medical professionals not actively to strive to get the consent of those people who are most concerned and closest to the deceased.

I do not want to detain the House, as it has other business to deal with; I simply want to express that reservation in the wider hope that the filling in of forms generally—not merely for organ transplants—may be made more human.

1.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) for putting these proposals before us today. He has explained that his intention is to clarify some aspects of the Human Tissue Act 1961, which he believes placed difficulties in the way of people who wanted to retrieve organs for transplantation. I congratulate him on drawing up a private Member's Bill which, unusually, even gained the support of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth). That is rare. I was in the strange position of being in the House the second time that he has supported such a Bill. That is a recognition of the fact that it was narrowly drawn.

I should like to put the Bill in the context of the action that the Government are taking. The hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) was rightly looking for action, and he again reminded us of Florence Nightingale—I hope that that was the last time, but perhaps I shall hear the same quote again in a few weeks.

The starting point must be the uniqueness of donation and transplantation, because a donation depends on the altruism of others. Repeated public surveys show that most people would be willing to donate organs. The number of available organs has decreased over the past 10 years, partly because of positive developments such as the reduction in the number of road traffic accidents and our increased ability to help people who suffer strokes in their 40s and 50s. All that has been very good. We need to improve people's understanding of the processes involved in asking about donation and what will be expected and accepted. People are facing bereavement; it is a stressful time. We need to educate the public so that Government campaigns or those supported by local organisations or national interest groups urge people to think about the issue before the event occurs. There is currently a great surge of interest and we expect to be able to double the number of names on the organ donor register before the end of the decade.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, East (Mr. Heppell) made it clear that we have to take the public's views into account, as this is not entirely a rational argument. We now have a dedicated telephone line for registering organ donations and information is available on websites.

We must make sure that no potential donation is lost because, for whatever reason, a family is not asked. There are pockets of resistance or squeamishness about donation within the health service that we need to overcome. We are putting in place a programme of training and support for those NHS staff who deal with bereaved parents. We shall also be making clear the importance of active support for donation throughout each trust and health authority, and that includes the wholehearted endorsement of management. This is known as the whole hospital approach. One of the first steps is a public commitment to donation by the whole organisation.

That has been taken up in my area of the west midlands, where all trust chief executives have agreed to implement a hospitalwide policy on organ donation. This means that hospitals in the west midlands have agreed to inform staff of the trust's policy and view of donation; to support staff when approaching relatives for donation; but also to challenge staff who are reluctant to approach the families concerned and to support transplant co-ordinators in their aim to promote a general hospitalwide consciousness regarding all issues in relation to organ and tissue donation. That is within the NHS.

On 27 February, the Government held an organ and tissue donation summit to consider all possible ways to increase organ and tissue donation, and to call on a wide range of organisations in the private and public sectors to help support donation. Examples include the national ITV companies running the "Year of the Promise". HTV and Meridian both adopted the NHS organ donor register as one of their "Promises". *The Sun* newspaper has twice run

a major campaign promoting organ donation to its readers and encouraging them to join the NHS organ donor register.

There has also been less spectacular but consistent support from Sky, Littlewoods, the AA, the National Express Bus Company and Connex. In August, Boots, the high street chemist, started promoting organ donation via its in-store loyalty card, the Boots advantage card. Boots customers can now join the NHS organ donor register when applying for or renewing their advantage card. Similarly, the Goldfish credit card has offered its 1 million customers the opportunity, when applying for or renewing their credit card, simply to tick a box to join the NHS organ donor register. We have to admit that it is more likely that people will carry their credit cards than their organ donor cards, even if they have them. We have recognised the importance of increasing the number of people on the organ donor register, but we are also ensuring that the register is used. I hope that that satisfies hon. Members that the Government are proactive.

In many areas, there has been a debate on the draft consultation document. What are the Government doing as a result of that? We have made it clear that UK Transplant must lead the campaign to promote organ procurement throughout the NHS. We need to strengthen the transplant co-ordinators service. It has an important role, identifying likely donors, ensuring that consent is sought by the NHS trust and that, when organs are available, they go to the right people.

The Government are also committed to investing in innovative forms of organ donation, encouraging the development of non-heart-beating donation programmes and encouraging live donations. We have also promised to consider in the review of the Human Tissue Act 1961 how we might modernise the law on the process of gaining consent for organ and tissue donation.

Mr. Swayne: A point was put to me by Professor Engeset in Aberdeen. His contention is that we are missing a number of potential donors, whom we would have had in the past, because of the development of technology. He stated—it was subsequently confirmed to me by other members of the British Medical Association—that an accident or stroke victim might be scanned at a regional centre and the result of that scan sent down the telephone wire to the consultant at the other end, who might take one look and say, "There is no hope for that patient," so that patient would never make it to the ventilator, as he would have in the past. Hence, we will have lost a potential donor, whom we would otherwise have had. That matter needs to be looked at.

Ms Stuart: If I understand the hon. Gentleman correctly, he is suggesting that we move away from a policy where an assessment is made of whether the patient will survive, a medical intervention is then made to save his life and, if that is unsuccessful, organ donation comes into play. He is suggesting that we should take action to prolong what appears to be life in the interests of securing an organ donation. France went down that road for a brief period and it was successfully challenged in the courts. For about four years, the number of donations dropped. It took France a long time to get the number back up. The public must have confidence that, within the NHS, everything is done to save a patient's life. If that is not possible, we make it possible for organs to be donated, but not before that. That would be a very dangerous step and I would be very wary of going down that road. I do not think that it is suggested in the Bill.

Mr. Swayne: The hon. Lady is right; it has nothing to do with what is proposed in this narrow Bill. However, she will know of my enthusiasm for elective ventilation. The procedure was successfully carried out in this country and withdrawn as a result of legal doubts, but those doubts can be addressed by a change in the law. It is a review of that—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Order. The hon. Gentleman must confine his remarks to what is in the Bill.

Ms Stuart: I will return to that point in the context of the Bill.

We know from looking at what is effective abroad that altering the legislative framework will not solve the shortage of organs. That is important. It is not the legislative framework that is preventing us from having more organ donors. The real question is whether a change to presumed consent, which some hon. Members suggested, would change things. There is no evidence in other areas of the world that such a change has been successful.

Currently, we operate a system where specific consent, or at least a lack of objection by relatives, must be established prior to donation. It is an opt-in system. Opportunities are offered via donor cards and the organ donor register for those who would be willing to be donors to opt in and to record their wishes. Regardless of whether that has been done, those close to the deceased will be consulted. When the deceased's wishes are known, families will nearly always agree to allow donation to go ahead.

The opt-in system is widely supported. In a survey conducted in July 1999, 68 per cent. said that they would be willing to donate under the current system. Now an opt-out system is being advocated, whereby consent is presumed unless the deceased has recorded an objection. Spain has been cited as the country with the highest donation rate in Europe. It is true that it has an opt-out law, but it has never been used and consent is still sought there. In France, where the opt-out system was tried, there was a huge public backlash. The right way forward is to continue to seek informed consent from those closest to the deceased.

The expert committee's report was clear. It said:

> "It is strongly advisable to ascertain the public's and health professionals' opinion about presumed or informed consent for organ donation before promoting legal changes that might be potentially detrimental."

Currently, most health professionals with experience in the donation and transplantation process, most notably the transplant co-ordinators, do not support a change to opt-out.

More importantly, the debate is now considered less relevant by most transplant organisations, because relatives or friends are asked as part of the screening process about the donor's recent medical history. If they object to donation, organs will not be retrieved, whatever the legal framework. Permission for donation for transplantation is always sought explicitly from those

[Ms Stuart]

close to the potential donor. They are asked to agree that the organs may be used for medical or scientific research if they prove unsuitable for transplantation.

Organs taken for transplantation cannot be used for research without specific permission from the donor's family. Transplant co-ordinators who seek consent consider that keeping the family informed throughout and giving them feedback on the use of organs is fundamental to the process. We will seek to ensure that current good practice on gaining consent for donation for transplantation is applied to all aspects of organ and tissue donation and retention for other purposes, such as diagnosis research and medical education.

The Bill offers some apparently minor changes to the Human Tissue Act 1961 intended to clarify it and improve the supply of organs for transplantation. Of course, we all endorse that objective, but the 1961 Act provides the basis not only for organ transplantation but for hospital post mortems and the removal, retention and use of organs and tissue at post mortem for medical education and research purposes.

The interim report of the Bristol inquiry and the Alder Hey inquiry report have both demonstrated difficulties with the 1961 Act, which has been described as arcane and complex. It has also been suggested that practitioners working in the field have little knowledge or understanding of its provisions. The chief medical officer's advice to the Government recommended short-term changes to the Act to clarify that parental consent is needed, rather than lack of objection, for the removal, retention and use of human organs and tissue taken from a deceased child. It also recommended that, as part of an urgent reform of the law, an offence should be introduced for not complying with such provisions. We have accepted that recommendation. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his statement on 30 January, we intend to introduce legislation to give effect to the recommendation as soon as the parliamentary timetable allows.

The chief medical officer also recommended a more wide-ranging revision of the law on the taking, storage and use of tissue from the living and the dead for therapeutic purposes, for research and for education. The work to underpin that will be undertaken in the next six to 12 months in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders. In both proposed reviews of the law, the intention is to address the main deficiencies of the Human Tissue Act 1961, to restore public confidence in the operation of that law and to ensure that organs and tissue are available for both transplantation and vital medical research, while ensuring that the wishes and feelings of families are respected. The specific changes before us today need to be considered as part of the major revision of the law that is needed to bring it into the 21st century.

Clause 3 proposes the inclusion of cohabiting partners and we agree with the intention behind the Bill's proposals to extend the categories of those who should be consulted about donation to the cohabiting partners of the deceased. I was extremely moved by the contribution of the hon. Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner), who vividly illustrated that attempting to define relationships on forms is very difficult and can sometimes be extremely insensitive to people in distress. Currently, there is no provision for cohabiting partners to be consulted and this seems inappropriate when so many people are not married to their long-term partners. Surely those partners should be considered to be the equivalent of a spouse or close relative in this case. However, it is not a simple matter to alter—for example, there are questions of conflicts between partner and legal spouse or partner and parent. We plan to consider the categories of those to be consulted as part of the wider ranging consultation on the Human Tissue Act.

Clause 1 refers to those in lawful possession of the body. The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe proposes an immediate change to the definition of the person lawfully in possession of the body. In practice, the health authority or NHS trust is assumed to be in possession of the body, and its staff authorise the donation. However, the chief medical officer's report did not identify this phrase as causing any difficulty, and certainly it has not been presented as an issue that requires urgent action.

The proposal about the preservation of parts of the body is intended to facilitate the practice of non-heart-beating donation. I have a sense that hon. Members are not drawing a clear distinction between non-heart-beating donations and ventilation for the purpose of keeping a body alive. A debate on that would have to be wide-ranging and, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman said, it would not divide down party lines as it touches on deep issues.

It is important to put on record that most organs for transplantation are taken from those who die while on life support—hence with still beating hearts—in an intensive care unit. It is important to understand that very few people die in such circumstances, and only a proportion of those, for medical reasons, will be suitable to be become donors. However, it is sometimes possible to accept kidneys from those whose hearts have stopped beating. There is a brief window of opportunity—during the first 40 minutes after the heart stops—when the kidneys can be retrieved and used for transplant. This so called non-heart-beating donation can go ahead if the organs are preserved by being cooled in the body once death is pronounced. The preservation process will continue until the family gives agreement and the organs are retrieved. It will cease when the time limit is reached and attempts to reach the family have failed or when the family decides that it does not want the donation to go ahead.

As part of the Government's plan to increase the availability of kidneys for transplantation, we have recently undertaken to support increased use of non-heart-beating donors. We are not ignoring that proposal, but looking to develop it in a more sensitive way. Three transplant units have successfully run non-heart-beating donation programmes for some years. The right hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned the one in his part of the world. They have all done so after full and lengthy public consultation which made the process transparent and tested out its acceptability.

The British Transplant Society is currently drafting a protocol on non-heart-beating donation to present to the Department of Health for wide consultation. This is a sensitive and complex subject which will require negotiation with the coroners services, which is of course the responsibility of the Home Office, and careful

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consideration of how to maintain public confidence. It is not an area in which hasty action is likely to lead to progress; nor would legislation necessarily be helpful.

Anxieties were expressed in the media immediately after the Alder Hey report that publicity surrounding organ and tissue retention post mortem, without the express consent of patients and parents, would have a negative effect on our organ transplant programmes. The latest figures for UK transplants do not support that contention. The number of donors in February was exactly the same as in February 2000. There was, in addition, an encouraging difference over the period in that there was a huge increase in the number of people joining the organ donor register. Some 80,000 joined it in February.

There is no evidence of any negative impact from Alder Hey on organ donation for transplantation or on tissue donation for medical research. However, even if there is no additional crisis, there remains a chronic shortage of organs. Keeping public confidence in the donation system is vital to the transplantation service.

Improving donation is about changing attitudes and behaviour. I do not believe that that will best be done by legislation. However, I welcome the opportunity offered by today's debate to discuss an important issue and to inform the House of what is in train to improve organ donation. On balance, given what I have said, the Government are not minded to agree to the Bill.

2.3 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: I am grateful to the Minister, to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) and to others for what they have said. There is obviously no difference of purpose or intention in the House. We all realise that something must be done to meet the gap between the need for organ transplants and the present supply. I am reassured to hear that the Government are addressing the problem with some urgency. I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, West that we need in the near future—whichever party is in power 12 months from now—to see some progress. Everyone has identified a long list of problems, and we must tackle them.

My only difference with the very helpful Minister lay in her conclusion. I should have liked the Bill to go to Committee. I accept that it might be subsumed by the wide-ranging review that the Government are undertaking, but I cannot see that any of the changes that I propose could do any harm or be undesirable. In some areas, the Minister concedes that my proposals would improve matters, such as on the question of co-habiting partners. Nothing that I have proposed would conflict, as far as I can see, with her intention to explore such areas in the review on the preservation of organs. Simply making it lawful to preserve organs would not get in the way of further constructive discussion.

I shall press for a Second Reading, therefore, although I appreciate that the chances of an adequate number of Members being present in the House of Commons at this time on a Friday are slight. Having got so close, I prefer to put the matter to the chance, to see whether anything has held an unaccustomed number of our colleagues here. I shall not press a Division in a spirit of total dissatisfaction with or hostility to what the Minister has said, but there is a slight difference of opinion about how we can best proceed.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time:—

The House divided: Ayes 12, Noes 0.

Division No. 157] **[2.3 pm**

AYES

Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Soley, Clive
Forth, Rt Hon Eric	Spicer, Sir Michael
Golding, Mrs Llin	Swayne, Desmond
Ladyman, Dr Stephen	Wilkinson, John
McIntosh, Miss Anne	
Mackinlay, Andrew	**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Öpik, Lembit	**Mr. Kelvin Hopkins and**
Skinner, Dennis	**Mr. Kenneth Clarke.**

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Barry Gardiner and
Mr. John Heppell.

It appearing on the report of the Division that 40 Members were not present, MADAM DEPUTY SPEAKER *declared that the Question was not decided, and the business under consideration stood over until the next sitting of the House.*

Private Dental Practitioners Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

2.14 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I was No. 13 in last year's ballot, and I am No. 8 this year. I am slowly climbing the ladder; I hope that by next year I shall be nearer the top three.

I am grateful for the opportunity at least to talk briefly about the Bill. Its purpose is to ensure that private dentists are brought into line with other private health services within the remit of the National Care Standards Commission. One in four adults have private treatment, either by choice or because they cannot find a national health service dentist. Often patients are unclear whether their treatment is NHS or private, and many have a mixture of the two.

It is therefore right that patients who use private dentists should expect protection similar to that enjoyed by patients who use other private medical services. At present, private patients may not even have access to a complaints procedure. Surgeries do not have to comply with formal standards.

Those who want to complain about work done privately have no recourse to an independent complaints procedure or other forms of statutory redress. As a result, many people who want to complain about their private dental treatment have found that the only formal options are either to complain to the General Dental Council, which deals only with cases of professional misconduct, or to sue the surgery or dentist concerned.

I shall refer briefly to two examples. Jonathan Cowie felt a sharp pain in one of his teeth the afternoon after he had had a dental check-up. He contacted his private dentist, who said that his teeth were probably still sensitive after being cleaned by the hygienist and that he should rub dentine on his gums. However, the following morning he was in severe pain, so he went back to the dentist, who took an X-ray of the tooth and told him not to worry and that it would settle down. The pain continued, so he made another appointment. This time, the dentist said that there was a crack in his tooth, which he filled. Three days later the filling started to come out.

Still in pain, Jonathan visited another dentist for a second opinion. He was told that the tooth had split from top to bottom and that the filling had pushed it apart, further exposing the nerve and allowing the tooth to become infected. It was removed and, two days later, the pain went.

Mr. Cowie complained to his health authority about his dentist's repeated misdiagnosis, but was told that there was no statutory complaints procedure for private dental treatment. He contacted the General Dental Council, which said that the allegation could not be described as serious professional misconduct, so the matter was outside its remit. Jonathan is still disputing the matter with the GDC. He feels that it is not following the Dentists Act 1984, which provides that the GDC should

"promote high standards of . . . professional conduct".

Another case was that of Audrey Read, who last year was told by her dentist that she needed a bridge to replace a broken tooth, and that that had to be done privately at a cost of more than £500. The bridge was uncomfortable and looked horrible. A second bridge was fitted, but it was no better. She asked for her money back and the dentist refused.

As the work had not been done on the NHS, Audrey Read could not use the complaints system, even though the dentist also did NHS work. When the dentist would not agree to a refund, her only option was to sue. A dental negligence lawyer arranged for an independent dentist to inspect the work. He found that the tooth had not been properly pulled out and that 90 per cent. of the root was still present. Even if it had been properly extracted, the permanent bridge should not have been fitted for at least three months, to allow the gum to shrink. Finally—this happens in most cases but there are some where it does not—the dentist settled out of court and she received £6,500.

It is important that in the present climate patients should be reassured that the highest standards of care will apply to all areas of health care. The Bill would give greater legitimacy to the thousands of excellent private dentists who perform to high standards.

The Consumers Association brought the issue to my attention. For several years, it has campaigned for higher standards of private and NHS health care. The House may know that I have long campaigned for better regulation of all private health care services, including cosmetic surgery; it took me seven years before the new system was introduced. More people are using private dental services, not necessarily by choice, but I shall not go into that now. Dentistry is one area of private health care that must not be permitted to continue to operate without proper safeguards for patients.

The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), has told me that private dentistry has not been brought under the National Care Standards Commission from the outset because the General Dental Council is committed to introducing a scheme for the investigation and resolution of complaints about private dentistry. Frankly, I am unhappy about that because, as we have seen with doctors, professional self-regulation alone is not sufficient.

There is still a pressing requirement to pull private dentists under the provisions of the Care Standards Act 2000, to ensure that complaints procedures are in place and that private dentists work to certain standards and provide good quality and safe care. Patients are just as vulnerable in the dentist's chair as they are at their GP's surgery. It is widely accepted that there is a need to regulate private GP practices, so why not dentists, especially as more people have private dental care than private GP care?

I should like to say more, but I would like to hear what other Members have to say. I am grateful for the support of Members on both sides of the House for the Bill, which is an important step in safeguarding the interests of patients who use private dentists. I appreciate that parliamentary time may not be available this side of the general election, but I should like the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), to commit the next

Labour Government to implementing measures similar to those in my Bill. That would protect patients, whether they are in a GP's surgery or a private dentist's chair.

2.22 pm

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): The hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) has clearly identified a problem for which a remedy is required. We understand why she has introduced the Bill and why it has the support of the Consumers Association. It is unacceptable that the only remedy open to private dental patients—and most adults, of necessity, have to become private dental patients—is recourse to law or, if there is a case of professional misconduct, the General Dental Council.

We therefore accept that a remedy is required. We support the creation of a formal complaints procedure for private patients. Indeed, the Health Act 1999 gives the Government the power to create one. The British Dental Association believes that that should be a Government priority, but we are still waiting for action on that front. I quite understand the frustration that led the hon. Member for Cynon Valley to introduce her Bill. Last September, the Government published "Modernising NHS Dentistry—Implementing the NHS Plan", which deals with quality issues. I should have thought that that provided an opportunity to widen the scope and address the issues facing private dental patients, given that so many of them—and increasingly so—are also NHS dental patients. We are interested to learn the Government's response to the Bill.

The National Care Standards Commission has the remit of regulating private dental treatment under general anaesthesia, but dental treatment of the sort described by the hon. Lady was specifically excluded. The Government are currently reviewing the NHS complaints system. Many of us who function as ordinary Members of Parliament with casework would say that that is long overdue.

Our approach to the Care Standards Act 2000, which would be amended by the Bill, was summed up in Standing Committee G by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond):

> "The primary function of the Secretary of State for Health is to ensure a safe environment for all patients, irrespective of whether they choose to be treated privately or by the NHS, including those who are moved into privately provided facilities at the expense of the NHS—a practice that will become increasingly common. Patients are entitled to expect an equal standard of care. The Secretary of State, acting in the public interest, should ensure that a proper framework of safety measures is in place to regulate a patient's environment."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee G*, 6 June 2000; c. 47.]

It follows from that that it would be preferable to have one set of regulatory and inspection criteria and a complaints procedure covering all provision of health care. Our difficulty with the Bill is that it perpetuates the system of two separate forms of inspection and regulation and complaints procedures for patients who move seamlessly between the NHS and the private sector, particularly in respect of dentistry.

The Bill will give rise to a practical problem, because the dentists who are to be regulated and inspected, and about whom complaints are to be investigated, carry out both NHS work and work in the private sector. They would consequently end up being subject to two different regimes. We are interested to hear the Minister's comments on the Bill.

2.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) on introducing the Bill. I take note too of the remarks of the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne). He reminded me of the debates that we had in Committee on the Care Standards Bill. The hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) ended up saying that he would go home and wrap a cold towel round his head, as he could not follow the discussion. I hope that the hon. Member for New Forest, West does not have to do the same.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley has an honourable record. I am delighted that her determined campaign on cosmetic surgery was successful. I hope that in time she will look back and see that her present campaign was equally successful. There is no disagreement between us about the objective of her Bill. The matter for discussion is how that will be achieved.

People should expect to receive high quality health care, provided by doctors or dentists in whom they have complete confidence—practitioners who are well trained, up to date with good practice in their discipline, and mindful of the ethical standards set by their professional body. A constant theme of the Government's policies for improving the quality of health services has been the strengthening of the regulation of health care professionals.

In 1999 we secured enactment of the Health Bill, which included provision to amend, by order, the uni-disciplinary Acts governing the main health care professions—the Medical Act 1983, the Dentists Act 1984 and the Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1997. Last year we used that provision after the conviction of Harold Shipman for murder to amend the Medical Act to provide for the immediate suspension from the medical register of doctors charged with serious offences. We also gave the General Medical Council wider ranging investigatory powers where complaints have been made about a doctor's conduct.

During the current parliamentary Session we have sponsored a Health and Social Care Bill which provides health authorities with tight controls over the four independent contractor professions—general medical practitioners, general dental practitioners, pharmacists and opticians. When the Bill is passed, health authorities will be empowered to refuse to register practitioners whom they judge unsuitable, to suspend practitioners on their own authority, without having to apply to the NHS tribunal, and to place conditions on their registration, such as prohibiting dentists from treating patients under general anaesthetic. We are currently working on a second order, to be laid under section 60 of the Health Act 1999. The order will empower the General Dental Council to strengthen the regulation of dentistry. It has two main elements to do with the constitution of the council—

It being half-past Two o'clock, the debate stood adjourned.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 23 March.

Remaining Private Members' Bills

CROWN EMPLOYMENT (NATIONALITY) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred until Friday 30 March.

RAIL PASSENGER SERVICES BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred until Friday 23 March.

PENSION ANNUITIES (AMENDMENT) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred until Friday 23 March.

VACCINATION OF CHILDREN (PARENTAL CHOICE) BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred until Friday 23 March.

OUTWORKING BILL

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs. Sylvia Heal): Not moved.

CLIMATE CHANGE BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Hon. Members: Object.

Second Reading deferred until Friday 23 March.

LIAISON COMMITTEE (SUB-COMMITTEE)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended as follows:

Line 31, at end add—

'( ) The committee shall have power to appoint a sub-committee, which shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, and to report to the committee from time to time.

( ) The committee shall have power to report from time to time the minutes of evidence taken before the sub-committee.

( ) The quorum of the sub-committee shall be three.'.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on Question [31 January],

That the Select Committee on Science and Technology shall have leave to meet concurrently with any committee of the Lords on science and technology or any sub-committee thereof, for the purpose of deliberating or taking evidence, and to communicate to any such committee its evidence or any other documents relating to matters of common interest—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

SELECT COMMITTEES (JOINT MEETINGS)

Motion made,

That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended as follows:

Line 40, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 50, before the word 'European' insert the words 'Environmental Audit Committee or with the'.

Line 52, at the end insert the words:—

'(4A) notwithstanding paragraphs (2) and (4) above, where more than two committees or sub-committees appointed under this order meet concurrently in accordance with paragraph (4)(e) above, the quorum of each such committee or sub-committee shall be two.'.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

Hon. Members: Object.

Secondary Education (West London)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Clelland.]*

2.32 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): This is a timely opportunity to have the privilege of raising in the House the subject of secondary school education in west London. I have used the term "west London" advisedly in the title of the debate. Although the problems that I shall describe are especially serious for Ruislip-Northwood and the Hillingdon borough, they transcend borough boundaries and must, therefore, be set in their wider context.

My constituency has a range of excellent secondary schools. It contains the Bishop Ramsey Church of England school in Ruislip, Northwood school in Northwood Hills, Haydon school in Eastcote-Pinner, Queensmead school in South Ruislip and John Penrose school in Harefield. Dolay Martyrs school, Ickenham, is situated just outside my constituency, in that of my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall). It is a Roman Catholic Church school that receives a significant number of pupils from my area.

The problem that is currently of special concern to my constituents is their inability to secure places for their children in local secondary schools of their choice. The problem is especially prevalent in parts of Eastcote, Ruislip Gardens, Ruislip Manor and South Ruislip, where many people face significant problems unless they can claim priority for their children on medical or sibling grounds. Most usually, disappointed parents are offered places for their children in John Penrose school, which is located in Harefield. The school is a long way from Ruislip or Ruislip Manor and is fairly inaccessible. Other parents are offered places in Hayes Manor school, in the extreme south of the borough of Hillingdon.

I raised related issues when, some two and a half years ago, I took a deputation—my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge did the same—to see the Minister for School Standards about education problems in Hillingdon, especially in respect of secondary education.

We discussed at that time the possibility of constructing a new school in Ruislip, and Hillingdon borough council local education authority hoped that Her Majesty's Government could let us know by now whether the capital funding for the project was available. Local education authority officials have been in discussion with the Department for Education and Employment, and a site has been identified at Sidmouth drive, although planning permission has to be secured first. I hope that the Minister can deal with that point.

Parental feeling is strong. Indeed, several parents of pupils at Lady Banks primary school in Dawlish drive, Ruislip Manor have got together. Many have written to me to argue forcefully against the effects of the Greenwich judgment, which permits cross-borough migration of pupils to the school of the parents' choice, often to the detriment of the exercise of that same parental choice by those who live in the borough where the school is located.

In my area of west London, the difference between the sort of secondary schooling in Harrow borough and Hillingdon borough makes the problem especially acute. In Harrow borough, people feel strongly that the current system should be changed. The Minister may remember that sixth forms disappeared when the borough changed to comprehensive education in the early 1970s. Education to A-level was then provided by sixth form colleges, which have subsequently been replaced by tertiary colleges. The reputation of the tertiary colleges is good, but they are not popular with all parents, who may prefer a post-16 sixth form in a school environment, where children gain authority as prefects and in other positions of responsibility. Such opportunities are not available in tertiary colleges.

Parents therefore seek places at 11-plus schools in neighbouring boroughs, such as my borough of Hillingdon, where school education to sixth form level is available. That leads to unfilled places in middle schools in the Harrow borough and resentment from parents in Hillingdon who cannot, as a consequence of the migration of pupils from Harrow, secure a place for their children in the Hillingdon school of their choice.

Successive Governments have upheld the Greenwich judgment. It was passed in 1989 in the Court of Appeal, which upheld a High Court ruling that a local education authority could not lawfully pursue a schools admissions policy that preferred children living in its area to those outside. There is little information about the impact of the judgment on parental choice. The hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) tried to secure such clarification in a written question on 11 January. The Minister for School Standards replied:

"My Department does not collect detailed information on the provision of school places by local education authorities in England; education in Wales is matter for the Welsh Assembly.

It is for local education authorities to ensure sufficient school places to meet demand."—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2001; Vol. 360, c. 630W.]

We understand that, and my local authority is doing its best, hence the dialogue with the Department for Education and Employment about a new school in Ruislip.

Even if the new school was authorised tomorrow—I hope that it is—that would not solve the immediate difficulty. Other west London boroughs have also identified a problem. I cite an Adjournment debate introduced by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) on 28 May 1998. He said that overcrowding in schools in Richmond upon Thames borough had been aggravated by the Greenwich judgment. In the same debate, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) said:

"The Greenwich judgment has created an acute problem for some London boroughs, particularly Richmond"—

I would say, "especially Hillingdon"—

"and I urge the Minister to consider possible solutions. Within the borough, we have tried everything that we can possibly do. I myself have been a councillor in the borough and have struggled with the problem. Although we have tried, we simply do not know what to do, to be fair to our own children."—[*Official Report*, 20 May 1998; Vol. 312, c. 925.]

The problem with the London borough of Richmond upon Thames is one that we share in Hillingdon: the schools are especially good in both boroughs. Children come flooding into Hillingdon, not only from Harrow but from Hertfordshire in the north and from the London borough of Ealing in the south-east. The then Minister in

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

the Department for Education and Employment, the right hon. Member for Tyneside, North (Mr. Byers), said in his reply that

"the Greenwich judgment has opened up opportunities for parents and children."

That is a somewhat contentious remark. He went on to say:

"in some cases it means that children can go to more local schools, which just happen to be over the road in another LEA area."

The difficulty is that, for someone in Harrow, Northwood school or Queensmead school in my constituency could be "just over the road". However, children who live in my constituency in the same road as those schools could be denied a place in those schools. That is most unsatisfactory. The Minister concluded:

"Cross-border movement works both ways. Local education authorities import and export."—[*Official Report*, 20 May 1998; Vol. 312, c. 927.]

In Hillingdon, we only import. I have no evidence of an exodus of pupils from Hillingdon to the neighbouring boroughs that I have mentioned, although one or two pupils go to grammar schools in Buckinghamshire and in Watford on the basis of competitive examination. However, they are special cases.

In short, there are widespread difficulties in secondary education in my borough. I took advice from the local education authority when trying to summarise what the difficulties were, in addition to the issue of parental choice. The advice that I received was this:

"The teacher shortage is very serious and set to get significantly worse at Easter. The pool of available supply teachers continues to shrink as these staff are appointed to cover vacancies . . . The teacher shortage is seriously affecting standards, directly and indirectly. The direct effects include the use of temporary (often overseas, inexperienced or non-specialist) supply staff for classes often already affected by rapid teacher turnover and lack of continuity . . . Added to this, we how have"—

the prospect of—

"the industrial action of the NUT and NAS/UWT . . . Hillingdon is very badly affected by the teacher shortage for a number of reasons. We fall outside the extra funding for inner London even though our house prices are"—

as high as those in many inner London boroughs, and, in some parts of Ruislip-Northwood, even higher. The local education authority went on:

"We do not score highly on the DfEE's indices of deprivation which do not recognise the significant pockets of socio-economic disadvantage"—

that exist in the borough—in Hayes and Yiewsley in the south, and in Harefield, parts of Northwood Hills and South Ruislip in my constituency.

The formula for applying for the education grant is subject to an extraordinary paradox that I find incomprehensible. According to the LEA, Hillingdon

"suffered a £1.9 million cut in DETR support . . . by the introduction in the ceiling on the increase in Revenue Support Grant for education which did not, therefore, match the 7.6 per cent. increase in Standard Spending Assessment which reflected growth in school rolls."

There is, therefore, a fundamental problem of funding, which I hope that the Minister will address.

I took advice not only from the local education authority but from the schools themselves, in which there was a unanimity of view. The head teacher of one school said:

"I am sure you are aware of the serious impact of the recruitment problems which were fully aired at the meeting with the Director of Education and others."

So concerned was the local education authority that it called in my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell), the director, the chairman of the education committee and the heads of all the schools to thrash out initiatives that could be taken. The head teacher said that although there are affluent areas in Hillingdon, the neighbouring boroughs of Ealing and Hounslow have excellence in cities additions to their funding that we do not enjoy in our borough.

Another head teacher cited the very high cost of housing in west London and the low level of the London weighting allowance. He said that for mortgage purposes and based on an income multiple of three times salary, the increase in the London weighting allowance would give an extra £6,000 on a mortgage, which was almost

"inconsequential in this part of London".

He also referred to low pay and the fact that particular specialisms, such as languages, maths and science, have recruitment problems.

Retention is always a difficult problem. The stress and strain of bureaucracy and form filling are acute, so people all too often leave the profession early.

A good summary of the situation was given by another head teacher. The aspects that caused him concern were a salary increase that in total adds up to about 6 per cent. while his likely budget increase is about 4.5 per cent.; the inequalities between our borough and Ealing and Hounslow, which enjoy excellence in cities funding, whereas we do not; the shortage of teachers; the long-term problems of teacher recruitment and retention; the painfully inadequate London allowance compared with house prices; and the need for affordable housing for young staff.

A catalogue of difficulties affects my borough of Hillingdon particularly severely. However, they are not just Hillingdon problems: they go wider than that and are made more acute by the difference in the education system between Harrow and Hillingdon, and the difference in treatment between Hounslow and Ealing and our borough of Hillingdon.

I hope that the Minister will address some of those issues, and give us hope about the new school in Ruislip.

2.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Mr. Malcolm Wicks): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) for raising an issue that is at the heart of the Government's agenda for education, and is important to all of us. We are committed to raising standards of education for all children. In west London, as elsewhere, we are taking action to drive up standards, and we support initiatives that underpin that commitment.

I know where the hon. Gentleman is coming from—I say that not colloquially, but geographically. In the early to mid-1970s, I lived in Hillingdon off Long lane. Our

first child was born in Hillingdon hospital, so I have some understanding of the patch. I used to teach at Brunel university just down the road from the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Since we have been in government, we have made a clear commitment to raising standards. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 gave us the framework within which we could accelerate our drive to raise standards in all our schools. Our record since then shows consistent and effective action through all stages of the education process. We need to ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach his full potential.

We shall further reinforce that action. Last month, the Secretary of State published the Green Paper "Building on Success". The proposals in the paper will allow us to pursue the improvements we have already made.

With regard to secondary education, we have set out a challenging agenda. All schools are to have their own mission and ethos. Young people who want a career based on technical skills will be able to choose a predominantly vocational programme from age 14, where it suits them. More schools are to be provided by Churches, major faith groups and voluntary and community groups in response to local demand from parents and the community. There is to be greater autonomy for successful schools—including more flexibility over pay and conditions and the curriculum—and a new source of help for weak and failing schools. A centre for gifted and talented youth will promote provision for gifted children in schools and establish intensive summer schools for them. More attention will be paid to school ethos and education with character for secondary pupils in and outside school.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the problems experienced by parents and children in finding a local secondary school. Our actions and proposals will address those problems by raising standards and enabling new provision.

We are pursuing the development of city academies. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has announced plans for two such academies in west London. In Brent, a city academy based on the Willesden high school site will have a sports specialism. In Hillingdon, a new city academy at Evelyns community school will have a technology specialism, with state-of-the-art computer facilities linked to high-tech business and to Brunel university.

Equally, we need to ensure that schools are supported by their local education authorities. LEAs have a duty to promote high standards. They must prepare education development plans, which set targets for pupils and for the quality of teaching, leadership and management in schools. Where an LEA cannot provide that support, the Secretary of State reserves the power to secure proper performance of the LEA's functions.

The hon. Gentleman made some valuable points about the availability of school places. I know that concerns have been raised by some parents who have been unable to get children into their first choice of school. I recognise that the position in west London is complicated by the movement of pupils between boroughs, which is in line with parental preference—something supported widely in the House. It would not be right to treat any parent expressing a preference less favourably simply because they live on one side of a local government boundary.

It is a difficult issue, and I listened carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said. He thought that only a few parents in Hillingdon chose to send their children to schools in other LEA areas; knowing Hillingdon as I do, I wonder whether it is a few. However, parents would no doubt object to their freedom to do so being ended.

Mr. Wilkinson: The Minister and I have something in common: my son was born in Hillingdon hospital, too. If there are two applicants of equal merit for a school, should not preference be given to the one who lives in the same local authority area as the school?

Mr. Wicks: Our difficulty is that the Greenwich judgment has put the emphasis on parental choice. It would have to be a matter for the LEA and the school's policies. However, I recognise the difficulties.

Although the law gives parents the right to express a preference for the school at which they would wish their child to be educated, it has never guaranteed every parent a place for their child at the preferred school. I understand the frustration of parents whose application has been unsuccessful. We would like all parents to gain a place for their child in a school that is satisfactory to them.

In my constituency of Croydon, North, I find nothing more difficult than talking to parents who would dearly love their son or daughter to go to a certain school and having to explain to them that, because of the rules of arithmetic, it is not possible. After all, if a school has more applications than places, it cannot admit every applicant. In the circumstances, places have to be allocated among applicants according to the school's published oversubscription criteria.

Admission arrangements for all schools must be published annually by each local education authority in a combined booklet. Information on the number of places available and applications made for them in the previous year must also be shown to help parents assess their chances of obtaining a place at their preferred school.

Parents who are refused a place at a school have a right of appeal. That is important. Under the new admissions legislation introduced by the Government, appeal panels are completely independent of the admission authority that decided the application. Their decisions are binding on the admission authority and can be overturned only by the courts. That is a step in the right direction.

Some schools have always been more popular than others. Our view is that the only satisfactory way to meet parental preference is to raise standards in all schools, so that the choice that parents have to make is between equally good schools. Our policies are focused on achieving that aim. However, as the House will appreciate, that cannot happen overnight.

In west London as a whole, there are enough places to satisfy demand based on current patterns of pupil movement; LEA returns from west London as a whole show that that is the case. However, I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman's point that, in Hillingdon, numbers are increasing and the demand for secondary school places is expected to exceed supply in future years.

LEAs have a duty to provide sufficient school places for their area. The Government believe that decisions about the organisation and supply of school places are best taken locally—by the main partners in the provision of education. We have established a new framework for

[Mr. Wicks]

local decision making. The School Standards and Framework Act introduced a new framework for local decision making in school-place planning.

LEAs must prepare a school organisation plan covering a five-year rolling period. That sets out how the LEA proposes to deal with surpluses and deficits of school provision and what provision it intends to make for pupils with special educational needs. The plan sets the context for proposals to change school organisation in the area. Those might include proposals to enlarge or to establish schools.

A school organisation committee has been established for each LEA area. The role of the committee is to consider the plan and to take decisions about statutory proposals affecting the local organisation of school places.

In thanking the hon. Gentleman for raising this important subject, which has a resonance for all of us in London, I should refer to today's announcement by schools Ministers that LEAs have been given the green light to spend more than £650 million on school capital projects through the private finance initiative. The money, which includes an extra £200 million of PFI credits from the Budget last week, has been provisionally allocated to 21 local authorities to support public-private partnership projects due to reach contract signature in 2002-03. A total of 174 schools will benefit and there will be more than 20 new schools.

The increased amounts available for school projects are part of the total capital investment in our schools. The projects range from building completely new schools to sports and information and communications technology facilities to renovations in primary, secondary and special needs schools.

On the plan for a new school in Ruislip, the hon. Gentleman recognised that I might not be able to agree to the proposal tomorrow. That is the case. I can agree to it today. The projects include a brand new secondary school in Hillingdon, located in Ruislip. The scheme is for a five-form entry school to include adult education facilities and a dual-use library.

Mr. Wilkinson: May I express my thanks and appreciation on behalf of my constituents?

Mr. Wicks: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but, obviously, the agreement was made on the merits of the case, which was very good.

Hillingdon local education authority will be invited to develop an outline business case for submission to my Department and the Treasury later this year. Once they have approval, LEAs can start the necessary procurement.

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that the launch of the new PFI projects, including the one in Ruislip, is good news for local parents and, more importantly, local children in the Hillingdon area. The schemes, together with those already in place, demonstrate the benefits that PFI can bring to our schools.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate and the House for listening. I have been able to announce some good news, and we can all have a good weekend.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at Three o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 6 March 2001

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Nursery Nurses

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Jamieson.*]

9.30 am

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): I am absolutely delighted to be opening this important debate and I am indebted to my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper) for suggesting it.

Nursery nurses have been the unsung heroes of early-years education and living proof of the need for trained specialists for children during their important, early, formative years when their personal, social and emotional development is so crucial. For too long, the early years have been seen as the province of the well-intentioned but untrained mother figure. In saying that, I do not wish to underestimate the fundamental role of mothers and fathers as children's first teachers, protectors and play partners because their role is central and must never be eclipsed by carers or paid professionals. Indeed, I am pleased that early-years practitioners now accept the importance of involving parents at every stage. However, because the early years have always been seen as an extension of the home environment, early-years practitioners have been seen as the poor relations in the child development world. Nursery nurses have been living proof that young children need particular support and special skills to help them to progress positively through the early challenges faced by all children.

Children are starting school earlier and earlier and nursery nurses provide the bridge from home to school. Whether in school, nursery or other settings, nursery nurses have provided the essential understanding of early child development, which has sometimes been lacking. Primary school teachers may end up teaching reception classes or even nursery classes without specialist training and I am pleased that the Government intend to change that and to insist that all teachers have specialist training in crucial early-years education. Nursery nurses are invaluable as experts in their field.

Happily—and after a long time—we now have a Government who value early-years education and recognise its huge impact on the lifelong potential of children, particularly those from disadvantaged homes. Replacement of the previous Government's nursery voucher scheme was a welcome first step. It created damaging competition between schools, playgroups and private nurseries for early-years pupils. Many pre-schools have closed since 1995 and only recently has the number of pre-school places increased under this Government.

Competition between the different providers led to schools hastily setting up nurseries and nursery classes to capitalise on vouchers when many were ill prepared to do so. I am concerned about the child-adult ratio that frequently exists in the school setting, which is often less favourable than in private settings. The establishment of a partnership between the voluntary, private and state sector through the early-years development partnerships is a welcome change. Some partnerships work better than others, which is to be expected at this early stage, so I welcome the Government's appointment of advisers to help these early-years development partnerships.

The boost that those partnerships will give to the training of early-years practitioners, be they in education or in child care, will be crucial. The national framework for qualifications, which was launched in September 1999, rationalised the existing 1,600 qualifications and gave individuals and employers clear information on the qualifications that are appropriate to different jobs. That is a good start, but in its recent report on early years, the Select Committee on Education and Employment, of which I am a member, went further. It recommended national targets for training, so that within 10 years all early-years practitioners will have appropriate specialist training, and all heads of centres and nurseries will be graduates or of an equivalent level. Moreover, all early childhood workers should be at national vocational qualification level 3 or equivalent.

That is not the entire story. Continual professional development is also a must. It is not easy to keep abreast of new developments, especially given that many child care workers have their own family and care commitments. Professional development should be a right and should be available flexibly. It should be available during the day in flexible training packages—including distance learning, workplace learning and modules—to allow qualifications to be built up progressively, and to increase access to training across all sectors of child care and early-years provision.

I welcome the Government's efforts to expand training in early years, and their commitment to provide appropriate training and development in early education for all qualified teachers and practitioners by 2004. Access to an average of four days relevant training for all early-years practitioners is crucial, but it is not enough and should be expanded further. For too long, early-years practitioners have been the poor relations of other education practitioners who get Baker days and associated training packages that help them to develop their professional expertise.

If we are to improve the quality of early-years provision, the dissemination of good practice is vital. I am excited at the prospect of helping to develop a rural sure start for pre-four-year-olds in my constituency, but we should not underestimate the difficulty of building such a project in areas where little infrastructure exists. Ensuring that rural villages and towns have the benefit of early education and health intervention will be a real challenge, especially in low-income areas. In practice, the so-called rural idyll can mean isolation and poverty. That is particularly true now of rural areas that face the devastation associated with foot and mouth disease.

I want to see a huge expansion in good-quality and affordable early-years provision. I am grateful to the Minister for supporting the expansion of nursery classes in Leek within the All Saints and Beresford schools, which are in my constituency, but we need to go further. Nursery nurses have blazed a trail for early-years education, and working as part of the early-years team

[Charlotte Atkins]

they have played a vital role in its expansion. I should stress the need for teamwork. Nursery nurses must be involved in planning, monitoring and developing good practice, and in helping to develop the skills of colleagues, including classroom assistants. In my view, the role of classroom assistants is underdeveloped. Schools such as Kelvin Grove—of which I have been a governor for many years, and which was the most improved primary school in London last year—have used classroom assistants creatively. They should not be left out of the equation, but they are often an undervalued part of the team. They are usually paid on local government manual pay scales, so their pay is low and their training can be neglected.

Nursery nurses have a different role, but I believe that classroom assistants can complement them. We must have a proper strategy for developing the skills of classroom assistants and nursery nurses as part of a ladder of qualifications through to graduate status.

I should like to see more men in early-years education to teach young boys at an early stage that learning is for them too. Unusually, a private nursery in my constituency, Nursery Thymes in Craigside Biddulph, has helped to develop young men interested in entering early-years education. I am delighted that it is successfully developing that interest among young men. Of course, the boys who attend the nursery also benefit, so it should be congratulated on its initiative.

Nursery nurses have shown us the way in early-years care and learning; we owe them a great deal. However, we must ensure that that message is expanded. We must ensure that the important role played by nursery nurses and early-years practitioners is properly rewarded and recognised because they play a crucial role that complements parents in developing young children's early lives. I should be interested to hear how the Minister anticipates that qualifications in early-years education will be developed so as to improve pay for nursery nurses and other early-years practitioners.

9.42 am

Mr. David Lepper (Brighton, Pavilion): I should begin by declaring an interest: my daughter is a qualified nursery nurse. Throughout her career she has worked in a private-sector nursery. I hope that that will not be seen as the only reason why I feel that it is important to debate the topic. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) on securing today's debate.

I echo my hon. Friend's remarks about the importance of the Government's national child care strategy. It has been welcomed by everyone in the education sector and by many parents in my constituency. Last week, the Minister had the opportunity to meet some of the people involved in early-years education in the Brighton and Hove local authority area, and I know that the comments that she made to our local press were valued by those people. I add my congratulations to those working in my local area.

The Brighton and Hove early-years development and child care partnership offers an example of good practice to other parts of the country. Its regular newsletter "Partners" informs those working in early-years education and parents about services. As my hon. Friend said, partners form the keynote of a strategy that involves a partnership between the state and private sectors. The Government's laudable ambitions for early-years education need a relationship with the private sector.

In Brighton and Hove, we have secured a free nursery place for every four-year-old and we are making progress on our commitment to provide places for three-year-olds. Thanks to additional funding from the Government, we hope by April this year to be able to offer a place to all three-year olds from the term after their third birthday. We are making progress toward achieving our ambition—and the Government's—that a free place should be available to all three-year-olds by 2004.

My interest in early-years education was sparked not only by my daughter's job, but by the suggestion made last year that the name of the job done by nursery nurses be changed. Many people in the profession were surprised and dismayed by the suggestion that their job title should be "classroom assistant" or "teaching assistant". My hon. Friend talked about the important role of classroom assistants and teaching assistants and the way in which that role should be developed, expanded and given greater recognition. However, nursery nurses were hurt by the notion, which seemed to come from Government sources, that their role was merely to provide assistance, whether in a nursery classroom, reception class or private sector nursery.

I was interested in the wealth of correspondence published in *Early Years Educator* magazine from practising nursery nurses who were shocked and dismayed by what appeared to be undervaluing of their professional status. In the course of that correspondence, Dr. Vivian Robbins of De Montfort university described nursery nurses as the invisible profession, relied upon throughout early-years education, but often overlooked in terms of professional status and qualifications.

The role of nursery nurses is extremely wide ranging. I received a letter from a Brighton and Hove resident who works not in the Brighton and Hove education authority area, but under East Sussex county council. She said that, in the course of any one day, nursery nurses have to

"teach, care, comfort, change children, be first aiders, prepare activities, plan work, display work, clean up, set up equipment, have a detailed knowledge of early learning goals, have meetings, speak to parents/carers, carry out assessments of children, liaise with other professionals and carry out individual responsibilities relating to the job. We do not get paid for our one hour lunch break, during which we usually manage to sit down for half an hour."

That is an interesting summary of the range of educational and caring responsibilities that are common to any nursery nurse in whatever setting she works. As my hon. Friend suggested, the profession is largely female, and I echo her sentiments about the need to attract more men into the profession.

More than merely the name of their job lay at the heart of the concerns expressed by many nursery nurses last year, but that issue was symptomatic of their feeling that their professional expertise, acquired during two or

more years' training, is not properly recognised. That expertise is vital to the success of the Government's strategy, which I am sure all hon. Members support.

There are two related issues, the first of which is pay. The basic scale from 1 April last year for nursery nurses in schools ranged from £9,531 to £12,444. For most nursery nurses working outside London and its fringe areas, the second figure is the maximum that they could hope to earn, irrespective of their qualifications. Although there are higher pay scales for nursery nurses working in social services departments, the majority working in education feel that the main pay scale does not sufficiently recognise their training, expertise or experience.

We can understand that feeling if we examine the new earnings survey carried out in April 1999, which examined the average earnings of many related professions. At that time, the average earnings of nursery nurses were £10,777, whereas the average earnings of classroom assistants, who probably have far less training—although, no doubt, they bring other expertise to their work—were £10,385. The difference, which is just a couple of hundred pounds, does not recognise the qualifications of dedicated nursery nurses. The Professional Association of Nursery Nurses has recommended that a pay scale of between £11,628 to £18,000 would be reasonable recognition of the professional status of a nursery nurse.

I have been talking about pay in the state sector, but the picture is quite different in the private sector, where pay often depends on the whim of the manager or owner of the nursery. Often, nursery nurses working in the same nursery have no idea of differences in pay between colleagues because there is no clear pay structure. My daughter, who works in a private sector nursery, has had a different experience. Her nursery has developed a clear pay structure that recognises training undertaken since employment. It is a pity that many other private sector nurseries do not follow that example.

Career structure, like pay, is important. Many nursery nurses felt that the Government's suggestion that nurses who want to earn more or increase their professional status ought to train as teachers might appeal to some. However, the survey suggested that the majority of women and men in nursery nursing are doing that job because it is the job that they want. They do not want to be teachers, but prefer instead to concentrate on a particular age group and use the skills that they learned during training.

There is a need for a career structure. My hon. Friend outlined some of the proposals that Government agencies have made on the recognition of qualifications. That is a step forward, but I suggest that the Government take a leading role in that respect. I recognise that the Government cannot intervene in the relationship between employer and employee in the private sector, because that is a matter for nursery staff and their employers, but they should indicate the direction that ought to be taken.

The emphasis must be on partnership. The Minister's letter to nursery nurses, which said that the role of nursery nurses was to support teachers in primary, secondary and special schools, suggested a lack of understanding of the professional role of the nursery nurse. Obviously, nursery nurses provide support, but they often take a lead role in their institution as well.

My plea is that the Government play a clear and leading role in bringing together the public and private sectors to work on creating properly recognised career structures and pay scales across both sectors. I shall be interested to hear the Minister's comments. Nursery nurses are the valuable people on whom we will rely to deliver the child care strategy of which the Government can be justly proud.

9.56 am

Helen Jones (Warrington, North): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) on securing the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper) on the work that he has done to raise the profile of the subject. The child care workers whom we are discussing are an important but often neglected group who have an important role to play in the Government's agenda on raising standards. Nursery nurses work in a variety of settings, but I will concentrate on their role in the early years, when they can and do play a part in improving standards for our youngest children.

My hon. Friend the Member for Moorlands mentioned the Select Committee on Education and Employment report on early years. The Committee, of which I, too, am a member, emphasised clearly that the early years—from birth to five-plus—are crucial in determining a child's life chances. That had been said before, and all the evidence that we received confirmed it. My experience as a secondary school teacher has led me to think that more money invested in the early years would lessen many of the problems that emerge at later stages of education. The Government, to their credit, have recognised that and, starting from a very low level of provision, they have done much to improve early-years provision. However, it must be recognised that, unless we can recruit and retain qualified and well-motivated staff, we will not be able to raise standards of provision. The Select Committee stated clearly its desire for integrated provision across health, education and social services.

We received much evidence regarding the importance of involving parents as partners in their children's education, especially in the early stages. However, that would require far more early-years staff than have previously been employed, they would need a range of skills to deal with the social, physical and intellectual development of children, and they would have to work proactively and constructively with parents, many of whom may have had a poor experience of the education system. In some settings, such as early excellence centres, parents are encouraged to learn and take courses themselves.

The job of working with young children, especially in disadvantaged areas, giving confidence to them and, in some cases, to their parents, is not one for a gifted amateur. There was much debate about that in the Select Committee, as my hon. Friend knows. The job requires staff who are highly skilled, take a broad view of education and recognise the importance of developing their own learning. We hear much about teachers in those settings, but not enough about the nursery nurses who work with them. Those who have worked in the education sector know that teachers and nursery nurses work as a team, and that the nursery

[Helen Jones]

nurse does not have merely a support role. They also know how much teachers value the nursery nurses who work alongside them.

In practice, nursery nurses are involved in planning, assessment and record keeping, as well as dealing with parents. They are increasingly involved in delivering the national literacy and numeracy strategy. We require a lot from them. Despite that, theirs remains a low-paid, low-status job, with the low pay deriving from that low status. As my hon. Friend the Member for Pavilion said, the average salary of a nursery nurse in education is just over £10,700, and the maximum that she can earn, whatever additional qualifications she may have, is just over £12,400.

It is no wonder that the Select Committee heard repeated evidence of the difficulties of attracting men to work in the sector. There is a gender issue, springing from the view that the job done by a nursery nurse is somehow an extension of women's natural role—that it is just a caring role. As a mother and a teacher with a higher degree in education, I have to say that I would not last five minutes in a nursery. I could not do the job.

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I would last even less time.

Helen Jones: Yes, so it is time that we valued properly the skills of those who do the job.

The Select Committee was adamant about the need to recruit a stable and highly qualified work force. We want to have a qualified teacher in every setting, but we also want a ladder of qualifications to ensure that nursery teachers can progress to a qualification equivalent to that of a qualified teacher. I am convinced that the key is not only to improve the qualifications of those staff who are currently poorly skilled, but to provide a proper career structure for the qualified nursery nurses that we have. At present, even if a nursery nurse obtains an additional qualification such as an advanced diploma in child care and education, it makes no difference to the sort of job that she can do or to the pay she receives. It is that lack of career structure that leads to a high turnover of staff and difficulties in recruiting men into the profession.

Members of the Select Committee were impressed with what we saw in Denmark. Pedagogues are a separate profession, trained to deal with children in the early years and in after-school activities, with a proper, recognised and valued qualification, and a pay scale that is almost on a par with that of qualified teachers. Unless we work towards a similar structure in this country, we shall neither achieve what we want to achieve in early years nor attract and keep the right staff. We should aim to put our best teachers and nursery nurses into the early-years sector, where they can do the most good.

I hope that the Government will consider that proposal seriously. Nothing will happen by telling nursery nurses that they can go on to become teachers. That approach does not value their existing job, nor does it recognise the different skills that they bring to a classroom or an early-years setting. I hope that the Minister will say something about improving the pay of nursery nurses. We need a proper job evaluation scheme to examine what nursery nurses do. I hope that other measures to provide an interim boost to pay will be considered. It says much about our priorities as a country—we are all involved—that when money was given to improve pay in higher and further education, it was given to all staff, whether or not they were lecturers, whereas similar action was not taken in early-years education. Perhaps it is time that we lobbied my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for the money to do that.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will comment on the problem of nursery nurses being replaced in some settings by classroom assistants. I valued the classroom assistants with whom I worked when I was a teacher—in fact, I valued them so much that one of them is my son's godmother. However, they are not the same as qualified nursery nurses and they do not do the same job. The current practice of many local authorities of replacing nursery nurses with unqualified classroom assistants or making nursery nurses take jobs as classroom assistants on lower pay cannot be allowed to continue because, in the long term, that is detrimental to good education.

I am not merely talking about the pay and conditions of one group of people, important though that is. It is crucial to raise standards and to deliver the Government's agenda on social exclusion and poverty. Unless we retain the right staff, we cannot deliver what we want to achieve. I hope that my hon. Friend will take that on board and that, in future, we can raise the profile and status of such key child care workers.

10.6 am

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): It is a rare privilege for me, either here or in the House, to be able to agree with virtually every word that has been spoken. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) on introducing such an important debate. The quality of the contributions from the hon. Members for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper) and for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) emphasised the seriousness and importance of early-years development. The only matter that I question is the title "nursery nurse". It is outmoded, as the hon. Member for Pavilion said. A more comprehensive title is "early-years learning assistant", but I urge the Government and their spin doctors to work out an appropriate title with the Department for Education and Employment.

As a member of an opposition party that has been committed over the years to early-years education, it is important to put on the record our support for the Government's actions. It would be churlish not to recognise the framework that has been put in place during the past four years. I am sure that the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) agrees that nursery vouchers were an abomination. They have now been abolished. We have got rid of the ludicrous idea of creating a market place within early-years education and turned rightly to a comprehensive framework for early years that brings together the voluntary and the state sectors into one organisation.

The early-years and child care partnerships in the North Yorkshire county council area, in which my constituency is situated, have provided opportunities, particularly in some of the remote rural areas, which

until now often had only scant provision. We must recognise that. I am delighted that, during this Parliament, the Government have adopted Liberal Democrat policy on free places for all three and four-year-olds. It is always good to see the Government adopt ideas that we proposed in our manifesto. It shows great strength on the part of the Minister and her colleagues that they have done that.

The provision of places for three-year-olds by 2004, however, is a target that lacks vision. Given the resources at the Government's disposal, and the money that tomorrow the Chancellor will undoubtedly give to all who need it, delaying the introduction of free nursery places for three-year-olds until 2004 is a step that I hope that the Government will revisit. I am not making a cheap point, but I am sure that the Minister will recognise that a significant number of early-years settings are struggling desperately, given the resources that they receive. Despite what the hon. Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands said, there is still a drive by schools—particularly primary and infant schools—to hoover four-year-olds into school settings.

I was especially interested in the Lady's comments about staff-child ratios. If I understood her correctly, she said that the Government were committed to a uniform structure for such ratios. If the Minister will clarify that point, particularly with respect to four-year-olds in schools, it will be a remarkable achievement from this morning's debate. I strongly disagree with the Government that it is acceptable to set rigid ratios in early-years settings that are not schools, but that such ratios should not to apply to schools themselves. If the hon. Lady has advance information of the contents of her party's manifesto, I should be delighted if they could be revealed today. If the uniform structure is included, the Minister will have my wholehearted support.

We should move on from the subject of universality and, rather than simply looking at quantity, we should feel the quality. A satisfying aspect of the debate has been that all those who have spoken have mentioned raising the quality of the settings. Liberal Democrats support that. However, I ask the Minister to clarify what resources are being used to support quality and training. There is clearly confusion about the announcement on 27 February by the Minister and the Secretary of State about the £58 million that was allocated for additional training. Will the Minister confirm that £30 million of that money is coming from Europe, and that such resources have not yet been accessed? If she says that we have the money, that is great, but it is not Government money, it is money from Europe. Although I welcome the money and the fact that we are receiving resources from Europe, I hope that the Minister will clarify where the resources are going.

Will the Minister also clarify how much of the £113.5 million, introduced as part of the comprehensive spending review for 2001 to 2004, will be used for training? [*Interruption.*] I believe that the Minister said that all of it would be used for training, but the press release clearly states that a lot of the money will be allocated for recruitment and advertising. That is a separate budget, and I do not regard it as training.

I understand that some £57.5 million of the £113.5 million announced in the comprehensive spending review is allocated specifically for training. Will the Minister make it clear that 47 per cent. of that—some £27 million—will have to be found from the budgets of local education authorities because of the match funding arrangement? That money is not Government money, but will require local authorities to pay more. The Government cannot claim to be spending such large sums of money when a significant amount—about £90 million—is coming from other sources.

The two press releases show confusion about the Government's training targets. I totally support the Government's ambitious targets to professionalise early-years settings. As hon. Members have said, for far too long it has been accepted that anybody can teach in such settings and that training does not matter. I reject that view, and I hope that we can clarify the matter.

On 27 February, a DFEE press release stated that new resources would provide enough

"to recruit a further 150,000 childcare and early years workers by 2004."

The Minister confirms—she nods from a sedentary position—that the resources referred to are for training, which is welcome. However, the press release that accompanied the comprehensive spending review stated that the Learning and Skills Council's target for training was 230,000 workers for child care and early-years education by 2004. Are those figures coterminous? Is the figure of 150,000 part of the 230,000, or is it 150,000 plus 230,000? If the latter is the case, I congratulate the Minister, because that ambitious target goes beyond my expectations.

I presume that the Learning and Skills Council will provide training for 230,000. Will the Minister put on record what additional resources have been given to the council for that purpose? My investigation reveals that its budget contains no additional resources for that element. If the Learning and Skills Council is to rob Peter to pay Paul, will the Minister be kind enough to let hon. Members know where the cuts will be—in the funding of sixth forms perhaps?

Will the Minister tell us to what standard the training will be done? If the figure is 230,000—we will keep with the Learning and Skills Council target for the moment—to what level will people be trained? Will they be trained to level 2, level 3 or, as many have hinted this morning, do the Government want to see more graduates in early-years settings? A breakdown of the figure would be useful because the level of training often determines the cost. Therefore, one cannot have one without the other.

On the same theme, how will the training costs of people in the voluntary sector be met? The voluntary sector felt enormously let down by the Select Committee's report. It was not that the report did not emphasise the need for training—the voluntary sector, especially the Pre-school Learning Alliance, supports the idea of training—but Government announcements make virtually no mention of resources to reflect the need to help the voluntary sector with training costs.

Staff in virtually every small voluntary sector early-years setting that I visit tell me that they cannot afford to let staff go on training courses because they do not have the wherewithal to cover supply costs. Indeed, there are often no supply teachers or nursery nurses available. I would be grateful if the Minister would tell us how the voluntary sector is to be supported.

[Mr. Phil Willis]

The Select Committee should be applauded for the emphasis that it rightly placed on training in its report. If the figures materialise at the levels that I mentioned earlier, the Government's response marks a turning point in the professionalisation and training of staff in early-years education. However, I need to explore that a little. There appear to be two level 3 NVQs for early-years training. There is the traditional National Nursery Examination Board route, which is tried and tested, and is recognised in the market place. The second principal route is the diploma in child care and education at level 3.

I disagree with some of the comments made earlier—especially those made by the hon. Member for Warrington, North—about the Government's agenda for growing professionals. It is an exciting agenda. People can leave the process at whichever stage they desire, but it creates a real opportunity to grow professionals from inner-city communities, not only in education but throughout the public sector. There will never be enough "middle class" people who want to work in inner-city areas, so we must encourage growth from within. I hope that that is not an either/or situation, but that both options are possible.

Does the Minister agree that, given the present structure, it is virtually impossible to move from level 3 to level 4? A level 4 NVQ in early-years education has been on the cards for some time, but one of the criteria for people moving from level 3 to level 4 in that course is that they must be in a management position. In reality, the vast majority of people who work as nursery nurses are in not management positions but support positions. I do not decry that, as it is right and proper that people should occupy such positions but, if they want to move on, we must remove artificial barriers rather than erect them. Will the Minister outline the Government's policy or vision for progression from level 3 to level 4?

Will the Minister respond to some joined-up thinking? I am sure that she has read the national skills taskforce reports word by word so that they are emblazoned on her heart, especially the significant piece of work by Chris Humphreys published last year. The final report stated that our major problem was with level 3 qualifications. One cannot disagree with that conclusion as, behind Greece and Mexico, this country has the fewest people qualified to that standard in the first world.

The report made two recommendations. The first was that people should have access to training at level 2 throughout their lives and the second was that 16 to 24-year-olds should have access to free level 3 training. My party supports those recommendations and argued during consideration of the Learning and Skills Bill that the Government should support them. The Government rejected them at that time because the Chancellor had yet to unlock his war chest and provide additional resources. Does the Minister intend to press for that level of commitment for training at levels 2 and 3? Many people—certainly in my constituency and the others that I visit—find the costs of training prohibitive, especially in the private sector. Such a commitment from the Government would unlock an enormous amount of potential at the crossover to which I referred and give people free access to child care training.

Another question raised by the national skills task force and many of the national training organisations is how people may receive the right to time off for study. In the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998, the Government committed themselves to giving 16 to 19-year-olds without level 2 qualifications the right to time off for study. An extension of the right to time off for study, if it is paid for by the state, will be of enormous help to the voluntary sector, which desperately needs support in training its staff.

The hon. Member for Pavilion made a tremendous speech about pay. I applaud his critical comments about the Government's policy on pay. He was right. Pay cannot be ignored. We cannot talk about a high-quality early-years setting, valuing people and giving youngsters a flying start, while we pay people at appalling levels. We are not only talking about salaries in the state sector or local authority settings. Pay levels are extremely low in the voluntary sector. I visited two early-years settings, one on the Stockwell estate in Knaresborough, and one on the Knaresborough Road estate in Harrogate, both of which questioned the minimum wage because they could not afford to pay it to their staff. I said, "My goodness, you must afford it, and you must go beyond it." We must tackle that issue. How do the Government intend to ensure that people in the voluntary sector who receive training and develop their expertise are paid appropriately for the job and are not expected simply because they live in rural or poor areas to do the job for the love of it rather than as professionals?

10.26 am

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): I echo the welcome given to the debate. The hon. Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) deserves our congratulations. She has achieved what few could. For some time I have been pressing the Government for a debate on early years on the Floor of the House, and I have written to the Secretary of State on the subject. He tells me that he is discussing the matter with the Leader of the House, and I hope that we shall have such a debate. I am delighted to see the Minister nod.

I should declare an interest in that I have an adorable three-month old son, who is a potential client for early-years education. Despite my enormous respect and affection for you, Mr. Jones, given the choice of being here with you or holding him in my arms, I would have him in my arms. Notwithstanding that, I turn to the job in hand.

There will be little debate or disagreement in the Chamber about the importance of early-years education. Since I became a member of a local education authority many years ago, I have held the view that early-years education is vital, and all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate have made that point. We understand and appreciate the importance of early-years education. The hon. Lady said that it has an impact on lifelong potential, which was an apposite phrase. We also know from Select Committee evidence that early-years education is important, and the hon.

Lady and others are right to say so. We know from academic work on child development and early learning that the first interface and experience of learning and socialisation has a significant impact on subsequent progress. We are all happy with that conclusion.

Provision is, however, patchy. Genuine problems are experienced in securing access to early-years education. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) rightly drew attention to the problem in rural areas, and mentioned north Yorkshire. The same would apply in many parts of Lincolnshire, including my constituency, where access to early-years education is difficult simply because of physical issues, such as travelling, especially from remote and sparsely populated areas, to sources of such education.

The problems of patchy provision are significant and also apply to some inner-city areas and social groups. Take-up of early-years education among some minority groups is much lower than for the majority population.

Parents have different expectations for their children and different requirements for early-years provision. That may be because they have a particular view of what is right for their child or because of their personal circumstances. All sorts of factors impact on people's opinions about what they want. There is no uniform demand; different parents have different demands in different parts of the country.

Parental involvement and the link between home and school are also vital. The hon. Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) referred to the Select Committee's findings in that respect. My discussions with teachers have shown that that is a real problem in many schools and communities. It is an important aspect of addressing the issue of early-years provision, and I shall deal with that in respect of the trends and changes that have taken place under the Government's stewardship.

We also understand that a child's experience should not be merely about learning. Play, for example, is an important feature of the early-years experience. Rigidity and formality in early-years education are not always desirable. The education provided requires a degree of flexibility and informality and, certainly, a high level of diversity. The hon. Member for Moorlands, in an unfortunate remark, talked about damaging competition. I am not entirely happy with the concept of damaging competition. I am not so arrogant as to believe that any single solution is the right one in every circumstance on every occasion. Diversity of provision is needed not only to allow for choice, but, more importantly, to allow for a variety of approaches to develop and prosper in order to identify best practice.

Charlotte Atkins: The damaging competition was drawn to the Select Committee's attention by the Pre-School Learning Alliance, which complained that school settings were taking potential pupils and making pre-schools unviable. That was the damaging competition in question, which the alliance felt was unfair.

Mr. Hayes: Now that the hon. Lady has made her position clearer, I endorse what she says. She is right to say that in many ways there is less choice than there was four years ago, which I shall illustrate later. That is because of the unfair and unreasonable competition from schools, as a result of which the number of alternative providers, especially playgroups and pre-schools, has shrunk dramatically during the past three or four years.

Flexibility and diversity in the sector, to which the hon. Lady alluded, are genuine concerns. It is true that parents want choice, and it is true that diversity has diminished. The facts are clear enough. The Minister will remember that, in November last year, I asked her what had happened to the number of pre-school and playgroup places under this Government. In a clear and frank answer, she told me that there were 30,000 fewer places than in 1997. She will also know—although it was not included in her answer—that the number of providers has reduced dramatically. According to one of the provider organisations, there are nearly 20,000 fewer providers. I would be interested to hear the Minister's precise interpretation of that.

There is a danger that we are producing uniform, vanilla flavoured provision. Perhaps that has been caused by the damaging competition that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Moorlands. The matter needs to be addressed, and I wonder whether the Government's current policy does that sufficiently, as there is no sign yet of that trend being reversed.

There are also issues concerning the diminishing level of parental involvement due to the reduction in community and volunteer provision of an informal nature. The great feature of the system of early-years provision that developed in part by accident—or, perhaps, by evolution—until 1997 was that it guaranteed a high level of self-help, community involvement and volunteering. Many parents, grandparents, and other members of the community became involved who would, perhaps, never have thought of becoming involved in a professional capacity had they not come through such informal routes. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough talked about some of them becoming professionals as a consequence of their first involvement as volunteers, but the current policy puts that in jeopardy.

Volunteer and community involvement is diminishing, but there are also other problems, such as the difficulties of establishing private provision. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion talked about the matter at length, but he did not, perhaps, have enough time to add that it is extremely difficult to set up a private nursery. A considerable amount of bureaucracy is involved. One has to be registered, secure planning permission and find suitable premises—and trying to find suitable premises in which to set up a private nursery in some London boroughs must be a nightmare. It is a lengthy and intimidating process, and many people who might wish to establish private provision are deterred from doing so.

Mr. Lepper: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not suggesting that the highest standards of property, administration and management need not be insisted on for private sector nurseries. His remarks seem to suggest that.

I also hope that the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge the Government's introduction of the neighbourhood child care initiative, which is aimed at providing capital

[Mr. Lepper]

and revenue resources to help set up child care places, particularly in the 20 per cent. most deprived wards in England.

Mr. Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is correct that standards need to be guaranteed. However, I have received correspondence from someone who is very interested and committed to the private sector and who has no particular political prejudice. The letter tells of a group of people who offer early-years provision to small rural communities from a local church. They have been told that they are obliged to have low-level toilets, in other words, separate toilets for staff and children, and other health and safety facilities that are beyond the limits of many premises that are designed for general community use. Those early-years providers were using a building that was, perhaps, also satisfactorily being used for other community activities, but they have been asked to make changes that they cannot afford. That will prevent them from continuing to provide a popular and valuable service that displays good practice in an area where there is, perhaps, no alternative on offer.

A balance needs to be struck with regard to our expectations of voluntary and private sector providers between the hon. Gentleman's desire for regulation and my desire for self-help, entrepreneurship and the widest possible provision. I am sure that the Minister will want to address that.

A recent report by the National Early Years Network addressed the problem of the decline in the number of nursery schools. The Minister will be aware that that report also described the Government as opting for the "lowest common denominator" with regard to early-years provision. The report suggests that up to 100 of England's 513 state nursery schools will close because of damaging competition unless the Government recognise the service that they offer. The National Early Years Network believes that the Government's current policy is a further threat to diversity and choice in nursery schools, in addition to the threat to the voluntary and private sectors.

My next point concerns the complexity of the system. The Minister knows that there are more than 20 separate funding streams for early-years education. It is very difficult for those involved to comprehend the process and simplification is required.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Hayes: I am delighted to see the Minister nodding in agreement.

The number of initiatives, new schemes and pet projects has led to a multiplicity of funding streams, which has created confusion and perhaps incoherence. We must examine that.

Perhaps the greatest indictment of the current regime, and I am angry about it, although I know that one should never become angry or animated in this Chamber, is that now, in 2000-01, more children are being taught in early-years classes of more than 30 than was the case in 1996. That information came from the Library, which stated clearly that, in 2000, 29 per cent. of pupils were taught in early-years classes of more than 30; in 1996 that figure was 27.3 per cent. and in 1997 it was 26.5 per cent. One result of more children being educated in reception classes and the unequal requirements for the pupil-teacher ratio, to which the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough drew attention, is the irony that the Government, who are determined to teach five to seven-year-olds in smaller classes, are teaching an increasing number of younger children in larger classes. We have heard the argument that the younger the child, the more important the direct contact with a teacher, but that is contradicted by the results of the Government's policy. I am entitled to be angry about that, not on my behalf but on behalf of the children, parents and others who feel cheated—

Helen Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hayes: I shall not give way because I have done so a couple of times and I want to conclude.

I am angry on behalf of those who feel cheated by that policy.

I welcome the helpful comments in the Green Paper on the Government's national accreditation scheme. I thought of that excellent idea at the same time as the Department for Education and Employment. I came up with it alone, working by candlelight, and the Department for Education and Employment matched me. I am proud of that very good idea and I welcome it. However, significant problems exist that are not addressed in the Green Paper or in anything that we have heard from the Government. They include lack of flexibility, diversity, choice, volunteering and involvement, over-regulation, bureaucracy, a multiplicity of funding streams and, as the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough said, difficulties in meeting recruitment targets.

Perhaps the Minister will refer to retention when she responds because I believe that there is an issue concerning not only graduate recruitment, but retention. How long do we retain people when they enter early-years teaching? Is that trend improving or worsening and what impact will it have on meeting targets, even with ambitious targets on recruitment? What is the balance between European money and other money? How much of the extra money targeted on the expansion is being taken from the standards fund? The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough asked whether it is new money or whether it is being taken from elsewhere, which is an important point that I want to amplify.

Can the Government assure us that they will address the issue of clarity in the funding of early-years education? We must ensure that people are not disincentivised from establishing voluntary and private nursery provision. Diversity must be allowed to continue to flower because that is the prerequisite for choice in a healthy sector.

I am delighted that we have had today's debate. I hope that the Minister will address some of my questions in her response and write to me about the remainder.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Ms Margaret Hodge): Like others, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands (Charlotte Atkins) on securing the debate. I also congratulate those hon. Members who have participated.

Two weeks ago, I had the good fortune to visit the local authority in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Mr. Lepper). I was impressed by the work that is being done by the partnership there and delighted that it has endeavoured to bring forward the introduction of free nursery education for three-year-olds as well as for four-year-olds in advance of national targets.

This is a period of massive expansion in services. I shall quote two relevant figures. First, we are doubling spending from £1 billion to £2 billion to secure free nursery education for all three and four-year-olds. Secondly, the Department for Education and Employment budget for child care has tripled. Furthermore, we are securing European resources and have secured a new budget of £155 million from the new opportunities fund, which will enable us to create 1 million places for 1.6 million children by 2004.

On the issue that was raised by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), we want to time the implementation of places for three-year-olds in a way that assures us of quality; I took that on board when we decided the timing. We could bring more resources to bear more quickly, but, if we went too fast, it would be difficult to train sufficient people to obtain the quality of nursery education that we want. Child care and early years is the second fastest growing sector in the labour market. We have added 122,000 jobs in the past three years, so we have more than 660,000 people working in it, which demonstrates the extent of the task. On top of that, we have the 150,000 additional jobs alluded to by the hon. Gentleman.

I say to the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) that competition damaged diversity. The legacy that we inherited from the previous Government led to many private and voluntary groups losing four-year-olds to the nursery sector as competition drove schools to grasp children. We have proved that competition damages diversity; co-operation through partnership enhances it.

I shall put to rest the charge that playgroups are experiencing a continuing decline. They were declining as a result of parents' changing demands and the damaging nursery vouchers scheme. It has taken time to turn that round, but, in the last year for which figures are available, nearly 6,000 extra places were available in playgroups. We addressed that through the way in which we distributed money for three-year-olds, the massive resources that we have given to the PLA and the money that we have set aside to help struggling playgroups. I hope that the pre-school sector will play a role both in our new plans for neighbourhood nursery expansion and in our other initiatives.

I do not share the hon. Gentleman's negative and rather pessimistic attitude about the role of the private and voluntary sectors in the expansion of neighbourhood nurseries. I am in constant conversation with them. We are determined that they will play a proper and appropriate role in creating the 900 new or extended nurseries in deprived inner-city areas, giving for the first time high-quality early-years experiences to young children in need.

On the issue of nursery schools, the hon. Gentleman has missed some of what we have been doing. We woke up a long time ago to the threat that nursery schools were under, which is why we gave them specific money to look at new ways in which to extend their services and to remain part of the diverse provision that is on offer.

I have talked about expanding numbers and how we value everyone who works in the early-years sector: nursery nurses, teaching assistants and all others. Far from devaluing them, our policy is about enhancing their esteem and enabling them to participate in training and development. It is not our intention to abolish names. I say again to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough that we are leaving that matter for people to decide locally. If he wants to change the name in Harrogate, he can do so, but the Department for Education and Employment is not taking a view on names. We are investing £350 million in the next three years not only in nursery nursing, but in teaching assistants. Many teaching assistants have the NNEB qualification, so there is some synergy between teaching assistants and nursery nurses.

Our overriding vision of the early years is about greater integration of care, education and health. Many of the traditional structures and jobs will be recreated over time to form a new early-years profession. As the early-years world becomes more integrated, nursery nurses, whom we value and whose contribution we recognise, will become part of a greater offer and fit into that greater structure. I do not want to hold on to past definitions and past professional jealousies and divisions. I want to bring the best of the worlds of care, early-years education and health together to create a new highly valued profession. That period of change has caused some tension in the teaching profession and in the nursery nurse sector.

We are tackling recruitment with energy. This year, we are spending £8 million on a recruitment campaign and we have had 60,000 calls to our telephone line since it started. We contacted the people who had telephoned six months later, so it was not a matter of hitting them when they first contacted us. Interestingly, 79 per cent. have taken action, such as looking for job vacancies, with a further 6 per cent. intending to do so; 32 per cent. have enrolled on training courses; 16 per cent. have found work in the sector; 39 per cent. have applied, attended an interview, or been successful in finding a job as an assistant in a day nursery; and 20 per cent. did the same for nursery nursing. I am proud of our efforts to bring more people into the sector.

On the issue of training, generous money is available. We are using some of the money that is available for learning and skills councils, which have traditionally trained people in early years and child care, but there is extra money from the Government and, I am happy to say, from Europe. I am delighted that we have been able to use that European money. A sum of money also comes through the standards fund—there will be a local authority contribution. The investment is massive. I shall write to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough with the details. I assure him that included in that sum is £7 million from the Government

[Ms Margaret Hodge]

and £15 million from the European social fund. It is all about unblocking the barriers to training, so it deals with issues such as supply cover and course costs. Training is across the private, voluntary and statutory sectors.

I accept entirely the point that was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, North (Helen Jones) about the importance of working with parents, and the additional skills and competences that are required in that regard. We are trying to build those factors into the core competence.

I am proud of the framework that we established in 1999, which recognises 16 qualifications, including the NNEB qualification. We have asked the Learning and Skills Council to train 230,000 people to NVQ levels 2 and 3. We must remember that, according to the 1998 work force survey, 44 per cent. of existing staff have no such qualifications. That is why a pot of money is being provided. It will include funds from the Department for Education and Employment and from elsewhere.

NVQ 4 is an exciting development that will provide a route—as my hon. Friend the Member for Moorlands will recall, we call it a climbing frame—to enable those with an NNEB qualification that is equivalent to NVQ 3 to progress. I do not accept that those with NVQ 3 cannot work in management. We have negotiated with a number of universities to ensure that, with a little underpinning knowledge, those with NVQ 4 can regard it as equivalent to 240 credit accumulation transfer points, which is two years off a degree. Our Green Paper makes it clear that, by 2004, we hope to be working with 1,000 people towards establishing a new senior early-years practitioner route that will be just below degree level and that will enable the desired careers progression for those who enter at NNEB level.

On pay scales, which a number of hon. Members mentioned, there is the single status agreement, which presumably takes account of such issues, given that it was based on a job evaluation scheme. We have asked partnerships to report on pay in this year's plans and we will see what comes of that. Of course, pay is determined locally and we must work hard in the coming years to raise the status and pay of early-years workers.

We recognise that ratios in reception classes are an issue. We have said that we want a ratio of 1:15. We have invested money to ensure that, in this Parliament, the 60 most deprived LEAs can establish such a ratio and recruit more staff through the standards fund. We need to make further progress throughout the country, but there is nothing to prevent any LEA from making ratios a priority; all LEAs have plenty of additional resources to enable them to do so.

In terms of gender, we have a very distorted early-years work force. Much of that distortion relates to status and to equal pay for equal value. At the moment, only 2 per cent. of the work force consists of men. Our target is that, by 2004, 4 per cent. of those working in the early-years sector will be men. We have also set targets in respect of ethnicity, disability and age. The work force tends to be very young and we want to encourage older people.

There has never been a more exciting time in the world of early-years education and child care. We take to heart many of the issues that hon. Members have raised and I hope that they will accept that we are making progress. We want to work with the private and voluntary sectors through the successful local partnerships that we have created to provide the best start for young children, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire, Moorlands said, makes all the difference to outcomes in their adult lives.

Neurology

10.59 am

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I suspect that this is the first debate on neurology in the House for many years, and possibly ever. I have not double-checked that with the Library, but the House does not seem to have given much consideration to services provided to people with neurological conditions. On the day that I received notice from the Speaker's Office that I had secured the debate after several weeks of applications, I was delighted to hear that the Secretary of State for Health had declared the Government's intention to draw up a national service framework for long-term health conditions, with a special focus on neurological conditions.

Three million people in the United Kingdom suffer from neurological conditions—only heart disease and cancer affect more people—and one in five of all admissions to medical wards are accounted for by acute neurological cases. Despite those facts, neurology has been something of a Cinderella service in the national health service—in part because until recently little could be done beyond diagnosis and amelioration of symptoms. However, that is changing, so now is a good time to have a debate in this Chamber and to turn the spotlight on neurological services with the aim of raising them to the standard of the very best NHS services. We need to improve the standard of excellence in neurology across the whole country, so that everyone has access to good-quality services on a level playing field.

Neurological conditions result from damage caused by illness or accident to the brain, spinal column or nerves. They have many causes, many of which are not yet known, and they affect young and old, rich and poor, men and women and people from all cultures and ethnicities. Some neurological conditions, such as epilepsy, are lifelong and people can experience their onset at any time of life; some, such as cerebral palsy, are present from birth; some, such as muscular dystrophy, commonly appear in early childhood; and some, such as Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease, affect mainly older people. Certain conditions have a sudden onset owing to accident or illness, such as head injury, stroke or cancers of the brain and spine. Neurodegenerative conditions, such as multiple sclerosis and motor neurone disease, can affect people at any age and often cause a slow deterioration of a person's quality of life and ability to live independently.

Of those conditions, some can be life threatening, most severely affect people's quality of life and many cause long-term disability. Their impact often extends far beyond the individual concerned, because they have knock-on effects on family members and others who have a caring role. Caring for someone with a debilitating illness is often such an onerous task that carers have to give up their own employment. That, added to the inability of the person with the condition to continue to be economically active, can have a devastating impact on a family's quality of life, financial circumstances and long-term well-being.

Today's debate is not about the needs of carers, but we should bear it in mind that they carry a massive burden, especially where neurological conditions are involved, and their role is often unstated, unrecognised and undervalued. It is important to say, however, that some of the Government's initiatives on carers' grants and respite care are making a difference to many of our constituents.

Neurological conditions are poorly understood. Public awareness is low, even of relatively common conditions such as epilepsy. Many rare conditions are largely unheard of and poorly understood, even by non-specialist health professionals. That can lead to problems with the quality of initial diagnosis and the care pathways down which people are directed.

My interest in the topic has developed over the past three and a half years. It started with my constituency mailbag, through helping constituents who were battling to be prescribed beta interferon for their relapsing-remitting MS. I approach the debate from a Back Bencher's perspective, having been struck by the patchiness of the provision of services across the country. There are wide variations in access to services, not only for MS, but for the whole spectrum of neurological conditions.

That interest led me to undertake a survey of NHS trusts last year. I am grateful for the support given to me by the Neurological Alliance, especially Nikki Joule, and for the advice of the Association of British Neurologists in drafting the survey. Their support and advice ensured that the information gained was useful and could inform the debate about how neurological services might be better provided.

I found wide regional variations in access to neurological services—it is yet another postcode lottery. Two out of three patients wait for more than 13 weeks to see a neurologist and the average waiting time in non-urgent cases is 25 weeks. In 44 per cent. of hospitals, patients wait for as long as six months for an out-patient appointment; the worst waits to see a consultant neurologist lasted up to two years. My survey also found that six out of 10 hospitals could not offer a 24-hour response to a neurological emergency. Yet early diagnosis and treatment can make all the difference to a person's chances of recovery and a better quality of life.

The reason that access to services is so patchy is quite simple: there is a lack of capacity, with not enough neurologists to meet demand. I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that a key bottleneck is the shortage of training places, which are needed to expand the work force and fill vacancies for neurologists throughout the country. My survey found that, on average across England and Wales, there is one neurologist for every 165,641 people. In Wales, the south-west, the north-west and the north-east, the number of neurologists is less than one per 200,000 people. Recently, a neurologist told me:

> "If the UK was to have the same provision of neurologists for the population as the United State there would have to be 2,000 consultants; for the same provision as Europe (excluding the UK obviously) 1,000 would be required. In fact we have just over 200 (allowing for part time academic posts etc). Quite how this situation has been allowed to go on for decades is beyond me; we appear to be where the US and Europe were at the end of WW2. The shortage will take decades to correct."

It is hardly surprising that most patients' groups to which I spoke said that, if it does nothing else, the national service framework must address the serious shortage of neurological consultants. The Association of British Neurologists and the Neurological Alliance

[Mr. Paul Burstow]

recommend that the number of neurologists must rise to a minimum of between 600 and 700—roughly double the current number—if the service is to start to improve.

Access to specialists can make an enormous difference to how an individual copes with diagnosis, especially as the specialist can explain the progression of the condition and the options for treatment. That shortage, however, masks a deeper problem: the shortage of sub-specialists. There are only 60 consultants in the whole country who have specific expertise in Parkinson's disease, and fewer than 40 who specialise in treating MS. The rarer the condition, the scarcer the expertise. I wonder, for example, how many neurologists specialise in progressive supranuclear palsy.

In neurology, access to specialist centres is a key way to make effective use of NHS resources and give patients the chance to receive the best possible care. I hope that the national service framework will address that. The current out-of-area treatment scheme, OATS, is often an obstacle to appropriate treatment. Many trusts have suspended specialist procedures unless they are under contract or being paid for privately. Many patients who have been referred to specialists under OATS are put on waiting lists that continue to lengthen.

Some patients' home health authorities have offered to pay for operations, but trusts refuses to perform them because there is no mechanism for funds to be transferred to them. Occasionally, trusts agree to undertake an operation, but only after much correspondence and often when hon. Members and others have lobbied on the patient's behalf. Operations have been suspended not because of lack of funds, but because of bureaucracy. I hope that that problem can be resolved, because it has put services at risk, and they are being run down. Last April, the Department of Health announced a review of OATS. It will help if the Minister can shed some light on the timing of that review and the publication of its results, so that we can see what reforms are planned and what issues are to be addressed.

In anticipation of the national service framework, I should like to raise a few issues. First, the Department of Health has asked the Medical Research Council for trials to test the treatment of Parkinson's disease through deep brain stimulation therapy. Will the regional specialised commissioning groups have complete responsibility for commissioning specialised neurosurgery? Will that be governed or monitored nationally and will it be reflected in the national service framework in future? Is there a timetable for the trials and will they account for all deep brain stimulation therapy during the trial period? Will those who opt out of them still have access to deep brain stimulation therapy? People with Parkinson's disease and the Parkinson's Disease Society of the United Kingdom will appreciate clarity on those issues.

Secondly, a few years ago, Scope conducted research into the effects of ageing on people with cerebral palsy and found that few sufferers visited their doctors for regular check-ups. The majority had not seen a consultant since leaving school and had not seen a physiotherapist for at least five years. General practitioners, physiotherapists, social workers and occupational therapists are often insufficiently familiar with cerebral palsy and, in short, many sufferers simply give up on treatment in the belief that they cannot be helped. That underlines the fact that the national service framework must address social and primary care as much as secondary and tertiary services. Primary care begins from the time of the initial referral and, alongside social services, has a long-term role after diagnosis.

The third issue relates to multiple sclerosis, which originally drew my attention to neurology. The Minister will know that new and emerging treatments can slow the progress of neurological conditions and may pave the way for even more effective treatments. For most people with multiple sclerosis, the national service framework offers the prospect of improved multi-disciplinary working and enforceable standards of service. However, it will not deliver the improvements that one group is looking for. It appears likely that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will deny access to disease modifying drugs to all or most people with multiple sclerosis who would benefit. The national service framework holds out the promise of better services for such people once they are disabled, but does not offer the hope of a brake on the progression of their disease.

At 3 o'clock on the day before the Christmas holidays began last year, after most people had gone home to start celebrating, NICE smuggled out an announcement, 10 days before its pre-programmed date for the release of the decision from its appraisal committee, which effectively kicked into the long grass its decisions on beta interferon. We will not know now whether beta interferon and copaxon will be available on the NHS until July at the earliest, and a final resolution will probably not emerge until even later. That is not acceptable. I hope that the Minister will look closely at the conduct of NICE on that day in December and its behaviour in respect of assessment of treatments. It appears to have ignored the voice of the patients, who have not been allowed to come to the table and express an opinion.

Fourthly, the Minister will know of the value that patients and patients' groups place on access to specialist nurses. The Multiple Sclerosis Society and the Parkinson's Disease Society contribute to the funding of a growing network of specialist nurses. That network should force us to examine how such nurses are supported, trained and funded in the NHS. While it is welcome that charities make contributions to the funding of such posts—in many cases, they fund them fully—in the long run, the NHS, in the context of neurology, must properly support the service.

The Department is addressing the recruitment and training of specialist nurses and considering how to ensure that commissioning bodies take such matters into account. Will the Minister say what progress has been made in the review of specialist nurses? When is that review likely to be concluded? Will it be affected in any way—I hope that it will not—by the national service framework? Time is pressing and clarity is needed sooner rather than later. The national service framework, which will be published in 2005, is welcome, but too far in the future.

Fifthly, I have received strong representations from several groups in respect of pain management in the NHS, about which, as the Minister may recall, the House had a debate last year—although it was held late in the evening and was therefore almost as well attended

as today's debate. The issue is important, but not often debated in the House. The point has been made to me forcefully that chronic pain should be included within the national service framework. Given the prevalence of chronic pain in the UK, it is surprising how poorly co-ordinated services remain. At best, a person can hope to be referred to a pain management course after a long wait; at worst, he can find himself being passed around the specialists and offered a range of different medications on a trial and error basis until something turns up that might alleviate the pain.

My final point relates to the prevalence of neurological conditions generally. I mentioned at the beginning of my contribution that 3 million people in this country suffer from neurological conditions, but the truth is that we do not know precisely how many there are, because no method exists for recording the diagnosis of neurological conditions. There is no disease register or systematic means of capturing such information, even though that information would be invaluable to effective research and deepening our understanding of such conditions, and must be central to effective commissioning of services at a local level. As a starting point, the national service framework must include better recording of prevalence in the population, so that we can allocate resources according to need.

Patients' groups have an important role to play in the development of all national service frameworks, not least in the context of the national service framework for long-term conditions. Umbrella organisations play a key role in that work by bringing together the disparate interests that a national service framework often covers. I suspect that that will be the case when the Government and the Department begin their detailed work on the national service framework. The Secretary of State has given a welcome indication of willingness to provide extra support for umbrella organisations, to facilitate their task of engaging in robust and real dialogue with Government, but it would be useful to know whether the Department and Secretary of State would be minded to provide additional resources to facilitate the involvement of non-governmental organisations in the preparation of national service frameworks. That would be helpful to the Neurological Alliance and other Non-governmental organisations with interests in other national service frameworks.

As the national service framework under discussion is likely to cut across already existing national service frameworks—especially those covering older people—it will be important to have cross-sector interests represented in the process to deal with those concerns. We must make sure that there are no gaps between the various national service frameworks. It will be interesting to hear how the Government will ensure that such gaps are not created.

I understand that the national service framework is unlikely to be published until 2004, and that it is intended that it will be implemented from 2005. It is essential that the Government's commitment to producing that national service framework in no way derails existing work that will benefit people with neurological conditions. I shall cite three examples. First, in a debate a couple of years ago, the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), referred to the production of a compendium of good practice for GPs and primary care groups on the commissioning of neurological services. Publication of that compendium is a year overdue; when will it be published? It will be an invaluable aid to primary care trusts and others who have a responsibility for commissioning, and the sooner it is being used, the better.

Secondly, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence is to begin work on clinical management guidelines for MS for publication in 2002. I have made some representations about the pace at which NICE intends to proceed. Given the range that must be covered, it is important that its work is not lost within the work on the national service framework. Thirdly, I have referred to the Department considering specialist nurses in neurology; it will be useful if the Minister can say when that work will be promulgated.

The national service framework and the other work that is in train within the Department are welcome. I introduced today's debate because the findings from surveys show that we have a long way to travel to reach the standard of service that the Government and all hon. Members want for people with neurological conditions. We need a people-centred approach that develops services around individuals and builds on the ideas in the national health service plan. We must ensure that an appropriate multi-disciplinary range of services follow people throughout their lives, and that services are at all times tailored to be appropriate to their needs and those of their carers.

11.21 am

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) not only on securing the debate, but on setting out the reasons behind it so clearly and excellently. I am disappointed that there has not been an enormous Back-Bench contribution to the debate, but his speech makes up for that.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): It is quality that counts.

Dr. Brand: It is.

My hon. Friend has made many valuable points, but I shall concentrate on a few. The national service framework is welcome, but I hope that it is not an alibi for not proceeding with the planning and thinking surrounding the diagnosis and treatment of neurological conditions. Over the past few years, the world of neurology has moved on tremendously. Some 30 years ago, when I trained, cerebral doctors who seldom handled patients considered it to be an intellectual exercise. That was probably appropriate because there was little that they could do.

Neurologists tend to be people who wear extremely expensive suits and silk ties and spend much of their time in Harley street. In fact, the man who taught me the Babinsky reflex, which is the awful test where doctors tickle the sole of a person's foot to see which way the toe goes, said that the only implement that should be used to carry out such a test satisfactorily was a Bentley key. Since then, I have never aspired to neurology, or to a Bentley, given that I did not think that owning such a key was appropriate.

[Dr. Brand]

My hon. Friend was right to point out that neurology covers a wide range of diagnoses. Neurological illness can result from catastrophic events, accidents, intercranial bleeds, nerve injuries during accidents and conditions that are either contracted in utero or around birth, such as cerebral palsy. Indeed, some conditions that appear in the first six to 12 months after birth are difficult to distinguish from the effects of immunisations going wrong. Many neurological diseases are neurodegenerative diseases, such as Parkinson's disease, MS, motor neurone disease and the big condition of Alzheimer's, which is not a uniform disease and requires diagnosis.

It is important to recognise that, although much more can now be done about neurological conditions, it is no good taking a scatter-gun approach to treatment. A precise diagnosis is required. In that sense, we have progressed tremendously over the past 10 to 20 years. It is no longer acceptable for a condition such as epilepsy to be treated by taking the approach that might be taken in cookery: trial and error, starting with a dollop of phenobarbitone, going on to a dollop of epilem, and over five years a suitable drug regime might be found. It is important to have precise diagnoses and not to rely solely on pharmaceutical intervention. Neurosurgery now has a significant place, but only an appropriately skilled neurophysician can establish which patients are suitable for treatment and the form that that treatment should take.

My hon. Friend is right to point out that we are woefully short of capacity in diagnosis and treatment. Liberal Democrat Members have highlighted not only neurologists but the role of nurse practitioners. I commend to the Minister the role of nurse practitioners, who should be funded more meaningfully. One of our practice nurses trained as a nurse practitioner in epilepsy services, but it is difficult to secure meaningful funding for her, so that she may use the expertise that she has acquired.

Much of the work that nurse practitioners might do can also be done by nurse assistants under supervision. I shall return to that matter when I deal with the long-term care proposals that are being considered in another place.

In addition to nurse practitioners, in providing treatment, we desperately need more speech therapists. Many neurological conditions have as sequelae significant communication problems. Speech therapy has moved a long way in targeting treatment for particular conditions. It now involves not only speech therapy in the traditional sense but access to modern communication aids. A lot of electronic equipment can now be extraordinarily helpful to people with degenerative neurological diseases, but it remains hard to get hold of. When I first became involved in the matter, we had regional funds for environmental aids. That budget has now been dispersed, and in dispersal seems to have been virtually lost. I am sure that all hon. Members encounter cases in which people are denied what should be standard equipment to help with communication.

In addition to speech therapists, it is important to have access to psychologists who understand degenerative neurological conditions. Some conditions can be difficult to diagnose, especially degenerative brain diseases such as Alzheimer's or Korsacov's encephalopathy. The different causes of the disease are not always clear except through expert assessment such as neuropsychology.

Once a diagnosis has been made, patients should have access to a physiotherapist with a special interest in neurology, which is especially important for children suffering from cerebral palsy. It is not good enough for a small child to be assessed once and to be referred again only three years later. Much of a physiotherapist's work could be carried out by physiotherapist assistants or other carers, but expert supervision is required to check that the correct treatment is given.

I am enormously concerned about the Government's definition of what treatment is allowable under the new long-term care regulations. The Government do not recognise how the world has moved on. Care is now delivered through therapeutic teams. They may be headed by a registered nurse, but much of the work may be carried out by another health professional. It is ridiculous that only time spent by the registered nurse qualifies for funding through the national health service, not work carried out by care assistants, whether with children or with those at the other end of the age spectrum. I hope that the Government will think again about their definition because it makes no intellectual or practical sense.

We have not yet mentioned the great strides forward in diagnostic imaging. In the past, my neurological colleague with his sharp suit and Bentley key was required to perform all sorts of magic—there was also a test involving gold coins, but I have forgotten what it was. We can now be somewhat more scientific and specific by using appropriate scanning techniques. However, we still rely too heavily on charities and voluntary organisations to equip communities and district general hospitals with the necessary imaging equipment. Throughout the country, many scanners that were bought with funds raised through an extraordinary amount of hard voluntary work are coming to the end of their useful lives.

I hope that the Government will conduct an audit of available equipment to determine whether it is available in the strategic places in which it is required. Access to good scanning equipment is just as important as access to good cancer services or cardiology; indeed, scanning equipment is necessary for those services. There is no evidence at present of a sensible national or even regional framework for ensuring that such facilities are available.

I present a good example of how things have moved forward. There used to be a rare treatment for a strange condition called torticollis that gave one a wry neck. What I am now doing is difficult for the *Hansard* writers to report, but the condition gives one an uncontrollable twitch. It is treatable through injections of botulism. It is amazing that that treatment is carried out predominantly in the private sector for cosmetic reasons—to get rid of wrinkles—yet in the national health service, there is an enormous waiting list for operations for genuinely distressing conditions.

I hope that the Minister will consider what is available and what can be done within the national health service framework. We should ensure that people who rely on

the national health service for treatment of real conditions have priority over those who simply opt for "botulism-injection tea parties", as I recently saw them described, attended for three months by middle-aged ladies who want to have their wrinkles controlled. Personally, I like wrinkles, as they suggest a degree of experience.

The abolition of extra-contractual referrals has had a dramatic effect. In the past, money would follow the patient and specialist centres would vie for that patient. The mechanism ensured that patients were referred and accepted. The out-of-area treatment scheme, which replaced ECRs, does not do the same job. Payments are often delayed. One may have to guess how many rare conditions are likely to occur in one's district and place a contract that may be unnecessary.

When some years ago I challenged the Secretary of State on the effect of the introduction of the OATS arrangements, he assured me that doctors could still refer patients anywhere within the United Kingdom. Doctors can do that, of course, but the hospital to which a patient is referred is under no obligation to accept the referral. Hospitals are increasingly turning down patients because they are not sure that they will be funded for the work.

A process such as neurosurgery for epilepsy, for example, is complicated and expensive. The diagnosis must be firm, the lesion causing the epilepsy must be identified through specialist techniques and the patient must be prepared psychologically for such a dramatic operation. On the other hand, the results of such surgery can be dramatically good. Patients may be able to come off a complex drug regime and begin to function anew—they may, in a sense, wake up. Those operations are worth while, therefore, but the few centres that perform them are working to capacity and unwilling to expand and to increase their work load, owing to the uncertainty over funding.

I pay tribute to carers and patients themselves. Doctors, like all other health professionals, are good at networking and learning about conditions in which they have an interest. That is positive and useful, but it is high time that patients and carers do more networking, so that they become aware of the treatment available and adjust their expectations. Patients with neurological conditions have for too long accepted that they are suffering from a Cinderella condition and that they cannot do much about it, apart from swallowing a few tablets. Much can be done, however, and through patient education and empowerment we can hope for a change in the present position, which is very much top down. Patients may begin to make reasonable and achievable demands, which are currently held back because of the restraint on resources.

11.39 am

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): It is always a privilege to speak after my neighbour across the western Solent, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand), who brings his professional expertise, wisdom and plain common sense to debates.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on securing this timely and important debate, which has produced speeches of high quality. I congratulate him, too, on the amount of work that he has done in bringing the matter to our attention. I secured from his website a copy of his report, dated 3 January, on the neurological service in England. It is a real achievement for an ordinary Back Bencher, who does not enjoy a great deal of administrative support, to provide such a high quality document, backed up by a significant amount of research.

I am glad that the debate so far has concentrated not only on neurologists, because the matter goes beyond their numbers. The hon. Members for Isle of Wight and for Sutton and Cheam referred at length to the failure of the out-of-area treatment scheme. That system is log-jammed, so an increase in neurologists alone will not necessarily address the problem. The OATS arrangements deserve attention.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight drew attention to speech therapists, thereby raising the question of rehabilitation in general and of strokes and similar conditions in particular. If patient outcomes are to improve, such specialist provision must be made. All the evidence suggests that establishing specific rehabilitation centres and facilities is the best way to achieve that.

As for the provision of drug treatments, I share the concern that was expressed by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam with respect to beta interferon. I entirely agree with his analysis of the history and the behaviour of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. It is 19 months to the day since NICE was asked to investigate and appraise the situation as regards beta interferon. On 6 February, at Health questions, we were told that guidance was expected from NICE in November; by that date, it will be 26 months since the matter was referred to the organisation. In the announcement that foreshadowed the creation of NICE, we were told that it would provide a mechanism by which the arrival of new drugs in the health service could be speeded up. In that role, however, the body has not covered itself in glory.

We are told that more economic modelling is required by NICE. I am not against that, in principle; one of the things that we do badly in this country is clinical appraisal, which should be accompanied by economic modelling. Many clinicians agree with that. They sometimes take a cynical view of the media-to-market approach—as they term it—of some pharmaceutical companies, and would like there to be a much more robust means of testing and appraising the value of drugs. However, I question whether, when the process has already been going on for so long, we should consider yet more evidence for beta interferon, given that it is no longer a new drug. Prescribing habits in the United States and in continental Europe are much wider than they are here. It is legitimate to ask how many patients who would have benefited from beta interferon have lost their window of opportunity as a result of the delays.

Dr. Brand: Is it not essential that, when a decision is made about making a drug available, the economic modelling should include the effects outside the national health service, for instance on benefits and the provision of social services? Would the hon. Gentleman agree that that economic modelling should be done by the Government collectively rather than by NICE?

Mr. Barry Jones (in the Chair): Order. Both hon. Gentlemen are on the edge of being out of order on this issue.

Mr. Swayne: There is much force in what the hon. Member for Isle of Wight says.

To return to the subject of neurological conditions, will the Minister answer the question posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) on 6 February, which the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham), failed to answer—why is copaxone being treated as an interferon when it is chemically and pharmacologically different? It has been tested for eight years and has reduced relapses by 70 per cent. In addition, what stage has been reached with respect to treatments for Alzheimer's disease, especially donepezil and rivastigmine. When will we know the outcome of an expensive trial that has been conducted in the west midlands with respect to donepezil?

I shall not dwell on Conservative policy in respect of NICE for fear of you bringing me sharply to order, Mr. Jones. However, we want a radically different approach to the problem. We want an exceptional medicines fund, with prescribing criteria laid down by a committee serving that fund. We want to remove from NICE's responsibility consideration of what we would regard as the availability of overall resources. We believe that that is not a decision for NICE. It is a political matter, and a Minister should decide what is available for the exceptional medicines fund.

I come now to another issue raised by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam concerning the provision of specialist nursing, and I want to illustrate a point that he made. Currently, one of the log-jams in the system is a significant shortage of specialist nurses. I have in my possession a letter from Mr. Palmer, the consultant neurosurgeon at Derriford hospital, dated 17 November. In the letter, he warns his colleagues about the effects of having to devote time and resources to train overseas nurses to fill the vacancies. He stresses that

"All elective admissions have been cancelled until probably at least February."

He wrote that in November. The letter continues:

"The neurosurgical unit can no longer provide a secondary referral service for Derriford Hospital. We will not accept direct emergency admissions from GP practices or receive referrals from the Accident and Emergency staff directly. Only tertiary referrals will be accepted i.e. from an admitting consultant team. We will provide 24 hours notice of return to secondary care but need the hospital's support to take these patients back into the admitting consultant's service without delay. When patients are not accepted back further emergency referrals will only be accepted on the agreement to swap with our blocked bed. If this is not possible the only option would be a transfer to another neurosurgical unit."

In respect of transfer to another unit, his letter states:

"We know that the neurological units in Bristol, Southampton and Oxford are in similar crisis precluding transfer of care."

If that is the situation in the acute neurological service, it requires urgent attention. Perhaps the Minister, in her response, will say what the Government have in mind.

If I were to summarise and simplify the report produced by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam, its key feature is that it draws attention to unacceptable waiting times for neurological disciplines. Its principle recommendation is that we must increase the number of neurologists by 60 per cent. That might by true, but I have a slightly different focus. We are increasingly moving toward evidence-based medicine and so my focus, along with that of many other commentators, is on patient outcomes rather than becoming fixated by our input into that process. Of course, inputs are important because they largely determine patient outcomes. Nevertheless, it is important to focus primarily on outcomes rather than on inputs.

An interesting fact that comes out of the hon. Gentleman's report is that in Denmark there are 100 neurologists for every 1 million of the population, in the United States there are 40, in Germany there are 12, but in the United Kingdom there are only six. The question that immediately occurs to me is: what about patient outcomes for the neurological conditions to which those figures relate? Why is there this extraordinary number of neurologists in Denmark? Are patient outcomes in Denmark much better than in the US or Germany, which has only 12 neurologists per 1 million of the population? With half their number of neurologists we do not compare too badly with Germany, which poses some interesting questions.

There is a nice line in the report when the hon. Gentleman refers to the British Brain and Spine Foundation stating that UK patients are half as likely to wake up with a neurological condition and find that there is a neurosurgeon at the bottom of their bed than they are in the rest of the developed world. To my mind, the key question is not who is standing at the bottom of the bed, but whether one is likely to wake up. Patient outcome is the key issue, so the discipline of the consultant who is responsible for care does not matter to the patient, so long as he or she is capable of delivering the best care available. It may be that it is vital that a neurosurgeon or neurologist should be at the bottom of the bed, but that is an issue about which we must acquire more evidence.

My conversations with neurologists have revealed that we function differently in the United Kingdom. Traditionally, neurologists have avoided dealing with the commonest causes of brain failure, be they stroke, dementia or sequelae of head injury; geriatricians and other physicians have made up the shortfall. The conditions upon which neurologists have traditionally had a therapeutic impact are epilepsy, Parkinson's disease and other rare disorders such as myasthenia gravis and post-infectious demyelinating polyneuropathy. I read about an hon. Member who had an episode of myasthenia gravis, although I must say that he has subsequently functioned as an outstanding parliamentarian, so he is clearly over that.

The diagnostic skills of neurologists have been useful traditionally in the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease and peripheral neuropathies, spongiform encephalopathy and a host of rare and esoteric disorders. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight drew attention to the fact that there has been a great increase in our ability to deal with many of those conditions in the past 10 years and longer. I know that, for patients, those conditions are not esoteric at all. However, many neurologists say that, in dealing with some of those conditions, their impact is quite limited, and neurology is predominantly an out-patient discipline.

One of the complaints made by neurologists performing that out-patient role is that many of the referrals that they receive from general practitioners arise because the GPs are themselves least comfortable with their own neurological diagnostic skills. Consequently, many neurologists find their case load taken up by people suffering from tension headaches and those who believe that their symptoms are indicative of a brain tumour or some other disease. Perhaps addressing the diagnostic skills of general practitioners would have an impact on at least some of the out-patient problem. I hope that, within primary care groups, there will be an exchange of patients, and a cross-referral between general practitioners who are becoming more specialist in particular conditions. That might relieve some of the pressure on secondary care referrals to hospitals.

Dr. Brand: The hon. Gentleman is confident that general practitioners can become more expert, but he must recognise that, if we are to meet the Government's own standards in accessing general practitioners, we need an extra 10,000. Giving them an extra job in this area will not solve the overall problems in the national health service.

Mr. Swayne: I acknowledge what the hon. Gentleman says and the difficulties facing general practitioners involved in primary care, and I recognise the need for more of them to meet the demands of the national plan. We are now talking about the huge shortage of neurologists, which raises the question of which issue to address first, or which should be given the greatest leverage for an improved patient outcome.

Most patients with serious conditions, for example, multiple sclerosis or motor neurone disease, are relatively easy to diagnose on clinical grounds alone. As the hon. Gentleman said, we now use a great deal of high-tech equipment to confirm such diagnoses. About 40 years ago, it might have cost just a few pounds to diagnose a multiple sclerosis sufferer. Given the Gentleman's remarks when describing his teachers, it might be more appropriate to say that it would have cost a few guineas all those years ago to diagnose someone suffering from multiple sclerosis. Now, it might cost as much as £1,000, using high-tech equipment. It is legitimate for us to ask by how much our skill and ability in diagnosing these conditions has improved.

I was particularly enthusiastic about paragraph 3.8 of the report in which the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam drew attention to the importance of speed of diagnosis and stated:

"A large number of neurologists and stroke physicians ... are now saying treating stroke as a medical emergency the way a heart attack is would improve survival after stroke, reduce post attack depression ... and the risk of being institutionalised."

That bears out what my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) was told when he visited the Royal Hallamshire hospital on Friday last week.

We all understand that a heart attack is an emergency and requires rapid treatment. The public also understand that, as do ambulance men and hospitals, but does the same understanding exist, especially among the public, about strokes, which also require swift treatment? All district general hospitals have coronary care units and they are successful in terms of patient outcome, but not all district general hospitals have stroke units, although experience shows that they can also achieve successful results.

Whether stroke units need to be staffed by neurologists or geriatricians, as they largely are now, is not a matter on which I have the expertise to make a judgment. It may be right to encourage a greater supply of neurologists to take on that work, but I would want to see the clinical evidence of improved patient outcome before huge resources were diverted to such an end.

I come to the national service framework announced by the Government, which, significantly, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam called for on 3 January. It was a notable success for him to have secured such a swift response from the Government, and one that he deserves.

We favour a national service framework, but we have some reservations and want to ensure that it does not become over-prescriptive. However, we are confident that it will improve matters. Hon. Members are entirely right when they say that the national service framework, which may be in place in 2005, must not be allowed to delay development in the meantime. There is a tendency to produce a report, put a framework in place and believe that the problem has been dealt with. I remind the Chamber of Florence Nightingale's words when she drew a problem to the attention of a senior officer in the Crimea who assured her that it was unnecessary for her to trouble herself with it because there was already a report on it. Her response was that in her experience such reports were not necessarily self-implementing.

12.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I confess that I am too young to recall the words of Florence Nightingale, but I congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne) on a polished close to his speech.

It is customary to congratulate an hon. Member on securing a debate, but the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) should also be congratulated on the timing of his thoughtful debate. I agree that it is the quality and not the quantity of hon. Members in the Chamber that matters.

Hon. Members have raised a number of specific issues. If, inadvertently, I do not provide specific answers, I shall certainly return to them in more detail. However, I was somewhat surprised that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam referred to a national crisis in neurological services. I do not agree that there is such a crisis, but I accept that there are problems, which are more severe in some areas than in others. Our stated aim is that the worst services must make progress to deliver the best, but that will take time.

Hon. Members will be aware that the NHS was in survival mode for many years, but we are turning the corner and it is now in expansion mode. There is record investment and we are working towards shorter waiting lists. In many ways, the debate has illustrated why we need national frameworks and coherence in respect of the services that we deliver. It has also demonstrated that we need an expansion in staff. Virtually every hon. Member mentioned shortages in certain areas and the practical problems that arise when nurses are recruited and trained as specialists.

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[Ms Gisela Stuart]

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam has made a number of points about waiting times, and it is important that I clarify them for the record. He said in January that waiting times for appointments are horrendous—up to two years—but that is not the case. For in-patients, the maximum wait is 18 months. Since 1997, no patient in England has waited more than 18 months for neurology treatment. The average in-patient waiting time in England is 9.48 weeks. The vast majority of out-patients—about 95 per cent.—are seen within 26 weeks and the average waiting time in England is 10.6 weeks.

The hon. Gentleman also said in January that only 20 per cent. of hospitals are able to give waiting times of less than three months for an out-patient appointment to see a consultant and that 44 per cent. of hospitals make patients wait longer than 26 weeks. Again, that is not the case. More than 85 per cent. of hospitals are able to give appointments within 13 weeks.

Dr. Brand *rose—*

Mr. Burstow *rose—*

Ms Stuart: May I finish my point about waiting times before giving way?

According to the press release that was issued by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam, the number of neurologists in England and Wales would have to be increased by 60 per cent. to reduce waiting times to meet the Government's target of three months. However, it is not clear to which target the press release refers. There are two different targets in respect of the three-month maximum waiting time: one for in-patients and another for out-patients. The NHS plan refers to reducing the maximum waiting time for out-patient appointments to three months by the end of 2005, and reducing the maximum waiting time for in-patient treatment to three months by 2008. We are confident that those targets are achievable.

Mr. Burstow: I will look at the figures that the Minister has given today with some interest, but I hope that she will accept that the report is a faithful representation of the results of a survey of NHS trusts. The information was not converted or altered—we merely reported what we found.

Ms Stuart: I accept that the hon. Gentleman desires to do nothing other than act on the basis of his findings. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for New Forest, West by congratulating the hon. Gentleman on his efforts as a Back Bencher. I simply want to put on the record the findings of our survey, which is, I hope, more reliable and thorough. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is satisfied with that.

Dr. Brand: When the Minister conducts her surveys, does she ask each trust whether it defers putting people on the waiting list, especially in respect of out-patient appointments? In my experience, it is not uncommon for patients to be sent a letter stating, "We have received your referral, but we are not in a position to put you on our waiting list as yet. You will hear from us in about six months' time."

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I call Dr. Gisela Stuart—

Ms Stuart: There are some doctors in the Stuart family, Mr. Winterton, but I am not one of them.

People should not be put on a waiting list for a waiting list, so I will take up the hon. Gentleman's point.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam described the wide variations in waiting times throughout England and Wales as a postcode lottery for neurological services. As he knows, waiting times in Wales are a matter for the Welsh Assembly. Waiting times in England do vary. We recognise that patients can wait a long time for neurology treatment. The NHS plan says that all patients will have a maximum wait of three months for out-patient appointments and six months for in-patient appointments. We are confident that we will be able to meet those targets.

The hon. Gentleman said that the figures show that the non-urgent average waiting time to see a consultant neurologist is 25 weeks, with 44 per cent. of hospitals having to make patients wait longer than six months for an out-patient appointment. That is not the information that I have been given. The national average out-patient waiting time for neurology is 10.6 weeks. In December 2000, only 12 per cent. of neurology out-patients had waited as long as six months for an appointment.

We all accept, however, that that is not good enough. We need to make progress in a co-ordinated manner. Some hon. Members have expressed a fear that the national service framework would be a hindrance to further progress. It will not be—far from it—but the various initiatives must go hand in hand in dealing with the situation in the short term and in the long term. It is essential that they work in tandem.

I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) for his enlightening anecdote about the Bentley key, and I am delighted to say that we have moved on from that. Funding for diagnostic imaging equipment was announced in the NHS plan, and 150 replacement computed tomography scanners, 50 additional CT scanners and 50 additional magnetic resonance imaging scanners will be funded by 2004. Those will be used in the diagnosis of cancer and other diseases, including neurological diseases. The hon. Gentleman said that we must consider strategic availability. Again, we must ensure that immediate and long-term strategies develop in tandem.

Reference was made to deep brain simulation therapy. The Medical Research Council is considering a trial of the effectiveness of such therapy. We are also working closely with the Parkinson's Disease Society and others. I understand that the trial would cost about £1.3 million over three years.

Hon. Members mentioned nurse practitioners and the availability of specialist nurses. The NHS has huge capacity problems. We simply do not have enough doctors and nurses of any specialisation. We must address long-term problems through more training and short-term problems through putting the available work force to best use.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight referred not only to nurse practitioners, but to speech therapists and physiotherapists. I am delighted that the Multiple Sclerosis Society is working with the NHS to provide more specialist nurses. The further development of a specialist nursing post is an integral part of neurological services. It will be addressed with NHS commissioners and providers. Specialist nurses will be important stakeholders in developing the national service framework.

Mr. Burstow: The Department is considering the recruitment and training of specialist nurses. Will that work be concluded before the implementation of the national service framework?

Ms Stuart: If there is information about precise dates, I will pass it on to the hon. Gentleman.

We must invest extra money. Hon. Members will acknowledge that we are dealing with that matter, not only through extra funding this year, but thereafter. I am pleased that the debate has not been a sterile discussion about solving the problem with pockets of money here and there. The problem is more fundamental than that.

The creation of national service frameworks to deal with the huge divergence of services is an important development. Hon. Members have rightly pointed out that there is a danger of creating various channels. We do not want that to happen. Other Government policy allows close working, for example with social services. The Bill to establish care trusts will facilitate such working together. I hope that hon. Members will be reassured that those are all parts of a jigsaw, which will be fitted together carefully.

Neurology covers a huge range of complex issues and conditions. Some neurological disorders are rare, but others are common, such as epilepsy, which affects more than 400,000 people in the United Kingdom, and multiple sclerosis, which affects a further 85,000 people. Most neurological disorders are chronic and disabling and have a profound impact on the lives of individuals and their families. One third of the British population lives with a long-term health condition. Therefore, our decision about the national service framework for such conditions, which was announced on 28 February, is important to people with neurological conditions and to their families and carers. Hon. Members have drawn attention, rightly, to the needs of carers and to the need to take their experiences into account in developing the national service framework.

The national service framework will focus on the needs of people with neurological diseases of the brain and with spinal injuries. It will include services for people with epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease or similar conditions. The question has been raised of whether the treatment of chronic pain will be included in the framework. What place that will have within the framework will be addressed during the consultation with stakeholders.

The aim of the national service framework is to overcome the lottery in care and to ensure that health and social services work together in all parts of the country to provide the right level of care and treatment for people who live with long-term health conditions. Many such people are poor, or live in the poorest parts of the country. There is an especially strong correlation between social class and long-term health conditions such as diabetes and epilepsy, as well as a fundamental and consistent link between poverty and ill health. The Government have a responsibility to break that link.

The Government have been successful in developing and publishing national service frameworks for mental health, coronary heart disease and the national cancer plan. Those frameworks have helped our programme to deal with inequalities and raise standards and to reduce unacceptable variations in NHS services. Later this year, a national service framework will be introduced for older people and for diabetes. The illnesses covered by the five national service frameworks account for half total NHS spending. The frameworks are part of the Government's commitment to ensuring that patients have fair access to high standards of care, wherever they live. The NHS plans commit us to developing more of them.

Each national service framework is developed with the assistance of an external reference group that brings together health and social care professionals and managers, service users and carers, partner agencies and other advocates. That inclusive process ensures that a range of views is heard and can contribute to the development process. A decision on the chair of the national service framework for long-term health conditions and on its scope and membership will be announced in due course.

I pay tribute to the constructive and important work of voluntary organisations. The Neurological Alliance has given an unequivocal welcome to the national service framework for long-term health conditions and is looking forward to collaborating with the Department of Health to produce a framework that will benefit people in that neglected area. The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam paid tribute to the support that he received in producing his report.

With long-term health conditions, patients are the specialists in how best they can receive care: whether it is best to receive it in the acute sector or at home. The Government recognise the important role of the voluntary sector and specialist patient representative bodies not just in being advocates for patients, but in bringing extraordinary expertise to the debate. That is why we work closely with the voluntary sector in other areas of neurology.

Mr. Burstow: That point provides the opportunity to seek clarification from the Minister, who rightly welcomes the important work and support provided by non-governmental organisations in supporting patients and so on. I specifically asked her about the Secretary of State's indication that the value of such work might be recognised with additional funding for umbrella organisations. Might that translate into additional support for the Neurological Alliance and, particularly, the work on the national service framework?

Ms Stuart: Of course, we are all optimists and everything is possible. If my brief is correct, the hon. Gentleman may be referring to applications by the Neurological Alliance under section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968. We are

[Ms Stuart]

considering those applications to allow services to be expanded. I am sure that his representations will be heard, but it would not be right and proper for me to make an announcement now and he would not expect me to.

I refer to our work with Epilepsy Bereaved and the comprehensive clinical audit to investigate the unexplained death of people with epilepsy. Tragically, some 1,000 people with epilepsy die every year. That audit should allow us to move forward in a more co-ordinated way. Hon. Members have recognised that some conditions are rare, but we must try to develop an understanding of them. We are working with the Human BSE Foundation to provide standards of care for people with new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. We are also working with the Parkinson's Disease Society, which has just received £36,000 for advice helplines. Only a couple of months ago, the society launched a fascinating CD-ROM, which took patients through the adaptations that they could ask for in their houses. We work with and support the voluntary sector. I put on the record that it is uniquely able to do something that neither the Government nor the NHS can do.

I turn to whether we have enough neurologists. I am grateful to the hon. Member for New Forest, West, who graphically illustrated that ultimate numbers do not necessarily show us the picture, or whether more specialists in an area will provide a better outcome for patients. We know that neurological disorders account for up to 17 per cent. of all general practice visits and almost 20 per cent. of all acute hospital admissions. Studies suggest that up to 2,000 people in a population of 100,000 will have a disabling neurological condition. More than one quarter of those will require daily help to remain living at home.

There have been difficulties in filling consultant neurologist posts in some areas. The Speciality Workforce Advisory Group has reviewed the number of consultants in neurology annually. The average length of training in the speciality is six years and past recommendations by SWAG take time to be felt on the ground. Current trainees in neurology will provide approximately 90 additional trained specialists by 2006: an increase of almost one third between 1999 and 2006. We shall continue to keep the specialty under review with the Royal College of Physicians and NHS management. In particular, we want to find ways of resolving local shortages that have been reported in some areas.

We are aware that most neurological conditions have no cure at present. Often, their causes are not fully understood and the diagnosis of individual conditions is difficult. That is why, in improving our understanding of how to treat and manage such conditions, it is important to consider research, too, hence the Government's support for the Medical Research Council, the NHS health technology assessment programme and other research streams that help us in our drive to understand the causes of neurological diseases. In England, the main Government agency for research is the Medical Research Council, which receives funding via the Department of Trade and Industry.

The Government keep their priorities for research under review. NHS priorities are identified through widespread consultation with those using, delivering and managing services. Account is taken of the burden of disease, potential benefits and Government objectives as well as the responsibilities and work of other funders. It is a long-standing and important principle of successive Governments not to prescribe to individual research councils the detail of how they should distribute resources between competing priorities. That is best decided by researchers and research users. The MRC will take all such factors into account when it decides whether it wishes to fund research projects into neurological and other conditions. I remind hon. Members that, in 1999-2000, the MRC provided about £18.6 million for research into neurological conditions. That research will help to improve our understanding of such conditions and aid the development of treatments for them.

I was not surprised that hon. Members raised the issue of beta interferon and multiple sclerosis. Although we shall have divergent views about the language with which we described the action that NICE has taken, it is probably best to put on record why it has asked for more evidence. There seems to be genuine uncertainty about the appropriate use of beta interferon. That was reflected in the different prescribing patterns throughout the country. We therefore asked NICE to conduct an authoritative appraisal of the evidence on beta interferon as part of its first appraisal programme. To us, that is a high priority.

I stress that NICE has not yet issued guidance on the use of beta interferon for multiple sclerosis. As part of its appraisal process, NICE circulated its final appraisal determination to patient groups, professional groups and manufacturers. All were given 10 days to appeal. NICE rejected eight appeals against the FAD. An appeal panel considered the appeals on 22 and 23 September 2000. Part of the appeals were upheld and, as a result, NICE's appraisal committee reconsidered its guidance on 13 December 2000.

During its appraisal of beta interferon and a similar drug, glatiramer acetate, NICE considered evidence that included economic models supplied by manufacturers and independent researchers, including data not previously submitted. Those models are used to inform NICE's judgment on the cost-effectiveness of beta interferon. The evidence relating to the cost-effectiveness of those medicines is critical to NICE's appraisal of the drugs. NICE considered those models and concluded that such detailed examination raised several issues, which its appraisal committee, using the information available, has been unable to resolve.

After considering the deliberations of the appraisal committee, NICE commissioned further economic modelling. It advised that the commissioning, construction and evaluation of a further economic model will take some months. It is therefore extending the time scale of its appraisal of both beta interferon and glatiramer acetate to enable further research to be undertaken. It anticipates that the appraisal committee will reconsider the evidence, which will consist of a new model and any other new material available at the time, in July 2001. Unless there are further appeals, NICE expects to issue its guidance by November 2001. We shall have to wait for that final guidance. I do not wish to pre-empt what it might say.

I hope that today's debate, which has been informed and welcome, has reassured hon. Members that we acknowledge the great importance of neurological services. The development of the national service framework will mean that good service will be available wherever in the country a patient must call upon it. However, sometimes long-term solutions will be needed to get that right and improvements may be made more quickly in other areas. That will happen, but, as ever, our biggest present constraint is the work force, the training of whom will take time.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I thank the Minister for her reply. We move to the next debate, initiated by the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington).

Asbestos Claims

12.30 pm

Mr. Tony Worthington (Clydebank and Milngavie): It is a joy to be under your tutelage, Mr. Winterton, although you mispronounced my constituency.

I thank the Minister for meeting me and my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) last week about this matter, which has caused immense anger and disgust among sufferers of asbestos-related diseases and their relatives, and in communities such as mine, where there has been a long record of abuse caused by the appalling poisoning of people due to the use of asbestos. Clydebank has had the highest rates of asbestos-related diseases in the United Kingdom, because we had shipbuilding and ship repair industries and an asbestos works. We also had employers who poisoned their workers long after the health hazards of asbestos were known.

Earlier this year, Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd went bankrupt. That company held the employers liability insurance for more than 2,000 firms—often long dead—many of which worked with asbestos. Therefore, its collapse threatened the prospects of compensation for many people who will die from asbestos-related diseases. Many such people will not currently know that they will contract a disease such as mesothelioma because its incubation period may be many decades.

Frank McGuire, the most prominent lawyer in Scotland dealing with such cases, calculates that about 5,000 people in Scotland are affected by the issue, and around 50,000 people affected in the UK. Thompsons solicitors, the largest legal firm in the field, has calculated that Chester Street held about two thirds of employers liability claims relating to asbestos in the country.

The appalling occurrence is that the solvent part of Iron Trades Holdings Employers Insurance Association Ltd. was sold to QBE International Insurance Ltd., an Australian firm. The loss-making element of that company, which included the mounting asbestos claims, was retained as Chester Street Holdings. I contend that that company was knowingly set up to fail and to deprive sufferers from the compensation to which they are entitled. I back up that contention with the 2000 annual report of Iron Trades Holdings' auditor, Ernst and Young, which, only two months after the deal had gone through stated:

> "Considerable uncertainty exists as to whether the undertaking can continue as a going concern."

Sure enough, the company collapsed at the beginning of this year. The liquidators, PricewaterhouseCoopers, found that Chester Street's assets of £30 million were dwarfed by liabilities of £250 million.

Incredibly—I say that carefully—the Financial Services Authority, which was set up by the Government to safeguard the consumer, had approved that company restructuring. The deal went through in February 2000, following approval from the FSA. Two months later, Ernst and Young raised totally justified doubts about the viability of Chester Street. Why was the approval given? Why did the FSA not protect the interest of people who will inevitably die from asbestos-

[Mr. Tony Worthington]

related diseases? Why did it act on the side of Robert Hardy, the former chief executive of Iron Trades, whose income rose from £204,000 in 1998 to £668,000 the following year? That is a difference of almost £450,000. A mesothelioma case might be expected to obtain between £50,000 and £100,000 in compensation. I hope that Mr. Hardy realises that he has taken the compensation of between six and 12 people who are dying from mesothelioma. He ought to be ashamed of himself. Those are immoral earnings, but his chairman congratulated him on his "outstanding achievement" as he pocketed the money and left the firm before the collapse that he had set up.

The FSA seems to be washing its hands of the matter. Thousands of seriously ill clients will lose out. The insurance industry must act to protect its name. The essence of insurance is that one wins on many occasions and loses on a few. We insure ourselves against things that we hope will not happen, but the insurance company has to pay out in the minority of cases in which the worst has occurred. Cases concerning asbestos-related diseases are the worst, so what kind of scurrilousness is involved when insurance companies renege on those policies?

Lawyers have written to me expressing concern about the domino effect with regard to other insurance businesses. Field, Fisher and Waterhouse suggested that regulations be put in place to prevent other insurance companies from dividing the profitable from the unprofitable parts of their businesses in the way that Iron Trades and Chester Street have done.

The insurance industry must give a lead and face up to its responsibilities. To its credit, the *Insurance Times* is forcefully pointing out the damage that such cases are causing to the industry. The Government must act to ensure that not a single victim loses out due to the appalling behaviour of Chester Street and Iron Trades. The Government acted to secure restitution for people who had been conned due to pensions mis-selling in the financial services industry. They must act again in this case.

The Government must give an immediate assurance that people who are dying from asbestos-related diseases will not suffer at all financially. That assurance must be extended to their relatives, because in many cases it is the dependants of the victims who receive the insurance money. There must be 100 per cent. restoration. Imagine what it must be like for someone who is dying from mesothelioma to hear that the chance of securing compensation for their relatives has been shattered by this deal.

I do not want a vague assurance from the Minister that there will be investigations. I want a commitment that those who are suffering from asbestos-related diseases will not lose out in any way. I also want an independent inquiry conducted by an independent person or body, rather than by the FSA, which is already tarnished by its approval of the deal.

The inquiry must focus primarily on the conduct of Iron Trades and Chester Street, but there is also a wider issue. Firms and insurance companies in the United States of America are being brought to their knees and bankrupted by the rising tide of asbestos-related cases. The inquiry must ensure that the interests of the victims of asbestos-related diseases are safeguarded. In particular, the interests of people who were in contact with asbestos before 1972 must be examined. There are many such people and they have been left without any protection. After 1972, victims receive some statutory protection from the Policyholders Protection Board, which has been backed by the insurance industry and is supervised by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. However, that has limitations; the figures are calculated on a percentage basis.

Can the Minister confirm that victims who contracted their illnesses while working at a publicly owned firm will be protected? I also need to know why Iron Trades was sold by Chester Street for £77 million less than the valuation of its accountants. The sale price of £175 million was £50 million less than the valuation of the company, and the Australian firm QBE held back £27 million in an escrow account. Why was it sold for less than its value, when that extra money could be used to pay claims? Is it true that Iron Trades Management Services is receiving money for helping in the winding-up of Chester Street Holdings? It is still receiving income, but not meeting its liabilities. There are so many questions to be asked about that shady deal.

The inquiry also needs to look at the confusing involvement of the Treasury, the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. I and others have been trying to extract from the Government a coherent statement on the matter, but although Chester Street Holdings collapsed in January, not one word has come from the Government voluntarily. Two months ago, Chester Street Holdings announced that it was insolvent. I hope that the Minister's statement will show that the Government are on top of this issue.

I am trying to get through my speech as quickly as possible in the hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone, the chair of the all-party asbestos group, may attract your eye, Mr. Winterton.

In urging that a statement be made on the matter, I am conscious that we should not have to rely on a Member's luck in winning a raffle for an Adjournment debate. Such issues are of serious concern to my constituents. There is much anger about what has been done by Chester Street Holdings. I hope that the Government will recognise that and ensure that no one loses out. We can afford it. We acted strongly on the pensions mis-selling and we must act strongly now. It is absolutely wrong for someone dying from mesothelioma to lose the compensation for his family because of the shady actions of Chester Street Holdings.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): *rose—*

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): *rose—*

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the hon. Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham), it is the usual custom that a Member who wishes to speak in a half-hour Adjournment debate receives the permission not only of the hon. Member

who initiated the debate, but of the Minister and the occupant of the Chair. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman has the permission of the Minister to speak.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I am happy for my hon. Friend to contribute to the debate. However, the more contributions that are made, the less time I shall have to respond.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): Indeed. I hope that the hon. Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone heard what the Minister has said. I am happy to use my discretion in this case and call the hon. Gentleman, who happens to be the chairman of the all-party asbestos group.

12.42 pm

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): Thank you, Mr. Winterton. I will be brief.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) clearly pointed out that this matter reflects the unacceptable face of the insurance industry. The decision in 1990 to hive off the liabilities between the two companies was taken in a calculated way. I regard such action as a dumping of the liabilities for asbestos-related diseases into Chester Street Holdings in 1990. To do so without ensuring that those liabilities were covered clearly shows that there was some callousness in the decision that was made at the time.

Will the Minister institute a Department of Trade and Industry inspectors' inquiry under section 432 of the Companies Act 1985? My hon. Friend suggested a completely independent inquiry, but I have legal advice that it is possible for a DTI inspectors' inquiry to be set up under that Act. Is it possible to call the insurance industry together to review the policy protection scheme to ensure that a better scheme could be instituted, which would cover the pre-1972 cases, so that we are not again likely to encounter a similar situation?

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): I call the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing), who I hope will speak for no longer than about 60 seconds.

12.44 pm

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): I will literally take one minute. I shall check. The clock now shows 44 minutes past.

When I was first elected to this Parliament in 1974 to represent the adjoining constituency to that of the hon. Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington), the issue was raised with me. I have pursued the matter in the Scottish Parliament, too, because of health board responsibilities for diagnosis and treatment.

I fully support the points made so eloquently by the hon. Gentleman about Chester Street. The distress of the disease is enough without the additional distress caused by lack of compensation and insurance.

12.45 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Miss Melanie Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clydebank and Milngavie (Mr. Worthington) on having secured the debate and on the energy with which he pursues the issues that he outlined. The Government understand the anxieties expressed in today's debate, which has been triggered by the news of the insolvency of Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd. In particular, the Government understand the anxieties, revealed by today's debate, of those suffering from asbestos-related diseases as a consequence of employment in firms whose employers' liability insurance is provided by Chester Street. It is for that reason that I welcome the opportunity to respond to today's debate.

It may help if I clarify several issues raised today. There are three main aspects—first, the company's history, secondly, employers' liability insurance policies, and, thirdly, arrangements for protecting policyholders of insolvent insurance companies.

The history of Chester Street is of much interest to people, judging from the letters that we recently received. Chester Street Insurance Holdings is an insurance company that is authorised to do business in the United Kingdom. As hon. Members will be aware, there is a general principle in law that employers are required to take out insurance policies to cover their liabilities towards their employees. That requirement is specified in the Employers' Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969.

Chester Street's main line of business was the provision of employers' liability cover. Its main customers were therefore in the business sector rather than individual retail customers. The history goes back much further than the 1969 Act, however. Indeed, Chester Street is the new name of an insurance company that had its origins at the end of the 19th century.

As a mutual, Iron Trades, which was founded in 1898, could write insurance business only for customers who were members of that mutual organisation. In the 1940s, that feature of the mutual status of the organisation was recognised as unhelpful and constraining business freedom by not allowing business to be written to non-members as well as members. The association therefore created a new subsidiary that it used to write business to non-members, and that subsidiary was called the Iron Trades Mutual Insurance Company Ltd.

In the late 1980s, association members agreed to restructure the Iron Trades group further. In view of rapid changes in the insurance market, it decided that all the group's insurance business, whether for members or non-members, should in future be written in the subsidiary company. The original association would no longer write new business itself but would remain the owner of the subsidiary and run off outstanding contracts. The changes took effect at the beginning of 1990, and the subsidiary was renamed Iron Trades Insurance Company Ltd. As the subsidiary was 100 per cent. owned by the association, all the benefits from its performance in writing new business accrued to the benefit of the association in run-off.

[Miss Melanie Johnson]

Further restructuring took place in 1997, at which point all the association's assets and liabilities, including ownership of the subsidiary insurance company, were transferred from the association to a new company, Iron Trades Holdings. The transfer had no effect on the underlying position of either the run-off business or the continuing subsidiary.

In early 2000, Iron Trades Mutual Insurance Company was sold to QBE International Insurance Ltd. The sale converted the asset represented by the subsidiary into cash that could be invested and from which claims payments could be made. As part of the deal, the name Iron Trades was sold to QBE and that is how Iron Trades Holdings Ltd. became known as Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd.

Claims for asbestos-related diseases incurred before 1990 are likely to continue to rise for many years. The management of Chester Street received information on claims developments earlier this year that indicated that the company had become insolvent. That triggered the decision to appoint provisional liquidators on 9 January 2001. The scheme of arrangement was unanimously agreed on 5 February at the creditors meeting. The scheme ensures that the assets of Chester Street are protected for the benefit of all outstanding and future claims on Chester Street and it has been sanctioned by the court. The provisional liquidators are assessing the available information about existing and potential claims.

I will now deal with employers' liability insurance—the main type of business that Chester Street wrote—the impact of insolvency and, in particular, one key area of potential misunderstanding. The general position is that employers are required to take up such insurance under the Employers' Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969. The employer, rather than the employee, would have taken out a policy. That an employer has such a policy does not affect the fact that employers remain liable for any valid claim brought against them by a current or former employee. A claim might relate to an injury sustained or an illness contracted in the workplace, and an employer can turn to the policy in the event of a successful claim against them.

However, the insolvency of the insurer with which an employer has placed its employers' liability risk does not affect the liability of the employer to its employees or former employees. Therefore, despite the insolvency of Chester Street, employers who placed their risk with the company remain liable for claims made against them by employees or former employees. That is the case for all employers, whether they are in the private or public sector.

On the arrangements for ensuring the protection of policyholders when an insurance company becomes insolvent, as in other areas of financial services, specific statutory arrangements exist to protect the interests of financial services customers. The Policyholders Protection Act 1975 was established to protect the interests of policyholders of insolvent insurance companies. In the case of compulsory insurance policies, and to the extent that the insolvent insurer is unable to meet the claim, the Act provides for 100 per cent. protection for eligible claims. The cost of protection is met by levies on the insurance industry under a scheme administered by the Policyholders Protection Board, which was created under the 1975 Act. The Government expect the board to work closely with the provisional liquidators and others to ensure that eligible claims are processed promptly and that the provisions of the Act are fully implemented. To the extent that Chester Street is unable to meet the terms of the insurance contract in full it is for employers to establish whether any protection is due to them under the 1975 Act.

Today's debate has rightly raised the position of employees whose employer no longer exists. We are investigating their position carefully. It is not correct that no arrangements exist to protect workers suffering from asbestos-related diseases whose employers have gone out of business.

Initially, many sufferers will be eligible for industrial injuries disablement benefit and other related Department of Social Security benefits. Above and beyond that, the Government have recognised the case for making further compensation arrangements for workers unable to claim damages from their former employers. The Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) Act 1979 exists to compensate those workers. Since 1980, the scheme has compensated around 8,500 workers and their families with approximately £10.5 million.

Several concerns have also been raised about the management of Chester Street, its predecessor organisations and the reorganisation of the Iron Trades Holdings Employers Insurance Association Ltd. Concerns about the management of Chester Street are a matter for the provisional liquidators, who are required to review the company's affairs and the actions of the directors and other parties. I understand that the issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, West and Penistone (Mr. Clapham) raised in relation to company law could be a spin-off from the liquidators' investigation into the insolvency.

Finally, questions have been asked about the role of the regulator. As an insurance company authorised to do business in the UK, Chester Street has been supervised by insurance regulators to ensure that it meets the requirements of the Insurance Companies Act 1982. Since 1 January 1999, the FSA has been responsible for the prudential supervision of insurance companies. The Treasury is in touch with the FSA about both the reorganisation and the concerns that I mentioned earlier.

Mr. Worthington: I asked the Minister for two basic assurances. First, I asked that no sufferer from asbestos should suffer further by loss of compensation because of the actions of Chester Street. Will the Government give an assurance that the goal that they are pursuing is for no one to lose out, which would mean that the insurance industry would have to contribute? Secondly, I asked for an independent inquiry because the FSA has lost our trust by approving a failing firm.

Miss Johnson: On the latter question, I understand my hon. Friend's argument, but the liquidators are examining the issues surrounding the insolvency. When that information is publicly available we will be able to see which further issues emerge.

On my hon. Friend's earlier question, I reiterate that the Government understand the concerns that have been expressed in debate. It is obviously desirable that people should receive the compensation that they seek. Treasury officials are in close contact with other Departments, the Policy Holders Protection Board, the FSA and the relevant parts of the remainder of the financial services industry to ensure that the concerns raised by the insolvency of Chester Street are dealt with as quickly as possible. I assure hon. Members that the Government are monitoring the situation carefully in the interests of those affected by the insolvency of this insurance company.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): We can move on to the next debate, which has been initiated by the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond).

Central Railway

12.58 pm

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this subject in debate. It has been raised on several previous occasions, but I make no apology for raising again a matter that is of importance to my constituents. A major threat has been posed to hundreds of households in my constituency and thousands of households along the length of the proposed route of a railway line. Since the subject was properly debated in the House, there have been considerable changes in the surrounding landscape and the company has announced that it intends to pursue a different route in seeking approval for the project.

The proposal for a freight line from the north of England to the channel tunnel goes back to the 1990s. In 1996, an application made under the Transport and Works Act 1992 for the proposed railway on an alignment that took it through south London was resoundingly defeated on a vote in the House of Commons. Many people thought that that would be the end of the matter, but in July 2000, the company resurrected the scheme with a revised alignment taking the route around the south-western quadrant of the M25 and off towards the channel tunnel. That would have a direct impact on my constituents, who—like everyone else, including the Government—assumed that the project would again proceed by means of a Transport and Works Act application: that is, it would be considered in accordance with the processes of that Act and voted on in the House. They were confident that if it were subjected to the proper processes, the scheme would ultimately be rejected on its merits. I shall address the scheme's merits and demerits later.

During the latter part of last year, my constituents concluded that the problem was the continuing blight that they were suffering as a direct result of the proposal, rather than concern about its eventual approval. Throughout that period, I asked Ministers several questions about the matter. The Government took the view that they could not comment because the Secretary of State might have to exercise a quasi-judicial function in respect of a future Transport and Works Act application. I acknowledged the legitimacy of their position. In the meantime, however, my constituents faced a potentially open-ended blight on their properties. As long ago as last summer, it was clear that the company had no intention of submitting a Transport and Works Act application until after the general election.

The whole process has highlighted the serious weaknesses in the Transport and Works Act procedure. It allows a company—which, as in this case, may be very thinly capitalised—to promote an extensive and expensive scheme without demonstrating its economic viability, producing any sound environmental impact assessments, or, most importantly, having to commit to any timetable for progress. Under the procedure, homes can be blighted for years without any obligation on the person or company causing that blight to make progress. I gave the Minister's predecessor some suggestions about how the law might be revised to deal with that problem. Although the Central Railway issue

[Mr. Philip Hammond]

has moved on, my appetite for reforming the Transport and Works Act procedure has been whetted and I shall want to pursue my ideas further.

In January this year, the company raised the stakes considerably by publicly announcing that it would not make a Transport and Works Act application and that it was seeking the Government's backing for a hybrid Bill to enable the scheme to proceed by Act of Parliament, thus bypassing the proper processes of scrutiny that a Transport and Works Act application would have entailed. In a sense, the company moved the application from the planning process to the political arena, and it did so at a moment that was probably not of the Government's choosing. The Government's line that it would be inappropriate for Ministers to comment on what might become the subject of a quasi-judicial application under the Transport and Works Act procedure is no longer applicable—it has been shot out of the water. The purpose of today's debate is to try to elicit a clear statement of Government policy about the project now that it is clear that, if the Government give their backing to a hybrid Bill, it will not proceed by means of a Transport and Works Act application.

No doubt the Government thought that they were being rather clever in bouncing an awkward ball into the long grass by asking the Strategic Rail Authority to consider Central Railway's proposal. I hope that the Minister will give us a clear outline of the terms of reference given to the SRA, including the timetable for its report. Those of us of a slightly cynical disposition might guess that that report will not be completed until after the general election. The proposal for the freight railway, albeit on a different alignment, has been around for years so it is not credible for the Government to say that they have no position on the project. The Strategic Rail Authority may or may not be the right body to review the overall implications of the proposed scheme. The company claims that there will be a clear impact on road freight volumes if the railway is given the go-ahead, but it is not clear that the SRA is the best body to comment on or evaluate that effect.

Whatever rationalisation the Government may offer, neither it nor the scheme will not be acceptable to my constituents in Runnymede and Weybridge. They are suspicious of the Government's record on transport infrastructure in our area, for reasons that I shall explain. The people blighted by the current proposal are the same people—residents of communities alongside the M25 motorway—who were blighted by the previous Government's proposals to build the infamous M25 link roads. My predecessor, Sir Geoffrey Pattie, fought long and hard against his own Government and eventually persuaded them to drop that scheme. Some of the houses that are now blighted by the Central Railway proposal have only recently—since my election to Parliament—been sold by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, having been compulsorily purchased for the link roads scheme. My constituents have had enough of blight resulting from one project after another along the M25 corridor. The Government's refusal to come clean about where they stand on the Central Railway project perpetuates that blight.

Before the previous general election, the Labour party clearly implied its hostility to the proposed widening of the M25 between junctions 12 and 15—a section of the motorway that will be affected directly by the Central Railway proposal. The current Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions described the scheme as "lunacy". The then Opposition spokesman for the Department, the hon. Member for Nottingham, North (Mr. Allen), described it as £100-million motorway madness. The local Labour candidate in that general election went a little further in declaring specifically that a Labour Government would scrap the scheme on day one. A Labour Government were indeed returned, as history records, but once safely in office, after a series of reviews, the Government did a 180-degree U-turn. On 31 July 1998—the last day of the parliamentary Session—they announced that the widening of the M25 to five and six lanes would go ahead after all. In so doing, they betrayed the many voters of all political persuasions in Egham, Thorpe and other communities along that stretch of the motorway who had voted Labour because of specific or implied pledges on motorway widening. The memory of that experience lingers.

Voters in my constituency want to know, and have a right to know before the general election, whether a Labour Government would support the Central Railway scheme proceeding via the mechanism of a hybrid Bill with no opportunity for proper local scrutiny. If the Government insist on postponing the moment of truth until after a general election, my constituents will draw their own conclusions, regardless of their broader political persuasions.

The backers of the scheme claim that it will take freight off the roads. The argument for moving freight from road to rail is essentially environmental, yet the scheme will be highly environmentally damaging. The railway will pass through built-up residential areas in my constituency, as well as areas to the north and south that are of great landscape value. Elsewhere, it will pass through areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Technical issues also arise. We are told that, due to design constraints, the railway will have a maximum gradient of 1 per cent., but it will have to pass over the top of major transport infrastructure such as the M25-M4 intersection, with which many hon. Members will be familiar. In effect, there will be an elevated railway for miles on either side of that and other intersections, which will have an enormous impact on visual amenity and generate huge amounts of noise. Nor will the railway carry cars of normal size: they will be wide-gauge and taller than normal cars of the shuttle freight type that is used to contain full-size freight vehicles on the channel tunnel line. There is even talk of using double-decker freight cars, and it is almost certain that overhead electric cables will be used. In sum, the railway will be elevated, with very high cars and exceptionally high electric pylons. The scheme simply is not environmentally acceptable—a view that is supported by many local authorities along the route. It appears that the environmental damage will far outweigh the environmental benefits.

The assumptions that are necessary to demonstrate the project's economic viability are open to question. So far, there is no sign from the company of anything resembling rigorous analysis to support its contention

that the project will lead to a substantial reduction in road traffic; nor is there any sign of an environmental impact assessment. Without producing a shred of evidence in support of its claims, the company is inviting the Government to support a hybrid Bill process that will side-step the usual checks to which such a scheme should be subject. Indeed, it is clear to all who have met the company's representatives that the scheme has not been properly worked out—it is simply a line on a plan. Requests for information about the vertical alignment of the railway, which will be vitally important to measuring the impact on the communities through which it will pass, have remained unanswered.

Given its undoubtedly huge environmental impact, even those who tend to support the scheme acknowledge that it should not go ahead without a public inquiry. Given the broad agreement to the proposed reform of compulsory purchase procedures, it would surely be wrong for a scheme with major compulsory purchase implications to be fast-tracked ahead of any changes to such arrangements. My constituents, who are suffering from the continuing blight arising from the project, are horrified at the thought of the promoter trying to erode proper scrutiny of the scheme by seeking Government support for a hybrid Bill.

I do not believe that in the years that the scheme has been around, the Government have not considered and evaluated its merits. My constituents demand answers to very simple and straightforward questions this side of a general election, so that they can decide how to cast their votes when the election comes. The first question is: do the Government support the scheme? The second is: will a Labour Government support the proposed hybrid Bill and thus allow the scheme to go ahead without the usual scrutiny of a planning inquiry? I look forward to receiving two straight answers to those simple and straightforward questions.

1.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Robert Ainsworth): In the traditional way, I congratulate the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) on securing the debate. I am aware of his concerns about the scheme as he has raised the matter on several occasions, but I am surprised at his desire to turn this into a blatantly party political issue. As Members of Parliament, we all have to decide how best to represent our constituents' interests in any given situation. Along with the other decisions that his constituents have to make, they will perhaps have to consider how he has represented their problems on this occasion.

As has been confirmed to the House previously, Central Railway has informed the Government that it does not wish to pursue its application under the Transport and Works Act 1992, but instead has requested our support for a hybrid Bill. It must be for the company to decide whether to allow its proposals to be examined openly under the TWA procedure. That would not preclude the possibility of the Government promoting a hybrid Bill if we considered it to be an appropriate means of authorising the scheme. However, Central Railway has yet to provide more details of its scheme, so I cannot say now whether the Government will sponsor a Bill to support it. It is, of course, open to any Member to propose a Bill, but this should not be seen as a means of bypassing the due consultation process. As with any major TWA application, a hybrid Bill must be debated in both Houses, and individuals and businesses directly affected would be given the opportunity to put their case.

Central Railway maintains that its project is an entirely privately funded scheme and that it is economically viable, but for a proposal of such scale and complexity, it is vital that the technical and commercial aspects are examined carefully. To that end, the Strategic Rail Authority has initiated a review of Central Railway's proposals. Until we have seen the results of that, it is impossible for the Government to take a view on the scheme, and it would be inappropriate for me to comment, let alone to give the assurances that the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge wants.

The hon. Gentleman asked for the terms of reference that had been given to the Strategic Rail Authority. The purpose of the review is to identify those factors that are critical to the success of the project and to give an indication of the level of risk attached to each. Consultants should examine, but not be limited to the following areas: volume and market share forecasts; revenue and operating cost forecasts; capital costs; technical feasibility of the construction and operation of the project; planning issues, especially on the southern section of the proposed route; commercial and regulatory issues surrounding the use of Railtrack infrastructure and interfaces with Eurotunnel and Société Nationale des Chemin de Fer Français—SNCF; capacity issues on the route; interchange location and other assumptions regarding terminals; and assumptions on rolling stock and rolling gauge.

Mr. Hammond: I am grateful to the Minister for giving the House such detail on the terms of reference that have been given to the SRA. I did not hear him mention the environmental impact of the scheme, but I am sure that he will correct me if that was an oversight. Is he convinced that the SRA is the right body to evaluate the company's claims with regard to the potential of the project for removing traffic and freight from the roads?

Mr. Ainsworth: The SRA is the body set up by the Government to examine how we implement our desires to move a significant amount of freight from road to rail, which it is doing. I know of no other body that would be more appropriate to undertake such a study on behalf of the Government, into Central Railway's proposal. It is worth bearing in mind the Government's clearly stated policy with respect to rail freight. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), restated that policy in the House during the recent debate on this issue. It is relevant to our consideration of Central Railway's request for support for a Bill, and it is important to reiterate it. He said:

"We are committed to more freight on rail as part of an integrated sustainable freight transport distribution system. We have set out in our 10-year plan for transport an unprecedented investment programme to enhance the capacity and capability of the network. Through the Transport Act 2000, we established the Strategic Rail Authority with a remit to promote rail freight. We have also revitalised the freight grant regime to encourage

companies to transfer more freight off the roads. We have made it clear that we wish to see greater investment in the railways to cater for growth in both passenger and freight traffic over the next decade. We have asked the SRA to take forward the detailed plans for applying that investment. As a first step, it will shortly produce its strategic agenda."—[*Official Report*, 12 February 2001; Vol. 363, c. 135.]

As the hon. Gentleman said, and as you will recall, Mr. Winterton, the last time that Central Railway's proposal was put before the House, hon. Members rejected it overwhelmingly. If the Government are considering supporting a Bill now for a revised and expanded proposal, it is right that the SRA should seek to learn more about it. I have outlined the basis of the Government's commitment to rail freight and the SRA's role in helping to achieve the industry's objectives. I cannot anticipate the result of that review, but I am confident that the SRA will examine Central's proposals in the context of the 10-year plan and the authority's strategy for freight. We will follow the SRA's review with interest, and will be happy to make a further statement about Central Railway in due course, taking into account the SRA's findings.

The main constituency issue raised by the hon. Gentleman was the question of blight. That is of great concern to many other hon. Members whose constituencies lie along the proposed route. Blight is caused by the presence of any major proposal in the public domain, whether or not a formal submission is imminent. Regrettably, and to varying degrees, blight is inevitable in connection with major infrastructure proposals. One cannot consider a case such as Central Railway in isolation. The sort of problems arising from the proposal under discussion can arise from any major infrastructure project, regardless of the form of the statutory consent being pursued. Nor is blight merely an issue in relation to major projects. It might also arise on a smaller scale in relation to any bad neighbour development that has a long gestation period, regardless of whether compulsory purchase powers are required.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that legislation to regulate developers such as Central Railway would be appropriate. Realistically, one cannot impose a time scale on the period between the inception of a proposal and its formal submission, nor can one dictate how the promoters of a scheme should act in the meantime. We would not want to inhibit developers from making their proposals public. Prospective applicants must surely be free to develop a proposition as they see fit, and to apply for approval when they feel best placed to do so.

Mr. Hammond: Does the Minister agree that as the law stands, there is nothing to prevent a wholly spurious, even malicious, scheme being proposed? There is simply no test. Anyone could propose to build an airport in the middle of the Minister's constituency without any real intention of progressing that proposal. His constituents would be blighted by the local authority's obligation to reveal that proposal in local searches. Does that not offend against the principles of natural justice?

Mr. Ainsworth: I do not know how the hon. Member would propose to change that. How could we without, as I have already said, stifling development proposals and preventing schemes that may be important to the future of the country, not merely a particular neighbourhood? An over-regulatory approach to the pre-application planning stage would stifle legitimate development of schemes essential to the well-being of the country as a whole.

The best approach to consultation is through flexible non-statutory guidance. That is why, as part of the Department's fundamental review into the laws and procedures relating to compulsory purchase and compensation, we published a code of practice on the dissemination of information during major infrastructure developments in October 1999. That emanated from the recommendations of an interdepartmental working group on blight. The code's approach is commended to private sector promoters of major infrastructure development, as its aim is to minimise blight.

A further recommendation arising from the blight review was for a property purchase guarantee and compensation scheme that would offer guarantees of future value for a property and thus help to maintain the stability of a local property market.

Mr. Hammond: I realise that the Minister has only a few minutes left, but as we seem to be straying from the main thrust of the debate, I want to put this point to him. He has explained that he does not want to commit the Government to supporting or refusing to support the scheme until he has heard the result of the SRAs review. What is the Government's position on the use of a hybrid Bill as a tool? My constituents believe it to be a transparent mechanism to avoid proper scrutiny of the proposals. Regardless of whether the Government, having heard the SRA's report, think that the proposals are good, should they not commit themselves now to asking the company to take the TWA route so that all the players have an opportunity to scrutinise the proposals?

Mr. Ainsworth: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we were expecting Central Railway to take the TWA route. We did not encourage it to propose a hybrid Bill. It was the company's decision to do so, and we are trying to deal with the proposition on the table. Before we take a definitive view on whether the proposition should be allowed to go forward, or given any support, we have decided to ask the SRA to undertake the review. I know that the hon. Gentleman does not like that, but it seems to be a sensible approach and it would be seen as such by anyone who, rather than playing politics with the issue, is attempting to get the proposition on the table dealt with appropriately.

As part of the same review, an independent advisory group into compulsory purchase and blight compensation was established. The group published its final report last July, and we are currently considering its recommendations and the comments that we have received on them. As soon as possible, we will publish for consultation a statement of future policy on compulsory purchase procedures and compensation arrangements that takes those issues and the recommendations of the working group on blight into account. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is now clear about what is happening and about how we propose to handle Central Railway's proposition.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (in the Chair): We can move on a little early to the debate on coastal erosion and its impact on neighbouring communities, initiated by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar).

Coastal Erosion

1.29 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): What a pleasure it is that you always preside in this Chamber whenever I speak, Mr. Winterton.

I am grateful for this opportunity for the debate and I thank my hon. Friend the Minister who is to reply, as I know that he has more difficult problems to deal with. He is familiar with my constituency and has visited it on several occasions. Only recently, he met a delegation from my constituency of Redcar and Cleveland councillors and residents about the floods in Skinningrove. I put on record my appreciation for that useful and productive meeting.

The basic thrust of my subject affects only a small number of my constituents, but that small number is faced with serious worries. Their fears are shared by others living in neighbouring areas that are represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn) and other hon. Members representing constituencies along the North sea coast. I refer to coastal erosion, coastal stability and the problems that they cause for people living on the edge of cliffs and shorelines—problems that threaten them as property or business owners.

Many of the seaside towns and villages in the region started as fishing villages or small ports and have become residential holiday and retirement centres. Along the coast in my constituency, the ground is made up of what geologists call glacial till, clay shale resting on harder sub-surface rock. By its nature, this is an unstable geological formation. With little water penetration the clay can rapidly acquire a plasticity that makes it vulnerable to landslides. The local shale is by its nature oily and slippery. A combination of those surfaces, along with the pounding that cliffs and foreshores receive from the remorseless action of the sea, makes slippage inevitable.

The instability is exacerbated by the constant erosive removal of material by wave action from the base of our local cliffs, some of which are around 600 ft high—the highest in Britain. That erosion results in the undercutting of the cliff, leading to more cliff falls and steepening, setting up a cycle of erosion that is so pronounced that its progress can be measured year by year and, indeed, month by month. I do not intend to enter the debate about global warming as we do not have the time, but weather patterns have changed significantly in the past few years and heavy storms and prolonged rain happen more frequently. If we accept the basic premise of global warming, we must accept rising sea levels and rising levels of coastal erosion.

I am pleased that the Government take the problem seriously and thank my hon. Friend the Minister for overseeing the new shoreline management plan, which involves an examination of the North sea shoreline. The plan process is democratic, embracing the local councils, communities and local water and drainage companies. The study also involves scientific engineering, and outlines in scientific and technological terms where the process of erosion can be halted and checked, where the line can be held and where there can be only a managed retreat, as it is called. That is where the problems start for my constituents.

[Dr. Ashok Kumar]

I refer to the small village of Cowbar as an example of the problem. It is situated high on the cliffs overlooking the picturesque and much larger fishing village of Staithes, where Captain Cook learned his seafaring skills. It has about 50 residents. Most of them are local people, some of whom are employed at the Boulby potash mine, which is nearby. Among the other inhabitants of the village are fishermen, retired people, and also the owners of holiday homes who, although they are only occasional visitors, are residents none the less.

About a year ago, those responsible for the shoreline management plan visited Cowbar, where the problems caused by erosion are well known and thoroughly understood. The road that serves the village snakes along the cliff edge. It has had to be repaired and re-sited twice within living memory; the last occasion was very recently. It is well known that rocks sometimes fall on to the shoreline below; that has been recorded for a long time. Engineers and academics have studied the area, and they have reached some sombre conclusions. The evidence before them suggested that, although there were no immediate problems, the erosion was unstoppable and that, within the next few years, subsidence might threaten some houses in Cowbar.

The impact of that prediction must be understood. The fact that it was stated in a public document was enough to frighten the financial institutions. The value of many houses fell because what had to be said had been said. No surveyor could ignore the findings of engineering professionals and no estate agency or mortgage lender could disregard the possible financial consequences of negotiating a property sale that ignored those findings.

The family home of Mr. Colin Mann, the chairman of the local residents' association, is situated far away from the cliff top. However, his mortgage lender has sent him a letter stating that it considered his home to be "unsuitable security" and, therefore, that it could not proceed further with his application.

I emphasise that I am not saying that public agencies should keep such reports secret. That would be a hundred times worse and could lead to charges that central and local government were keeping people in the dark about potential threats to them and their communities.

Increases in coastal erosion are starting to have an impact on people as well as on the countryside and the Government have a moral duty to take action. Coastal erosion will also start to impose costs on the wider community. Those costs are often unexpected.

I want, briefly, to adduce another example from my community that also arose as a result of the shoreline management plan process. One of the highest and most prominent natural features in my constituency is called Hunt cliff. It towers over the seaside resort town of Saltburn. Indeed, the town's very successful secondary school is named after it. A single-track railway line runs along the cliff top. It was constructed by Victorian railway engineers who sought a direct route from Teesside to Whitby. The line was an outlet for the limestone that was mined in dozens of local pits to feed blast furnaces. Passengers are no longer able to appreciate the great views from the cliff, but freight trains still use the line, carrying steel blooms into the Skinningrove steelworks and finished steel out.

The line is also constantly used by heavy freight trains moving potash and salt from east Cleveland's biggest employer, the Boulby potash mine, to which I have already referred. Heavy and bulky loads are moved quickly, cleanly and efficiently by rail and are, therefore, kept off the local road network, to the great relief of local people. However, the line has been indirectly threatened by the shoreline management plan, which takes a pessimistic view of the long-term stability of the cliff edge on Hunt cliff. It is recognised that there is not an immediate problem, but I am worried that the seeds of doubt might now have been sown. If big investment decisions were to be made about infrastructure repairs or new job creation projects, the report could have an impact on such matters. Increased movement of goods by road may be considered—movements that would have an impact on the environment of the area and the quality of life of local people and which would impose a cost on road maintenance and repair. For those reasons, the Minister and his Department should carry out an investigation.

That investigation should include whether the scope of the coastal protection budget—a budget informed by the work of the shoreline management project—could be extended to cover the impact of coastal erosion on homes, businesses and infrastructure. Such a budgetary extension could be catered for by the existing public finance provision that applies to, for example, the compulsory purchase of properties needed for new roads or civil works. It could, in effect, be ring-fenced by saying that in a 30-year period it would apply only to properties that partly or wholly lie within 200 m of a coastline.

Such a scheme could operate on a basis similar to the compulsory purchase order where, if agreement cannot be reached between the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the individual affected by erosion, the matter could be subject to a public examination. The scheme would have a marked effect on restoring confidence to home and property owners who have an interest in land adjoining the shoreline, and investors and lenders would know that they were not running a high risk. I am aware that legal and insurance remedies exist for people affected by coastal erosion.

Given the increasing importance of the issue and of climatic change, we must look to new remedies. Our response to climate changes must be more than merely ensuring that the pumps are operating or that enough sandbags are on hand. We must recognise that coastal erosion has a profound impact on our society—an impact that takes a financial and legal as well as an environmental form. The adoption of such a scheme would make a start on recognising that impact, as well as giving much hope to a small number of householders in my constituency, who at present feel threatened by a combination of natural forces.

1.43 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East

(Dr. Kumar) on so clearly expressing the problems that people face in respect of coastal erosion. He has been to see me several times about the problem and I have visited his constituency. I pay tribute to the energetic and effective way in which he has represented his constituents in taking such issues up with the Ministry. I fully understand that coastal erosion, with the associated loss of land and property, is a highly emotional subject. It puts great stress on people and not only in economic terms. I have the utmost sympathy for my hon. Friend's constituents who are facing such problems.

Although natural events such as coastal erosion can never be prevented entirely, it is right that maritime district councils should take measures to alleviate the risk when it is sustainable to do so. However, it is unrealistic to expect to maintain all the coastline as it is now. We cannot completely surround the country with a wall of concrete. That is not only unrealistic, but undesirable. It would have consequences, given that our coastline is dynamic and erosion is part of a natural process. In that respect, we should base defence measures on an understanding of such natural processes and work with the processes as far as possible, while keeping the impact on defences elsewhere on the coastline in mind, rather than work against them.

As my hon. Friend stated, that is the reason why the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has encouraged the setting-up of coastal defence groups to provide a forum for discussion and co-operation. That leads to the preparation of shoreline management plans. They provide a basis for a sustainable coastal defence policy and set objectives for future coastline management, while taking into account natural coastal processes, coastal defence needs, environmental considerations, planning issues and current and future land use. Shoreline management plans are in place for the whole English coastline and are intended to be living documents, which can adapt to changing circumstances and which will be reviewed regularly to ensure that they are relevant to the needs of the people whom they protect and the coastline that they manage.

I understand my hon. Friend's strong case about the financial consequences of planning blight on people whose homes are identified in shoreline management plans as being at risk from erosion. However, I am sorry to say that compensation is not payable to people who are affected by flooding or erosion, except in limited circumstances. That includes cases where it has been decided not to defend a particular area or to undertake managed realignment. That is not the case in this instance, as it is natural erosion.

That approach, which has been adopted by successive Governments, is justified by current legislation, which provides operating authorities with permissive powers to undertake flood and coastal defence work. Apart from the requirements of the habitats directive, there is no general obligation to build or to maintain defences at all, or to a particular standard. Consistent with that approach, the legislation makes no provision for compensation payable from public funds for people whose property or land is affected by erosion or flooding.

That sounds harsh, but coastal erosion is not a new process. It has occurred for centuries and people who live in areas that experience coastal erosion are aware of the inherent risks. The use of funding for flood and coastal defence would be unsustainable, given the funds that are available, although such funds have been increased. MAFF does not have the framework to provide such compensation. We do not have assessors or people who can advise on compensation levels. Also, we cannot compete with insurance companies, which have a role in flood and coastal defence, and nor should we.

I understand that that is not of great comfort to people who face such blight. However, I can offer my hon. Friend words of comfort about the grant aid that is provided for capital for flood defence and coast protection schemes that meet the criteria of being technically sound, economically worth while and environmentally acceptable. The priority score arrangements that we use for that are under review and a formal consultation is under way.

Schemes that meet such criteria may receive grant and approvals from MAFF to allow local authorities to borrow the balance of the cost of the approval schemes, net of grant. That funding has been increased in the past two spending reviews. Further funding has been announced as a result of the severe floods that the country has experienced. MAFF funding for flood and coastal defence capital is set to increase by 50 per cent: from £76 million this year to £114 million in 2003-04.

In recent years, MAFF has given grant aid for emergency coast protection works that have been undertaken by Redcar and Cleveland council at Redcar and Skinningrove and has funded strategic studies. My hon. Friend brought representatives of the local council to see me. I was impressed with them because, in contrast to others I have met, they did not sit wringing their hands and expecting the Government to step in and do everything for them. The council allocated its own resources and got on with the job of dealing with the coastal erosion problems and severe flooding that Skinningrove has experienced. It did not wait: it recognised the needs of the people that it represents and tried to provide for them. The council put forward some of its own money and attracted MAFF grant money. As my hon. Friend knows, I have agreed to consider a retrospective grant application for the flood defence works at Skinningrove.

Redcar and Cleveland council is undertaking some works at Cowbar. I assure my hon. Friend that, if the works meet the normal criteria, grant funding will be available to help the local council to provide coastal defences. That is a far more appropriate way of using Government funds. Although we cannot take on compensation for any type of blight, we can remove the blight by contributing to properly costed and evaluated flood and coastal defence schemes. The local council, which is considering that, is welcome to submit any proposals to MAFF to establish whether they qualify for grant aid. That may deal with the problems that my hon. Friend's constituents currently face.

I stress that we have clear criteria for giving grant aid, as my hon. Friend is aware. The key objectives of our flood and coastal defence policy are, first, to encourage the provision of adequate and cost-effective flood warning systems. No Government can guarantee that floods will not happen. We can, however, reduce the risk of floods and coastal flooding by encouraging people to provide good advanced warning. Secondly, we will

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encourage the provision of adequate, economically, technically and environmentally sound and sustainable flood and coastal defence measures. Thirdly, we will discourage inappropriate development in areas at risk from flooding and coastal erosion—a policy that has not been given sufficient weight in years gone by. Lessons have been learned from planning policies in the past.

Authorities are being asked to report on the extent to which local authority development plans contain coastal erosion statements and on planning applications in which coastal erosion was a material consideration. That does not affect Cowbar, but it is part of a strategic approach for the future. We must try to consider the future as well as dealing with the present.

I can offer my hon. Friend some support on the question of research and development. We should investigate the forces behind flooding and coastal erosion; the knowledge that we acquire will help to shape the technical means of responding to them. Local authorities would naturally find it difficult to find the resources for such research and development and we would not expect them to do so. It is appropriate that the Government take on the considerable spending involved to find the information needed to understand the forces along the coastline represented by my hon. Friend. That will give us some ideas in predicting the rate of erosion and about the responses that we need to make.

We are increasingly aware that we should regard holistically such issues as coastal erosion and flood defences. If one considers only one particular spot on the coastline and installs defences, it may have implications for other parts of the coastline. That consideration is taken into account in the research that we have commissioned and the funds that we have made available to assist the schemes that I am sure my hon. Friend wants.

We cannot, unfortunately, help with compensation for the sort of blight that my hon. Friend outlined so well. He made a strong case, but there is no facility for the Government to do that. However, we can help with capital support for his local council to enable it to defend some areas where it is sustainable to do so. That must be a key condition. I have a lot of respect for my hon. Friend's local council, which has done a good job in looking after the people whom it represents. If it suggests a scheme in accordance with the criteria that I have outlined, I shall be sympathetic to its case for Government grant support.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes to Two o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 7 March 2001

[MRS. SYLVIA HEAL *in the Chair*]

Fishing Industry

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Touhig.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): It is pleasing to see so many hon. Members with interests in fishing communities here on Budget day, which could be an advantage or disadvantage for this debate. In a sense, what better time could there be to put questions to the Fisheries Minister than immediately before the Chancellor of the Exchequer delivers his Budget? We all anticipate that the Minister's powers are such that he will make a beeline for the Chancellor immediately after this debate to resolve a number of the problems that we shall have brought to his attention.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): The Chancellor will say, "You again."

Mr. Salmond: I do not know whether *Hansard* caught that aside; I might ask the Minister to repeat it in his speech.

The disadvantage is that we run a slight risk of the debate being overshadowed, although that was not a risk for yesterday's massive fishing industry demonstration of solidarity in Scotland, which involved 167 fishing boats in a procession that stretched for 11 miles and took the best part of two hours to pass under the Forth bridges. Having had a quick look at this morning's Scottish press, I am pleased to see that the demonstration is dominating the newspapers. As far as I am aware, it was the biggest flotilla of fishing boats ever gathered, certainly in peacetime. It was one of the largest such demonstrations in history.

That should send a signal to the Minister that, apart from some of the more general long-term problems that hon. Members from various parts of the country will want to raise this morning, there is an immediate crisis in the Scottish white fish industry that needs to be addressed. Those of us from Scottish constituencies have high hopes for this afternoon's meeting between the First Minister and fishing industry leaders, but if the crisis is not urgently addressed, much of the long-term future—and today's debate—will become redundant. We shall see, effectively, a wipeout of the most important white fish stock in Scotland; the haddock fishery.

I spoke to the Minister privately last week, but I hope that this debate, whatever else it does, will show him the strength of feeling that exists, the importance of the crisis that has befallen Scottish white fish boats and the solidarity in the industry as a whole with a view to doing something about it. Yesterday's procession was made up not only of white fish boats. As it sailed down the coast of Scotland, there was a demonstration by the Shetland boats up at Sullom Voe. It picked up boats all the way down the east coast of Scotland, starting from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) and going down through Angus and the East Neuk, which is within the constituency of the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell).

The procession picked up boats from the south-east of Scotland, which came up from Eyemouth, and 30 boats joined at the mouth of the Forth. Even the small fishing fleet in the firth of Forth joined the flotilla at the last minute as it started to sail towards the bridges. It was a remarkable demonstration of the strength of feeling by a variety of interests and sections of the industry. I have never seen the catching side of the fishing industry as unified as it has been over the past two weeks in response to the crisis.

The realisation of the problems with white fish by those who are not immediately affected is interesting and important. As we sailed down, we received a message of support from the scallop fishermen, who are largely on the west coast of Scotland. The prawn or nephrops fishermen realise that, unless something is done to solve the white fish problem, one of the next developments to occur after the demise of the haddock stock will be pressure on the prawn fishery, and chaos and dislocation will continue in the industry.

A number of the deep-sea boats in Scotland, which are equipped to go into far waters, were also part of the flotilla. Again, they have not been immediately affected by the crisis that has hit the medium-sized white fish boats; none the less, they realised that dislocation for one part of the industry would cause problems for the entire industry.

It was even more interesting to hear last week—not for the first time in my memory, but certainly for one of the first times—the statement of support from the Scottish White Fish Producers Association and again from Will Clarke by telephone as we sailed towards the Forth yesterday. They realise that every part of the industry will have little or no future unless the problem of the slaughter of juvenile haddock is resolved. I hope that the strength of feeling that was on display yesterday will be evident to the Minister. I also hope that he will excuse my fragile condition because, although the weather yesterday was fine, being on a fishing boat through the night on the North sea is something that few hon. Members will have experienced. It was worth while to see that strength of solidarity.

I urge the Minister to respond to the demonstration, because the industry has shown unity and an awareness of the crisis over the past ten days. Above all, it has been a responsible and dignified protest that has tried to take its concerns to the heart of Government. It is incumbent on the Minister to say something positive because, as he accepted last week, the situation is urgent.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): I suspect that all hon. Members will agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis. Does he accept that one unique feature of the fishing community's present attitude is that, when it came to juvenile haddock, it voluntarily

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withdrew its effort because it recognised that, if it did not, the fishing industry in Scotland would cease to exist?

Mr. Salmond: Yes, that is a vital point. In effect, we have had a voluntary tie-up of the fleet for the past 10 days or so, which has meant a substantial sacrifice on the part of the crews. They have mortgages on their boats and houses, and other financial commitments, yet they have voluntarily tied up their boats to illustrate dramatically that fishermen are sick to the heart of having to pursue a fishing strategy that will mean the decimation and slaughter of the fishing grounds.

Less than £10 million is needed to solve the immediate crisis. I am not talking about the long-term problems—which we might discuss later—or about something that many hon. Members would like to see; a step change in structural support for an industry that lags far behind those in comparable European countries. I am speaking about an immediate move to protect and preserve the vital haddock stock.

By any estimate, such a move would cost less than £10 million. As I said in the Scottish Parliament last week, that is less than the price of Tore Andre Flo, the recent Rangers star signing. Rangers fans might have a variety of views on whether that was money well spent. As one fisherman said yesterday, "It may be less than Rangers pay for a striker, but it's mair than Aberdeen pay." That is undoubtedly true, but the point is obvious. The sum needed to address the immediate problem is, at most, marginal for Government; £10 million from either the Scottish Executive or UK Government Budget would prove to be good value for the Minister.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): Most hon. Members would agree that this is a crisis, but the question is whether the Scottish National party believes that it is appropriate for the Scottish Executive or the UK Government to resolve it.

Mr. Salmond: I would welcome a resolution to the crisis from the Scottish Executive in their meeting this afternoon or from the Minister this morning. Like most of my fishing constituents, I am anxious for it to be resolved. We can worry afterwards who should take the credit for resolving it. Given the billions that have been talked about as the Chancellor's potential giveaway this afternoon, less than £10 million to meet this immediate crisis seems to me a very solid investment.

The argument for dealing with the immediate crisis is that it is man-made. It is not a natural disaster, an act of God or a great calamity that has befallen the industry because of the forces of nature. It is a man-made crisis. The key grounds that the white fish boats have been pushed into by the closure of areas under the cod recovery plan have been regarded by Scottish fishermen for generations as nursery areas for young haddock and whiting. No amount of technical innovation, in which the Scottish fleet has been first and foremost, is going to help in that situation. The sea to the east of Shetland, around the Fair isle, teems with huge quantities of young fish, particularly juvenile haddock; yet that is one of the few remaining fishing grounds left open to Scottish fishermen as a result of the closure of cod areas.

It would be a substantial and fatal irony for Scotland if the attempt to address the problem of the cod fishery—that may or may not work; it has had broad support—resulted in the destruction of the haddock fishery. Let us remember that haddock is twice as important as cod to Scotland. Many hon. Members are familiar with the map that I showed the Minister last week. It illustrates that the policy of closing 40,000 square miles of fishing grounds—as opposed to areas of the sea that are not fishing grounds—where a fleet of 150 white fish boats would have been pursuing the fishery for mature cod and haddock has forced the boats into what is effectively a nursery area for young fish.

When the Scottish Minister responsible for fisheries, Mr. Ross Finnie, was asked about that issue last Thursday, he said that he knew about the problem of the young haddock. I accept that he has other questions to deal with, as does the Minister. However, the young haddock are not a problem, but an opportunity. It has been many years since the sea held the vast quantity of haddock that the 1999 year class represents. If those fish are nourished, cherished and allowed to survive the next two to three years, we will regain a substantial haddock fishery in Scotland. Many of the other difficult questions that the Minister is grappling with, such as decommissioning and the structural power of the fleet, will be much less problematic if we have a substantial fishery. I will discuss the problems of the processing sector shortly, but a substantial haddock fishery would address the problem of supplies to the processing sector.

If people in the industry, both offshore and onshore, could see light at the end of the tunnel, or if they could see the prospect of a new fishery with substantial quantities, much of the current economic and financial pressure would be easier to bear. One of the biggest difficulties faced by the processors onshore and the fishermen offshore is that few people in the industry are optimistic about its future. The vast quantity of young haddock in the 1999 year class is one of the few bright lights, and that must be protected at any cost.

In the fisheries negotiations in December, the scientific advice was that the discard rate for haddock would increase as a result of the cod closure areas and might reach 2:1; that is, two boxes of dead undersized haddock discarded over the side for every box that could be landed and marketed. The ratio east of Shetland, in that part of the sea around the Fair isle, is 10:1 at present. Until the white fish fleet voluntarily stopped fishing there, 10 boxes of undersized haddock, which were illegal and could not be landed even if there were a market for them, would go over the side for every box landed. That slaughter has sickened the hearts of fishermen. That is why they have voluntarily tied up their boats and are making that economic sacrifice in an attempt to secure the future of the industry.

That remarkable demonstration is essentially about conservation and is supported by a number of Scottish environmental organisations, which issued a statement last weekend. It is also supported by the processors who have a huge stake in the long-term future of the industry. Would it not be an appropriate moment for the Government to agree that such an attitude and behaviour should be encouraged and that, in the light of this man-made crisis, things should be tided over for the next eight weeks until the closed areas are reopened? The case for action is unanswerable. It is a moral case, based

on the reasons for this short-term crisis. It is a case for the industry; we are talking about what is necessary to secure its future. I certainly hope that we get encouragement from the Minister this morning.

Before I move on to the processing side of the industry I should like to say a word about the fishing tragedy off the west of Scotland, which the fleet heard about yesterday as it sailed in the Forth. Our condolences go to the members of the largely Spanish crew who were lost on that German registered boat. Such events unite people, regardless of nationality. Fishermen are fishermen in essence. That was certainly the feeling of the flotilla that was sailing down the east coast of Scotland. I know that the Minister, as is traditional and proper in a fishing debate, will refer to the danger that is inherent in fishing as an industry. He should not underestimate the public support that can mobilise itself behind an industry which, like mining, has a special place in people's hearts because its inherent dangers are recognised. They are aware of the real price of fishing.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Naturally, I share the hon. Gentleman's regret at the loss of the Spanish fishermen. Those who survived, including the man who was in the water for an astonishing 16 hours, were wearing survival suits. Does he agree that too few of our vessels carry that vital piece of safety equipment?

Mr. Salmond: Yes. Every Member representing a fishing constituency, including my hon. Friend the Member for Moray and a number of others who have been through fishing tragedies in their constituencies, would support that call. We welcome the recent resumption of the grants for safety equipment on fishing vessels after they were quite scandalously interrupted. I know that Governments have pressing reasons for making cuts, but that was one of the most vicious cuts ever. We should all like to see further safety improvements in vessels. Although fishing tragedies are not necessarily the result of economic pressures, a combination of young skippers and older boats going to ever more distant waters in a desperate attempt to maintain their boats and their livelihood is inherently more dangerous. Obviously not every fishing tragedy is due to financial pressures, but they do make the industry more hazardous than it traditionally was.

Finally, I shall refer to the processing sector and I shall offer three documents in evidence. Unfortunately for my constituency—I am sure that other hon. Members will be deeply worried about processing factories in their constituencies—I have the notification from the receiver concerning Abacus Seafoods, which went into administration just before the turn of the year. There have been several expressions of interest but—perhaps unsurprisingly in the current climate—it is not clear whether this terrific factory, with its terrific facilities and first-class work force and location, will be able to maintain its position.

Although the factory has its own water treatment plants and its own access to water supplies—a common difficulty in the sector—it has yet to find a buyer. The fact that such a fine factory, at Lintlaw, has yet to find a purchaser demonstrates the problems facing the industry. We all hope for the best, but fear the worst. We also fear that the recent announcements about Abacus and others will, unless effective action is taken, be the first of a blizzard of closures in the processing sector.

Last week, the results of the year 2000 UK sea fisheries survey were released and I want to put one of the steering group's statements on record. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) looks interested, and the statement also encapsulates much of what he frequently says on the same issue. It relates to the processing sector's response to

"the stream of legislation emanating from Brussels at local, UK and European level and the costs of compliance... making an already difficult environment even more threatening to the future of the industry. The Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive, the Climate Change levy, Control Regulations, Hygiene and the Veterinary Inspection Charge are just some of the regulations. At local and national level some of this legislation has been handled by government agencies in a particularly robust manner and processors are not regarded as customers. They should help rather than hinder processors who have to compete, not only amongst themselves, but also against our European colleagues who may not always be subjected to equally stringent interpretations of necessary levels of compliance. The impact of waste water legislation will be ongoing and will directly affect not only costs but the way processing is carried out."

Every fish processor would agree with that statement from the steering group. It is the voice of the deeply depressed processing sector, which already has to struggle for supplies of fish and faces the additional burden of the heavy weight of regulations. The dramatic increase of water and effluent disposal charges has been a kick in the teeth to processors already struggling to maintain a business against difficult odds. The increase in water charges amounts to several hundred per cent. It is truly extraordinary. Whatever the Government say about private water companies south of the border and about the public agencies in Scotland, more could and should be done to help.

A company with a large factory—one of two in my constituency, but for obvious reasons, I shall not name it—has invested in new facilities and has a substantial programme for further investment. The company made that investment commitment under difficult conditions, but wanted a pause, or breathing space, in the present difficult circumstances before it proceeded. Millions of pounds were already committed to the factory, but it found that the water authority wanted to rush to court on the basis of compliance legislation. It is extraordinary that a public agency should behave in that fashion when people's livelihoods are at stake.

Mr. Malcolm Savidge (Aberdeen, North): Would the hon. Gentleman pay tribute to the co-operation of local processors in Aberdeen with the city council, other parties and the water authority in finding a solution to the problem?

Mr. Salmond: I would indeed. I was coming on to discuss the Grampian Enterprise initiative document, which expresses the hope that the same process can occur with Aberdeenshire council. "Finding a solution to the problem" may be optimistic because, although the agreement represents an improvement on a disastrous position, it is hardly a solution, as the hon. Gentleman would accept.

The final document that I submit in evidence is the Scottish fish processing action group's plan for the industry, which was completed in January and is now

[Mr. Salmond]

with the Scottish Executive and the Minister responsible for fisheries. The document, which accurately details the problems of the processing sector, contains some good and hopeful initiatives. I particularly like the idea of a licensing scheme for processors; there are solid arguments that show that it could be of substantial help to the industry.

The document seems hidebound by the fact that its proposals must fall within existing budgets, a matter that the Minister may wish to discuss with his Scottish colleagues. The money specified in the document can be added up in several ways, but the most reasonable total—although it is still not new money—is £1.8 million, which will not go far in addressing the processing sector's difficulties.

The action plans include working with companies to develop the ability to process alternative species and enter new markets, and a marketing campaign to help in that aim; that will be worthwhile and useful. Processors must be helped to adapt and marketing campaigns are important in that respect. Fish is one of the relatively few foodstuffs that is in roughly the same condition as it was 50 years ago. People can have confidence in it and be reassured; there is much evidence that pelagic fish is good for people's health. However, the problem with the admirable marketing objective is the cost—£30,000. I am not in the advertising business, but I do not think that £30,000 will buy us much space, air time or anything else to promote the action plan. The budget for that worthy and admirable initiative should go far beyond the amount specified in the document.

I have spoken before about the long-term future of the industry and most people accept that capacity must be considered. The Minister and his Scottish colleagues should take a different attitude; instead of reducing the capacity of the boats or the processors, they should consider how to increase stocks, an issue to which the Minister is deeply committed. It is a great opportunity, given the mood of the catching side of the industry. The Scottish fleet is prepared to experiment with technical measures; it is the only fleet in Europe that fishes with a square mesh panel. The mood of the industry generally is to co-operate in pursuing those measures.

The problem with the cod closure area is not that people do not accept it, but that there is no plan to deal with its consequences; despite warnings to Ministers in this House and in the Scottish Parliament that there would be a displacement effect on other areas. We must think of something for the 150 boats to do when the areas are closed. In return for the compensated lay-up scheme, which is critical in the next few weeks, Scottish fishermen are prepared for the area east of Shetland to be closed, to protect juvenile haddock and to secure the industry's future.

David McPherson, a member of the action group that met Scottish Ministers recently, died, tragically, last weekend. He was a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Moray, who will speak about him in a moment. There will be an empty chair at the action group's meeting this afternoon, and that brings home to us dramatically that people are protesting for the noblest cause of all; the future of their industry. They can see the opportunities swimming in the sea; the vast quantities of young fish stock. They may not be growing as fast as they should, and the Minister may want to say more about the industrial fishing that is depriving the young stock of the food source that would enable them to grow faster. There is a massive stock of haddock in the North sea. I hope that the Minister will take the appropriate action, or tell us that appropriate action will be taken in time to make a difference. If the young stock is fished out, the Government will spend a lot more money on decommissioning an industry with no fish than on decommissioning part of an industry with a substantial supply of fish.

Despite the crisis atmosphere and pessimism, fishermen believe that something could be done. The processors' support for the demonstration illustrates their belief that something could be done. The Government have it within their power during the next few vital days to make or break a large section of the fishing industry. I hope that the Minister steers a wise course.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It may be helpful if I remind hon. Members that this debate will finish at 11 o'clock and that the winding-up speeches should begin at 10.30, commencing with the Liberal Democrat spokesperson. If speeches are brief, it may be possible to call all hon. Members who are trying to catch my eye.

10 am

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on securing this debate. During the past few months, we have had several debates on the fishing industry, all of which have been important and constructive.

I was a little disappointed when I came into the Chamber this morning. It is the first time I have been here since it was realigned and we seem to be back to the old adversarial system. The previous arrangement was more constructive and Members felt that they were all part of a group discussing an issue—*[Interruption.]* I see that there is a rebellion from Opposition colleagues.

The fishing industry is important and I want to follow the constructive approach of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan. I disagree with little that he said. It is important to focus on the problems and how they might be resolved.

I have been in the House for approximately nine years and have attended debates on fishing every year. There always seems to be a sense of crisis in the industry; sometimes it is real, but often the industry is crying wolf. However, there is a serious problem now. The present crisis is distinguishable from previous crises by the way in which the industry has approached the problem. The Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, which is based in England, have taken a constructive approach. The processing industry onshore has also been constructive. Ministers should examine that carefully because we hear language from both sides of the industry that would have been unthinkable a few years ago. There are discussions of sustainable fisheries and the fish processors have set up an environmental committee to discuss how to achieve long-term goals for the industry. That is backed by the important report of

the Select Committee on Agriculture in 1999, which encouraged the Government to consider a long-term strategy for the industry.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan told us about the problem and it is important to focus on some of the solutions that the industry is suggesting. I am particularly pleased with the proposals from the Scottish Fishermen's Federation—it is based in my constituency and I am pleased to have it—which is considering the problem in three parts. For the short term, it has proposed a tie-up scheme that covers the problem of closed fisheries and displacement to the haddock spawning grounds. The Government should consider a tie-up scheme because the proposals seem to be modest.

We must not think that this is simply a Scottish problem; the problem exists throughout the United Kingdom. The current focus is on the white fish side of the industry because of the closure of the cod spawning grounds, but it is still important to make wider points.

A decommissioning scheme is the long-term solution to the problem. In all my years as a Member of Parliament—especially when the Conservative party was in government—decommissioning has almost been a dirty word. The taxpayer has not obtained best value from previous decommissioning schemes because the industry has not played it straight. Boats were decommissioned but were later recycled, so decommissioning never led to a reduction in catching capacity.

The SFF has approached the situation constructively. It has recognised that the Government cannot pay the whole cost and that we need more than a simple decommissioning of boats. It recommends the decommissioning of the vessel catching unit, which is effectively the licence. It has recognised that there are three essential components to the value of a fisherman's licence; the boat, which has an intrinsic value, the vessel catching unit and the quota. It has come up with constructive schemes that anticipate the industry playing a part in finding finance for decommissioning so that we can get catching capacity down to a level that matches available stocks. That must be the long-term future for the industry. However, there must be Government support for such a scheme. I support that argument because I cannot see how the industry can be restructured towards a solid and profitable long-term future without Government support.

Finally, part of the long-term solution is the reform of the common fisheries policy. The SFF has come up with constructive proposals, which are not new but are in tune with Government thinking, on regional and zonal management. These would ensure that our fishermen became stakeholders, rather than being outside the decision-making process. Those are all constructive suggestions.

I shall make a brief political point to which I suspect the Conservative spokesman will refer later. The Conservative party's idea to withdraw unilaterally from the CFP is at odds with the wishes and interests of the industry; it should spend more time listening to the public.

Mr. Savidge: My hon. Friend may remember that we heard that few Conservative Members turned up to the previous fishing debate because so many Aberdeen Members wanted to speak. Apart from the party spokesman, none of them have turned up today.

Mr. Doran: I take my hon. Friend's point, but I am anxious to ensure that as many hon. Members as possible can speak in today's debate, so I intend to sit down in a moment.

My major interest is the fish processing industry because there are 2,000 jobs in that sector in Aberdeen, all of which are threatened by a shortage of product. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan referred to the industry's work with Scottish Enterprise Grampian and the local authorities, which are working hard to help the industry through the restructuring process. Scottish Enterprise, the local Scottish enterprise companies and the enterprise companies in England and Wales are the appropriate agencies to tackle the processing industry's problems. However, I accept that need for extra finance. I do not expect the Minister to respond to that today, but if he can find more money in the short to medium term it would be well spent on this side of the industry.

The statement made by the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan that he does not care where the money comes from concerns me. He discusses the Scottish Executive coming up with the cash when he makes statements in Scotland, but when he is in Westminster he discusses the Government coming up with it. This is a UK—indeed, a European—problem.

Mr. Salmond: Given the extent of the crisis in the white fish industry, the hon. Gentleman must appreciate that the last thing in the minds of fishermen at the moment is where the money is coming from. If they do not get the money in the next few days, much of the future that the hon. Gentleman described will not exist.

Mr. Doran: The hon. Gentleman made that point in his speech and I accept it, but he does not make the same point when he writes articles for Scottish publications or makes speeches in Scotland.

As I said, this is a UK problem that requires a UK solution. I do not want the industry to be split by, say, the Scottish Executive producing one solution and MAFF in England and Wales producing another. A UK solution is important for the unity of an industry that, in a crisis, is taking a unified approach. The Government must ensure that the industry continues to take such an approach.

10.10 am

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I shall try to be brief because I do not want to be an English voice crying in a Scottish wilderness; I see that the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) is here to add a Cornish perspective.

All the points made by Scottish Members are equally valid in respect of the English fishing industry. There is the same feeling of bitterness and neglect, and of making representations to Government that are ignored. There is also the same desire for fishing to be treated fairly. At the moment, the focus is on support for agriculture, yet fishing has coped for decades with very little help. The industry is experiencing a crisis that in relative terms is more serious than that experienced by agriculture, but still nothing happens.

[Mr. Austin Mitchell]

I met representatives of the Grimsby Fish Producers' Organisation just 10 days ago, and they were 20 angry men. They were angry about proposals to increase mesh sizes, and about burdens such as light dues, inspection charges and higher landing charges. Such burdens should not be placed on an industry that is in financial crisis, yet they are being added to by, for example, the waste water processing directive. Nothing is being done to provide relief. The industry is being fed a constant diet of hope, but nothing materialises.

Industrial fishing, whether for sand eels or other species, should be stopped altogether. It produces a huge by-catch that is deeply damaging to the marine environment. Given the present state of conservation, catching edible fish to produce fish meal is a crime. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister is concerned about animal welfare, but something also needs to be done about the seals. If the fishing quota is to be reduced, there should also be a cull of seals. The seal population at Donna Nook is expanding, and I am sure that seals take more fish than does the industry.

There is also the question of power stations. The *Financial Times* has highlighted the problems caused by Sizewell B. It is estimated that about 200 million fish a day are sucked into a water cooling intake that acts as a killing hole. Again, that is a crime against conservation. There is also an enforcement problem. The British enforcement police are taking an increasingly heavy approach to British vessels. The complaint has been made many times that fishery protection vessels are nowhere to be found—either they cannot be summoned or they never arrive—when friction or conflict with Dutch fishermen arises. However, there is a heavy weight of enforcement on, and constant interference with, the British fleet. Fishery protection vessels approach at night with fishing lights and board British vessels. I shall quote a couple of instances that were described in a letter from the Grimsby Fish Producers' Organisation. It states:

"Recently one of our members, a day boat, was boarded and inspected just before returning to port, inspected on arrival in port, and inspected on his return to the fishing grounds".

It was inspected three times in 24 hours because, according to one officer,

"the gunboat had nothing else to do".

That is ludicrous. The letter continues:

"The dangers were recently emphasised when in one incident two members of the boarding party fell in the sea in the dark."

That shows the scale of the problem. An industry that is already in crisis is being further pressed. I do not say that we should stop inspection, but should it be so oppressive, considering the industry's present state?

We have 25 vessels left in Grimsby—not many. Six are laid up, while many have to fish three-handed because they cannot afford to go to sea with more men. That is not safe. The industry faces a huge burden of debt and the banks are unhelpful and unco-operative because they know about the state of fishing. Something must be done. Operating and lay-up support is needed. A similar package to that offered to competing European industries is required. The danger is that our quotas and licences will be sold on and purchased by foreign vessels, which are kept viable because their Governments provide them with support. That support is not provided to our industry, which has been forced into financial crisis and to sell up.

Mr. Salmond: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the new aid, announced by the Dutch Government, of $15 million—roughly £10 million—for a fleet much smaller than Britain's?

Mr. Mitchell: That completes the picture of other Governments giving support to their industries, while nothing happens here.

I am not keen on decommissioning because it would work against the interests of Grimsby. I want to retain a viable fleet in Grimsby to provide the critical mass to support the facilities there. I would like to put an idea to the Minister. Why can we not give a loan or advance to the FPOs so that the licensing of quotas can be put in escrow—in reserve to be reactivated later, like a post-fishing credit—until stocks recover? That might be a way to hang on to an entitlement locally and revive it later.

It is important that the fishing industry operates in centres that have a concentration of facilities. Something must be done. Fishing is in a crisis that could be fatal, particularly for the English industry, which is harder hit than the Scottish one, although both are badly hit. It is no longer satisfactory to say that MAFF has problems in agriculture—for example, with BSE and foot and mouth disease—and so it is difficult to get money from the Treasury. That excuse is no longer acceptable to an industry in crisis that will fold if it does not get support.

10.17 am

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on securing the debate. I also offer my condolences to the families of those who lost their lives to the west of Shetland, and I ask the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) to pass on everyone's sympathies to Mr. McPherson's family.

It is important that we address the future of the fishing industry. It is of environmental significance to our country that we maintain our biodiversity and stocks, which, if handled properly will give us an industry for life and for future generations. If we do nothing, and simply stand back to watch the crisis develop, there will be no fishing industry. Fishing will not recover unless we take action now. Fish is a quality, healthy food and maintaining the world's fishing stocks and sustaining fisheries is laudable and sensible.

An excellent paper from the Scottish Fishermen's Federation has been sent to MAFF and the Treasury and I hope that the Minister will tell us whether he has analysed its suggestions. It is time that we had more detail. The Minister has met representatives of the fishing industry in England, and we have heard promises of more substance in future. Time is rapidly running out. We must know what cost MAFF puts on proposals from the industry. The industry needs to know what is happening and where its future lies, otherwise it cannot respond constructively.

The document puts the point well. Many people think that total allowable catches and quotas refer to what one can catch but they are really a control on what can be

landed. That is where there is a serious problem. If one catches the wrong stuff, it just goes back into the sea until one catches the right stuff for landing. The document hints at an added danger, which is that even where there is a very restrictive quota, someone might discard much of what he catches and continue to fish until he has found the valuable catch that he wants to land. The incentives and structure of the industry could lead in a dangerous direction if there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

The technical measures are an important part of the process—the industry has bought into them—but they must be developed further for long-term sustainability. Part of the light at the end of the tunnel should be a decommissioning scheme. That must be seriously considered. The document, and the comments of scientists, have made it clear that the sustainable level of fishing that will have been achieved even after five years will not match current catching capacity. The earlier a decommissioning scheme is sorted out, the earlier the Government will want a long-term sustainable fishery to be achieved. That would also partly address the problem of overcapacity.

As the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) said, the paper from the Scottish Fishermen's Federation sees the Government's key role as buying back licenses. That would begin a regime under which quotas could be sold, in the first instance, to the remaining boats in the fleet, within the producer organisation. Where possible, other uses should be found for boats whose licences had been bought back. There are other commercial uses for such vessels; for example, as guard ships in the North sea. If a non-fishing use could be found, it would bring in money that had not come from the Chancellor.

The SFF's figures for the Scottish fishing fleet suggest that the Chancellor would have to find £15 million for buying back the licences to underpin the package. The industry would have to find £50 million to redistribute the quota. If another commercial use were found for the vessels, there would be no further cost. If the Government insisted on destroying the vessels, another £10 million would probably be needed. We will be interested to hear MAFF's comments on those estimates.

That is the long-term picture. However, overcapacity and over-fishing mean that there might not be a long term. The Government, therefore, must seriously examine the SFF's proposals on managing the lay-up scheme. It is crucial for the Government to know how big the cheque must be, and how open-ended the scheme is. An estimated 40 vessels would have to be laid off to get a 20 per cent. reduction in white fish catching capacity. At a cost of £1,000 per day for 180 days, the total cost has been estimated as £7.2 million in the first year. That would taper off to about £1 million in the fifth year, because as the recovery takes place, less lay-up is needed each year, until, finally, the sustainable fishery is reached. That is the light at the end of the tunnel.

The Minister has seen the document and the figures. Does he accept them? If not, why not? If he thinks that it is too early to comment, may I emphasise that it is urgent to move on from discussing the philosophy to discussing the nuts and bolts? I hope that today's meeting in Scotland will be constructive and helpful, but we in Westminster can add our weight. The all-party fisheries group is seeking to meet the Treasury Minister concerned. I do not know how far that request has got, but the debate has made it clear that the Treasury is at the heart of the problem.

The Minister said, in a sedentary intervention on the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan, that the Treasury would say, "Oh, not you again" when he turned up. Perhaps he should emphasise that he will not be speaking just on his own behalf, but on behalf of all hon. Members in this Chamber and of all hon. Members who represent fishing areas. The all-party group wants to meet the Treasury Minister to get across to him the key point; we are talking about a UK resource, we have a UK Government and hon. Members throughout the UK are concerned about this serious structural problem.

If the Government decide to wash their hands of the matter and refuse to engage with these constructive proposals, they cannot hope that the market will sort things out, as it does in industries on the mainland. There will be no sustainable future for the fishing industry if it is left to the market, with its current regime and structures. All that would happen is that bankruptcies would occur.

When someone goes bankrupt, the value of what they have is sold on at a price that the market will take. Catching capacity will not disappear through bankruptcies; it will fall back to a price at which it is seen as worth buying. When overfishing kills off more fish stocks, bankruptcy will recycle that capacity back in. If it is left to the market, capacity will remain and fishing will disappear. The long-term future for a viable industry with a sustainable, healthy fishing product will disappear as well. The Government must start to respond to the problem with some detailed solutions.

Mr. John Cummings (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, I remind hon. Members that it is customary in Westminster Hall to commence the winding-up speeches at half-past 10.

10.25 am

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I promise to be brief. I begin by offering my condolences to Mr. McPherson's family and to the families of the fishermen who died the other night when their vessel foundered. It is worth pointing out that those who survived were wearing survival suits. The rule in this country, by which survival suits must be carried only on vessels of a minimum overall length of 24 m, is not good enough. I have long campaigned for all fishing vessels to carry such safety equipment.

I agree with much of what has been said today. However, one bright note is the decision by the Minister's Department to award the contract for the new fisheries research vessel to Ferguson's, a yard with which I have long been associated and where several of my constituents work. The last fisheries research vessel built for the Department by Ferguson's at Port Glasgow is reckoned by naval architects to be among the top three such vessels in the world. The Minister and his officials did well to select Ferguson's.

The catching and processing sectors of the industry are in deep trouble, and our fishing communities should be given equal sympathy and consideration to that being

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[Dr. Norman A. Godman]

shown to farming communities. The media have been swamped by discussions about the terrible plight faced by many of our farmers, but let us not forget our fishing communities. The Treasury must provide financial assistance.

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) has a strong case on the need to protect stocks of young haddock. It would be insane to destroy those stocks. The discard problem to which he referred is difficult to tackle, but the Norwegians have given us a lead and I should like to know whether the Scotland Office and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food believe that we can learn any lessons from them.

I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) about industrial fishing. It is being reduced, but it should be banned altogether. It destroys valuable fish stocks and I do not believe that anyone in any maritime nation—with the possible exception of Denmark—can make a case for it. In fairness to the Danes, they are beginning to examine the question. My hon. Friend was brave to talk about a seal cull, which is another matter that must be tackled.

Our fishing communities deserve the sort of sympathy and consideration that is given to other communities, in particular farming. Let us have equality of treatment for our damaged fishing communities, which have been badly treated down the years by both Tory and Labour Administrations. We have a good Minister dealing with the industry's problems and it is time that the Treasury listened to the all-party case for assistance.

Mr. John Cummings (in the Chair): I advise hon. Members that the Opposition spokespersons have kindly and graciously agreed to reduce their contributions, which allows me to call the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing).

10.29 am

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): I am grateful to the official Opposition for that concession. I shall be brief.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on his clear exposition of the crisis and I am delighted that so many hon. Members from all parts of the United Kingdom, with the exception of Northern Ireland, have attended the debate.

I want to make a local point. I am grateful to hon. Members who mentioned my constituent David McPherson of Hopeman, who tragically died at the age of 39 last weekend, leaving behind a young widow and three youngsters. Our thoughts are very much with them, because their loss is most severe and heartbreaking. In addition, our fishing communities have lost a strong advocate for the fishing industry. Over the years, many hon. Members will have been in contact with David, who fought with great dignity and vigour for his cause and always presented well-argued cases. Last week, when he spoke at the rally in the Scottish Parliament and met Rhona Brankin, our Fisheries Minister, he put his case with his usual vigour. As my hon. Friend said, there will be an empty seat at the meeting with the First Minister this afternoon.

The dignity with which David argued his case is the dignity with which we should treat our coastal communities in responding to the issues that have been raised during the debate. This is one of the most despondent times that I have experienced in the years that I have represented the beautiful fishing constituency of Moray. The fleet has been in the van of technical conservation measures. It supports 25,000 jobs in our coastal communities and has a huge impact on our economic life. These small businesses—floating businesses—are critical if a way of life is to have a future.

I conclude with words that were spoken last week in Edinburgh by one of David's fisherman colleagues. He said: "How can we talk of a long-term future if we don't have a present?" We must deal with the present crisis quickly and effectively, or we will not secure the future for the industry that we all want.

10.32 am

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): I was not expecting to be able to speak and I have drastically cut what I intended to say. I add my condolences to those of other hon. Members.

I want to concentrate on local issues. Recently I went to Troon harbour to speak to local fishermen and learn first-hand about their perspective on the situation. That situation is slightly different from that in other areas, but as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) said, individual circumstances have a knock-on effect on the whole industry. I found a dismal local picture. We are down to about 20 boats. I spoke to the owners of small family businesses in Troon, including a father and son whose family has been in the fishing industry for generations. I had intended to speak in detail about their plight, but I shall not take up time in doing do as all hon. Members will be well aware of it.

Through the partnership between the Labour-led Scottish Executive and the Labour Government here in Westminster, we will do what we can—notwithstanding structural change and the fact that we cannot artificially support market conditions—to deal with these crisis situations. We will be there to offer any support that we can. We have done that with shipbuilding and various other industries, some of which are represented in my constituency. Surely, that also goes for fishing. Surely, we should support fishing as much as any other industry.

I ask the Government for their support on behalf of small family businesses in Troon, which have served our community well for many years. I shall not expand on that argument, as time is running short. I shall simply plead with the Government for their support. I know that they and the Scottish Executive are considering a response to the matter and I hope that it will come soon.

10.35 am

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on having secured the debate. He passionately expressed the united desire in Scotland to sort the problems out. He also pointed out the consequences for nephrops and distant-water fishermen.

The debate provides an opportunity to reflect upon yesterday's deaths on a German-registered vessel west of Scotland. That reminds us of the danger that fishermen face so that we can have fish on our dinner tables. We must reflect on that.

The nub of the hon. Gentleman's argument was the law of unintended consequences. Closing off areas for cod fishing has pressurised the haddock fishery. The 1999 year class has not yet reached minimum landing size. He stated that the discard ratio of the catch is 10:1—I was told that 90 per cent. is below minimum landing size. If such catches continue, there will be a drastic impact on stock. We should have anticipated that that would happen although it was an unintended consequence.

The primary purpose of the debate is to concentrate on the challenges facing the Scottish fishing industry. I was grateful that the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) pointed out that those challenges have consequences for England in general and Cornwall in particular. The basis of the case being made either to the Scottish Executive or the Government is that there is an immediate need for £10 million, which was compared to the price of a striker recently bought by Glasgow Rangers. In terms of Government expenditure, that is a relatively small sum. If that investment were made, it would have a significant knock-on effect in protecting stock around Scotland, which would have consequences for the remainder of the United Kingdom.

I am interested in the Minister's response to whether such a relatively small amount of money could have such a dramatic impact. We are discussing £10 million, which sticks in the craw of fishermen who know that at least £55 million is being given away to Spanish and Dutch fishermen as a result of the Merchant Shipping Act 1988 fiasco, which was botched by the Tories. Britain's fishermen believe that they have a right to compensation when times are tough because we are spending £55 million on a serious mistake. Conservative Members have not apologised and during the previous fisheries debate we heard a brazen statement from them that blamed Europe, which was not in keeping with what I believe fishermen wanted to hear. However, it might be helpful if the Conservative spokesman would shed a little light on the assistance that a Conservative Government would provide in the current climate and on their fishing policy, because it is not clear. Does it include withdrawal from the CFP and limiting fishing to United Kingdom nationals in some way? How would Tory policy help to solve the crisis in the Scottish haddock fishery? We would be grateful for information on that.

The matter is urgent and I should be interested in the Minister's comments on whether a settlement for Scotland would set a precedent throughout the United Kingdom. I understand that under article 16 of the financial instrument of fisheries grant, compensation may be paid for a biological event and loss of access to a third country. Spanish fishermen are being paid for their loss of access to a third country and United Kingdom fishermen will find it difficult to understand why they cannot receive compensation under that instrument when the Spanish can.

What assessment has the Minister made of the proposals of the World Wide Fund for Nature for long-term restructuring and recovery of the fishing industry? What assessment has he made of the estimate of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation of the cost of compensation and paying for the fleet to be laid up? What discussions has the Minister had with his counterpart on the Scottish Executive about the crisis? What consequences might arise if different financial arrangements were made in Scotland and south of the Scottish border? If the Minister has received cold comfort from the Treasury, would he welcome broad, all-party representations to the Treasury to strengthen the case for compensation for the fishing industry?

10.42 am

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North-East Cambridgeshire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) on this timely and important debate. As the official Opposition spokesman, I pay tribute to Mr. McPherson, who, tragically, died recently. His contribution to the fishing industry was immense and his words of wisdom will be sorely missed.

This debate is narrowly focused on the immediate problems in the fishing industry, which have been precipitated by the cod fishery closure programme. This is neither the place nor the time to make political points or an election address, although the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) seems to believe that it is. It is not the place to discuss the medium or long-term future of the industry, important as that is, nor the future of the CFP. However, the debate is not concerned only with the problems of the Scottish white fish industry, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) said, because they also affect the English east coast ports from North Shields to Lowestoft, many of which have beamer fleets which, at this time of year, would be fishing for their quota of plaice and sole in the areas that have been closed. It is important that if any compensation is forthcoming because of the problems precipitated by the closure of cod areas, it should be United Kingdom wide. That has been pointed out several times this morning.

The problem has been caused by the cod fishery closure programme and it is important that the Minister explains exactly how that came about and whether he was fully in favour of the way in which it was done. Was it based on accurate science? If so, why was there a second draft of the proposals and why were they different from the initial proposals? Was the closure programme based on the logbooks of vessels that were fishing in the traditional way in that particular area of the sea? If so, is it not an attack on fishing effort rather than a conservation measure? Was the timing of the closure appropriate? Fishermen to whom I have talked believe that spawning—which took place in November and December—was largely over by the time the recovery programme was implemented. Yet again, we have tried to close the stable door after the horse has bolted.

Why did the Commission not anticipate the problems that fishermen in the North sea now face? It was surely obvious to the fishing industry that catching effort would be switched to those areas and quotas that had hitherto been ignored at that time of year. It is no surprise to Scottish fishermen, who have picked up prominent early-year-class juvenile haddock, that there have been great problems in certain areas. A discard ratio of 10:1 is obscene in the extreme and credit must go to Scottish fishermen for voluntarily deciding to tie up in such circumstances.

The Commission's conservation measures seem too little too late and they take no account of the detailed knowledge of fishermen. If consultation had taken place

[Mr. Malcolm Moss]

earlier, some of the problems that we now face might have been anticipated and alleviated. If the closure programme was ostensibly driven by conservation considerations, why is industrial fishing for sand eels—an issue that has been raised by a number of hon. Members today—to be allowed to continue? Given the mesh sizes used, industrial fishing is the most environmentally damaging practice, particularly in the cod-spawning areas that we are supposed to be protecting.

There is a real crisis in the industry and the time for consultation and discussion is over. The fishing industry sees the Government responding positively to the problems in farming and agriculture and regards its own need for compensation as modest in comparison and no less warranted. If the Minister has no words of cheer this morning, he will confirm the industry's worst fear: that it is to be made dispensable.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): As with all such debates, the speeches today have been thoughtful, serious and worthy of careful consideration and a detailed response. However, my time is limited so I want to focus on the main points.

I offer my condolences to those fishermen who were affected by the recent tragedy off the west of Scotland. I also echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) about the use of the survival suit. That was a truly remarkable feat of survival by the fisherman concerned. I also pay tribute to the remarkable efforts of our rescue services in finding a single person in the seas at this time of year. It was a tragedy that Mr. McPherson died as he did, particularly given that he leaves behind a young family. They and the community in which he lived will miss him, and I hope that the hon. Member for Moray (Mrs. Ewing) will pass on my condolences.

The debate has focused on compensation, which is linked to the cod recovery programme. I should make it clear, particularly to the hon. Member for North-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss), that I make no apologies for the cod recovery programme. It was the right action to take and was undertaken with the unprecedented involvement of the fishing industry. As the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan knows, the European Commission's original proposals were altered because the industry itself did not think that they were justified or would achieve their objectives. The final scheme was designed with the views of the fishing industry very much in mind, and was applied in a way that kept large areas of the North sea open for fishing. Alternative fishing grounds were available, although I do not dispute that a closure of that scale has an impact on the fishing industry.

The industry's involvement was crucial to the setting up of the cod recovery programme and I very much appreciate that. It is true that issues such as spawning dates need to be addressed, especially in the southern part of the North sea. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Mr. Wright) brought inshore fisherman from his constituency to talk to me about those matters. We will take their points seriously, and consider them when we examine future arrangements about spawning dates; for example, whether there should be different arrangements for north and south, or changes to the proposed area. Such schemes are not set in stone; they are dynamic and they evolve, depending on the industry's views about how they can be made effective.

Compensation is the most important issue, and I understand that. When I have met industry representatives, I have said that I accept the case for compensation because of the pressures on the industry. I have made it clear to the industry that I will press its case, and I have kept that promise.

There have been unprecedented demands on MAFF's reserve this year, as has already been touched on. Foot and mouth, swine disease and the cost of the flooding—[*Interruption.*] If hon. Members will let me finish, I think that I can reassure them, because I know what they are going to say. The financial demands on MAFF have been enormous. That does not mean, however, that the fishing industry does not have a legitimate case for compensation. I am not saying that, for one moment.

Mr. Salmond: I am glad that the Minister made that last remark, because he could see the outrage of hon. Members who represent fishing communities. They do not begrudge people compensation for foot and mouth disease; no sensible person would. However, if that were a reason for giving no compensation to the fishing communities, there would be mass outrage around the coastline. The Scottish fishing fleet has been voluntarily tied up for almost two weeks. If it is driven to sea by economic pressure, as it will be, the cod recovery plan will become the destruction of haddock plan. That will happen because haddock fishing is one of the few remaining areas where people can make a living, although they do not want to make a living at the expense of the future. Does the Minister accept that that is the reality? Can he offer us some help for the crisis period?

Mr. Morley: I understand the point, but I do not necessarily accept that that is the case. I will turn to the reasons for that in a moment.

I return to the demands on MAFF's reserve. Many people have demanded compensation, such as those who have suffered consequential losses because of foot and mouth—including the meat industry and the processing industry—and those who have suffered because of the floods. The Government cannot compensate all of them. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that I am not saying that because of such demands, there will be nothing for the fishing industry.

Sir Robert Smith: I think that the language used causes problems when the Treasury is approached. The Minister must understand the structural problem. Compensation is not as important as the fact that MAFF has issued too many fishing licences. MAFF must ensure that there is restraint, or market pressures will mean that only some people take action. This is not a collective industry in which everyone can be forced to do something. MAFF has issued licences, and is part of the problem.

Mr. Morley: I understand that point, and I will try and address it in relation to choices and options.

The first issue to be examined is where the money comes from. As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, in some ways the fishing industry is not concerned about that, and I accept that it is not its worry. However, the fact that there are devolved Administrations contributes to the issue. The Scottish Executive have their own budget, within structural funds. Two thirds of the white fish fleet is in Scotland, so much of the cost of any scheme could fall on Scotland.

I strongly support devolution, and with an element of it, different choices can be made. However, structures are available for assisting the fishing industry in both England and Scotland; I accept the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) on that. We must approach the matter on a UK basis. Although devolution means that England and Scotland can have different approaches to fishing patterns and needs, we want a broadly similar approach. I have been working closely with Rhona Brankin to find ways of doing that.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Morley: I understand that hon. Members want to intervene, but I have six minutes left to try and finish answering the points.

Mrs. Ewing: Will the Minister assure the Committee that he will do everything possible to encourage the Scottish Executive to use the funds available to them to compensate those who have joined the voluntary tie-up scheme?

Mr. Morley: I take it that the hon. Lady is not asking me, as an English Minister, to tell the Scottish Executive what they should and should not do. Devolution is about making choices and I have every confidence in my colleagues in the Scottish Executive. They understand the pressures on the fishing industry.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) said, English fleets—including fleets in Cornwall, which, he suggested, is merely tacked on to England—are affected too.

How can we best help the industry? A case has been made for a tie-up scheme. I have carefully considered whether such a scheme would be effective and would meet the objective—which was the main point of the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan—of alleviating pressure on juvenile haddock. That is an important issue. The fact that we have one of the best year classes for many years is good news; it has the potential to be a good fishery for the North sea fleet. We need to protect that fishery.

The advice from the Scottish Executive's scientists at the marine laboratory is that the 1999 year class—two-year-old fish that are predominantly undersized—is "widespread throughout the northern North sea". They have no evidence of a particular concentration of two-year-old fish in the areas that have been identified. That is the scientific advice, which I must listen to. Money will be difficult to find, so we must think about the best use of resources.

Mr. Salmond: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Morley: I have only four minutes left so perhaps the hon. Gentleman will let me finish so that I can address all the issues.

We must decide on the most effective use of resources. For example, we might feel that there is problem with the Scottish fleet catching undersized fish. If we subsidise it for three months, after which it continues to catch undersized fish, it would be a bad use of resources. [*Interruption.*]

Mr. John Cummings (in the Chair): Order. The Minister is not giving way.

Mr. Morley: Members will be aware that there are many ways of reducing the catch of undersized fish. Concerns have been raised about the length of extensions to nets, which, in some cases, have been more than 70 m. That will negate the effect of using a square mesh panel. One way of reducing the catch of undersized fish is by prohibiting lifting bags. I know that those practical issues are under consideration by the Scottish Executive and the industry, which knows full well how to reduce the level of discards.

Mr. Salmond: The Minister should not only acknowledge the failings, but the fact that the Scottish fleet is further forward in technical conservation than the English fleet. The fishermen who demonstrated on those 167 boats know where the concentrations of juvenile haddock are. They were fishing in those locations to make a living. They refuse to fish there now because of the circumstances. Why can that area not be closed? The Minister says that closed areas work for cod, so why can they not work for haddock? Will he make it clear that he will not stop Scottish Ministers if they decide to do something about the crisis, a crisis that the Minister seems to be doing nothing about?

Mr. Morley: If the Scottish Executive have identified closed areas and think that they will be effective, I warmly welcome that. There is a case for closed areas where they are effective.

I was arguing that tie-up grants might be a short-term fix. I am not interested in short-term fixes, but in addressing the long-term problems of the fishing industry. We should also consider over-capacity, which raises the issue of decommissioning. Decommissioning has its downside, as my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby mentioned. If we are to go down the decommissioning route, we must consider the shape of such a scheme. I acknowledge that the federations have been thoughtful in putting forward ideas that are worthy of consideration. My officials are considering the proposals and costings. The suggestions are serious and sensible.

On seals and industrial fishing, hon. Members know where I stand. We agreed on closures, for the first time, for sand eels. Norway pout fishing is excluded from the closed areas because it has a big by-catch. There is a dispute about the impact of sand eel fishing, but we have agreed on a joint study with the Danes of the total allowable catches. We are sharing science and putting our scientists on their boats. That has not been done before.

It is too easy to look for scapegoats such as industrial fishing, seals or power stations. The principal reason for the problem is over-fishing and too much capacity and effort. My time has been too limited to deal with the

[Mr. Morley]

sensible points put by Members, but I will consider them carefully. There are real issues here for the fishing industry and I will take them seriously.

UN Human Rights Commission

11 am

Mr. Paul Goggins (Wythenshawe and Sale, East): I am delighted to introduce this debate on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, which is the most important annual event devoted to human rights. The 57th session is due to begin on 19 March and will last for six weeks. It is an opportunity for the world's Governments, as well as human rights non-governmental organisations, to consider the record of Governments and international organisations and to take appropriate action. The United Kingdom Government always play an important role in the meetings. This debate gives right hon. and hon. Members a chance to raise issues of concern, so that the Minister can take them into account when preparing for this year's session.

I will raise a number of general issues before making several specific points on Colombia. First, I want to underline the important role played by special rapporteurs. I pay tribute to Sir Nigel Rodley, the special rapporteur on torture, whose very effective term will end at the forthcoming commission. I also pay tribute to Asma Jahangir from Pakistan, whose work on summary executions has required great personal courage, and to Francis Deng, who has worked to develop new standards for people who are internally displaced as a result of war and conflict.

Those people receive no salary or remuneration for the difficult and sensitive work that they do. It is vital that they can make investigative visits and prepare their reports speedily and efficiently. I hope, therefore, that the Government will support arrangements to ensure that all rapporteurs are issued with standing invitations that enable them to make visits without undue delay or obstruction.

Secondly, I urge the Government to ensure that financial support for special rapporteurs' work is placed on a stable and sustainable footing. At present, most rapporteurs must raise their own funds and have little or no administrative support. Governments create those posts, so they should ensure that the positions are properly supported.

The death penalty is likely to be raised at this year's commission. An unusual medley of states leads the opposition to its abolition: the People's Republic of China, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States of America. I urge the British Government to use their influence to ensure that we see no further retreat from the progress that has been made towards eventual worldwide abolition of the death sentence.

Child soldiers are another important subject that will be raised. I am aware that UK Ministers do not accept the international majority view on the age limits for recruitment and combat. Although I do not want to use this debate to weigh the merits of their argument, I ask that those who put our Government's position have it in mind that the Governments of other countries, such as Myanmar or the Democratic Republic of Congo, will be looking to justify their policies of recruiting soldiers who are still far too young and who should be protected from the risks involved.

The world conference on racism, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance will be held in Durban in the first week of September. The conference will be chaired by the High Commissioner on Human Rights, Mary Robinson, and will be the subject of considerable discussion at this year's commission. Racial discrimination is a worldwide phenomenon. Although we in the UK are beginning to get to grips with the difficult issue of institutional racism, it is as much a matter of attitudes and values as it is of policy and regulation. I hope that the conference will help to produce a renewed burst of energy and ideas so that we can make further progress.

The issue that threatens to block progress at the world conference is compensation: the claim that people descended from slaves or others who have suffered from severe institutionalised racism should be compensated for the wrong that they have suffered and for the permanent depression of living standards that resulted. Given the importance of the world conference, I hope that the Minister will agree that it should not be diverted from its central purpose. I would be interested to hear his views on how that politically sensitive matter should be handled. At the very least, and as a first step, our schools should teach children the history of that period honestly and frankly. It is part of our past, as well as that of people in Brazil, Caribbean countries and the United States.

The commission is the main international forum in which countries' record on human rights is publicly debated. Last year, a mild resolution was passed concerning the protection of human rights in Chechnya, but the situation there is no better and access to the territory no easier, either for Russian or foreign nationals. Reporting from Chechnya has been minimal, but serious allegations of human rights abuses continue to surface. I hope that the Government will encourage a full discussion of the issue.

Other hon. Members may wish to discuss other themes and other countries. I wish now to focus on the difficult and deteriorating situation in Colombia. In doing so I acknowledge the considerable assistance I have received from ABColombia and CAFOD. Colombia has suffered internal conflict for the last 40 years between the state and guerrilla groups—including FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, and ELN, the National Liberation Army—and, more recently, an increasing number of paramilitary groups. The central directorate of the judicial police announced that 25,660 murders took place last year, in a country with a population of 35 million. Despite the heroic dedication of staff in the prosecutor general's office, the superior judicial council estimates that more than 60 per cent. of crime goes unreported, while 40 per cent. of reported crime goes unpunished. Even if the conviction rates were higher, that would create separate problems because the country's prisons, which were built for 30,000 inmates, already hold nearly 50,000.

The public ombudsman reports that 314 massacres occurred between January and August 2000. During the year as a whole 3,706 people were disappeared or kidnapped and 77 trade unionists assassinated. Civilians and representatives of civil society continue to be targets, not just the accidental victims of the conflict. Last October in Medellin, Angel Quinteró and Claudia Monsalve from the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared and Detained were themselves forcibly "disappeared".

Barrancabermeja is a town of around 250,000 people, of whom 480 were selectively assassinated during 2000. The total so far this year is 108. Last September the entire directorate of CREDHOS, a local human rights organisation, received death threats from the paramilitary group AUC. Such murders and death threats have created a climate in which anyone who stands up for human rights is likely to be labelled a military target. As hon. Members will know, that happened most recently to volunteers working with the London-based organisation Peace Brigades International.

The chilling letter from the AUC to members of CREDHOS says that its aim is to "carry out social cleansing". It claims that the human rights workers are friends of the FARC and the ELN and that

"if we eliminate them we will be building the country we desire".

I welcome the announcement in January by the Interior Minister, Humberto de la Calle, of an anti-paramilitary and anti-hitman committee to combat paramilitary forces and to respond to the deteriorating situation in Barrancabermeja. However, there have been similar initiatives in the past and that has not prevented the situation from worsening significantly.

Forced displacement is one of the great tragedies of Colombia. I well remember the displaced people whom I met two years ago in a disused basketball stadium in the town of Quibdó in the Chocó region. They had been there for 27 months. Human rights organisations estimate that the number of displaced people could be as high as 2 million, with more than 300,000 displaced last year alone.

Displacement hits women and children the hardest. A third of displaced families are headed by a woman. Only 15 per cent. of displaced children have access to schools. Many settle on the outskirts of the big cities of Bogota, Medellin and Cartagena in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions. Many lack access to health care. The legal requirement to respond to the needs of displaced people is not matched by the actions of a Government who are still failing to provide a systematic programme or budget.

The office of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Bogota reported that displaced people and those who work alongside them have also received death threats. Despite the recent partial implementation of law 387, many of the recommendations made previously by Francis Deng, the UN special rapporteur on internally displaced persons, remain only words. Mr. Deng reported last year that most of the recommendations that he made on a previous visit in 1994 remain relevant today. It is important that his mandate continues.

The Colombian Government have made attempts to improve their human rights record over the last year, especially in bringing human rights violations before the civilian courts. I am personally grateful for the efforts made by the Colombian ambassador to the UK, His Excellency Victor G. Ricardo, to ensure that Members of Parliament are kept up to date with developments. As recently as 23 February I received a detailed note of the action being taken in some 15 different cases.

[Mr. Paul Goggins]

None the less, the conflict seems to move ever more quickly and the US State Department's report on human rights for 2000 concluded:

"The Colombian Government's human rights record remained poor; there were some improvements in the legal framework and institutional mechanisms but implementation lagged and serious problems remain in many areas. Government security forces continued to commit serious abuses, including extrajudicial killings".

The report goes on to claim that paramilitary forces find a ready support base within the military, and that members of the security forces regularly collaborate with paramilitary groups by sharing information, allowing them through road blocks and providing them with supplies and arms. They also report that high-ranking police and military officers are rarely charged with human rights offences. Given such strong words, it is hard to understand why the Clinton Administration were prepared to waive the human rights conditions that ordinarily attach to foreign aid and to grant $1.3 billion to a largely military-based Plan Colombia, which places additional power and resources in the hands of the very forces that they criticise.

At Foreign Office questions on 23 January I urged my hon. Friend to take steps to ensure that he could learn directly from grassroots communities in Colombia about what was taking place in the country. The Minister announced that he had issued an invitation to Father Francisco de Roux, a Jesuit priest who lives and works in Barrancabermeja and is the director of the Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Programme. I am delighted to say that Father Francisco is in London this week to meet the Minister and his officials. I was also pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) and I had an opportunity to meet him earlier this morning.

I asked Father Francisco what his message was for our Government and the international community. He said the most important thing was to encourage a dialogue for peace, but added that such dialogue—fragile as it currently is—was threatened principally by the paramilitary forces. He told us in detail how they have taken control of half his city by cutting communication links and forcing local families to provide their homes for use by the gunmen. He told us about members of a women's organisation who had worked in Barrancabermeja for 25 years but were being threatened by the paramilitary and told to leave. He told us about his friend Omar Vera, his wife, Benita, and their two children who were forced to flee to Bogota because of their work for the community. He also explained how the actions of the paramilitary go unchallenged by the police and the military, who parade openly on the street: everyone knows where their headquarters are, but no one arrests or charges them.

Father de Roux gave a personal account of how he had negotiated with a local commander for a food convoy to travel to peasant communities in the Magdalena Medio area. Just 15 minutes later, the truck and the food were seized by paramilitaries. After Father de Roux complained to the commander, everything was returned and no one was arrested.

Father de Roux underlined his belief that some of the worst elements in the military have been removed, but such events suggest that considerable collusion between the military and paramilitary still takes place at all levels. I pay tribute to him and the people who work with him, who show great bravery and deserve our continued pressure for action to improve human rights in Colombia.

As a last word, I make three strong recommendations to the Government in advance of the UN Commission meeting. First, we should press for more support for the office of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Colombia, including the opening of offices in regional areas. Secondly, we should insist on a strong statement from the Chair to emphasise international concern about the lack of progress on human rights and, in particular, the actions of the paramilitary. Thirdly, we should press for a commitment to monitor the impact of Plan Colombia and, in particular, the impact of crop spraying on rural communities and the level of military activity that arises from it.

I look forward to hearing assurances that my and other hon. Members' points will be carefully considered in advance of the forthcoming session of the UN Commission on Human Rights.

11.16 am

Mr. Desmond Browne (Kilmarnock and Loudoun): This is the second time in the past 16 hours that I have risen to speak after my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins). I am grateful to him for introducing the debate and I congratulate him on his comprehensive and excellent speech.

It is almost a year since we last debated human rights in Colombia in this Chamber on 28 March 2000. Last night I refreshed my memory by re-reading our earlier debate. On that occasion, my hon. Friend pointed out that the 56th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights had begun in the previous week. This year we are fortunate in being able to anticipate the 57th session.

I want to concentrate on three subjects: first, the human rights disaster that may be unfolding from the distortion of Plan Colombia, which has developed into a bilateral military aid project between Colombia and the United States of America; secondly, the emerging pattern of escalating violence in Colombia, which is targeted against the brave people who work for human rights; and, thirdly, the lack of improvement in the persistent problem of impunity in Colombia and its consequential effects in denying human rights across the country.

In March 2000, hon. Members warned that the plan—originally designed for the purpose of advancing the peace process, improving the economy, contributing to the fight against narcotics, reforming the judicial system, promoting human rights and supporting democratisation and social development—was already losing its way. It was in its infancy, but was already becoming dominated by a misconceived, anti-narcotics military plan between Columbia and the United States, posing a danger to the peace process with a potentially destabilising effect on the country. We now know that our worst fears have been realised.

That did not have to be the case. United States Colombia aid legislation passed in 2000 contained strict human rights provisions, for which human rights groups fought hard. They were intended to block United States aid unless and until Colombian armed forces ceased to support the paramilitaries. It was argued that without them the funding would inevitably support massacres, killings and disappearances. Although the House and the Senate agreed with them, they were qualified to allow a presidential waiver of the human rights provisions on national security grounds.

When paying the first tranche of money in August last year, President Clinton invoked the waiver provision; he allowed the aid to go forward, even as his State Department was preparing a report that showed that the Colombian forces who would get the money were inextricably linked to paramilitary groups, were implicated in human rights abuses, were ambivalent about allowing the civilian courts to deal with military personnel who were charged with human rights crimes, and failed to prosecute or even, in some cases, suspend officers implicated in abuses. It was worrying at the time that at least one of President Clinton's spokesmen was prepared to make human rights considerations subservient to their drug war. About that time, the United States drugs tsar, Barry McCaffrey, was reported as saying, "You don't hold up the major objective to achieve the minor." However, the official justification for the waiver at that time was a plea to allow the Colombian Government to have more time to make good their commitment to improve human rights protection.

More time was given. Five months later, in January, the second tranche of aid was due for payment. The human rights situation in Colombia had deteriorated; there was documented evidence of paramilitary activity continuing throughout the country and compelling evidence of collusion between them and the armed forces. Putumayo, the state where the drug eradication efforts are concentrated, had a high concentration of active paramilitaries. In his last days in office, President Clinton ignored the mounting evidence that Colombia was failing to meet the basic human rights requirements and agreed to pay over the money without the necessary human rights certification. He relied on a technical interpretation of the legislation to enable him to do so, arguing that he was bound to do so as a result of his earlier decision.

On 17 January, an estimated 50 paramilitaries conducted a chilling massacre in the village of Chengue in the province of Sucre. They killed 24 men by crushing their heads with heavy stones and sledgehammers in the main square of the village. Two bodies were later found in shallow graves. As they left, the paramilitaries set fire to the village.

The day after the massacre, the paramilitary leader, Carlos Castano, acknowledged responsibility for the killings and on the same day, President Clinton announced that human rights protections were not relevant to the payment of the second tranche of money under Plan Colombia.

The experience of the implementation of the plan on the ground is that it is worsening conditions that have already deteriorated. If the initial objectives of the plan are to work, they must be consistent with a peaceful solution and not an excuse for an increased military presence in the guise of humanitarian assistance. The implications of the plan being reduced to a militarised anti-drug operation are being acknowledged. The Colombian Ombudsman has called for the suspension of crop spraying in Putumayo after confirming that the operations were damaging food crops. The spraying has stopped, whether in response to the ombudsman's call or not, I do not know. The European Parliament rejected Plan Colombia by a vote of 474 to one, for the same reasons and because of worries about the human rights consequences of the United States' support for that approach and its support for an army that retained links to paramilitary forces.

Alternatives are emerging. The local government of the six south-eastern Colombian provinces opposed the plan. They remind us of what we knew and debated last year—that there was no consultation with civic society when the plan was designed—and they introduced initiatives based on ways to help local peasant communities, alternative eradication methods and new infrastructure projects. The European Union and the new United States Administration now have an opportunity to assess the project thus far and to transform it into a development plan. Unless that opportunity, in conjunction with the up-coming human rights commission, is seized now we may lose the opportunity to achieve the project's initial objectives.

On average, 14 people die every day in the conflict between Government forces, left-wing guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia. On 1 February, the United Nations human rights observers reported that the human rights situation in Colombia was in a state of "alarming degradation". One of the most worrying features of the violence there is the targeting of human rights workers.

On that subject, the State Department report says:

"The Human Rights Community remains under intense pressure ... Human Rights monitors were subjected to a systematic campaign of intimidation, harassment and violence. According to the Colombian Commission of Jurists, five Human Rights activists were killed during the year, three Human Rights Workers disappeared. A total of 49 Human Rights Workers have been killed or have disappeared in the last five years. On numerous occasions during the year, paramilitary groups in several municipalities circulated lists of the names of persons they considered 'military targets' which included the names of local Human Rights activists, Labour organisers and politicians."

As has been said, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East and I were privileged to meet Father Francisco de Roux this morning. He has a deserved international reputation as a champion of human rights, and lives in the city of Barrancabermeja. We met him when we visited Colombia in 1999. Our meeting this morning reminded me of the courage and dignity shown by many people whom we met during that visit.

Father de Roux's city is of strategic importance to the continuing dialogue between the Government there and the guerrillas, particularly the ELN. Traditionally, the city is a stronghold of that rebel group. The ELN requested that the Government grant it a safe haven for peace talks, such as the one that has been granted to the FARC. The proposed site was two hours by boat from Barrancabermeja, but the paramilitaries were determined to block that proposal. They vowed to cleanse the city of guerrillas.

[Mr. Desmond Browne]

Father de Roux reported to us this morning that almost half his city is now controlled by paramilitaries, who are employing their well-honed tactics of terror in poor neighbourhoods. They are forcibly placing their people in houses all over the city and are disrupting communications. There is no doubt that they have informal relationships with the military and police. They openly patrol the streets and, as part of their regime of terror, target human rights workers.

This year the paramilitaries issued threats against members of the People's Women Organisation. For 25 years, that organisation has been doing good work in the poor communities of the city. Its refusal to accept the paramilitaries has led them to turn their attention to the women and pressurise communities to expel their organisation.

In addition, members of the Peace Brigades International have become targets of paramilitary violence. A Swedish citizen, Lars Emerson, who works with the PBI, has been declared a military target.The authorities in Barrancabermeja are failing in their obligations to protect their citizens and the human rights workers.

Amnesty International has launched a worldwide campaign to protect human rights activists in Barrancabermeja. In the context of the meeting of the Human Rights Commission, a strong condemnation of the Colombian Government's failure to provide the necessary security for human rights workers or to combat the paramilitaries must be a priority.

The Colombian Government have attempted to improve their record in bringing those who perpetrate the violence before the civilian courts. However, their success rate is poor. The US State Department's report for 2000 states:

"The Central Directorate of the Judicial Police announced that 25,660 murders occurred during the year compared with 24,358 murders in 1999. The press reported that, on average, one person was killed every 20 minutes. The police and the Prosecutor General's office have insufficient resources to investigate most killings adequately. The superior judicial council estimated . . . that 63 per cent. of crimes go unreported and that 43 per cent. of crimes reported go unpunished."

That estimate was based on a 1997 survey. In 1999, when we were in Colombia, those whom we met estimated that impunity rates were as high as 97 per cent. Just as it is proper to record that the Colombian Government have attempted to improve their record on civil justice, it is also proper to record the personal bravery and commitment of the national officers who are charged with that task. However, impunity remains a serious problem and will continue to be so until those charged with human rights abuses, whoever they are, are brought to book before the appropriate civil courts. As long as paramilitary forces have a base of support in the military, the police and local civilian elites, that will be almost impossible to achieve. To quote the State Department again:

"Impunity for Military personnel who collaborated with paramilitary groups remains common."

I do not doubt President Pastrana's commitment to human rights. He has made serious attempts to combat human rights abuses. My hon. Friend the Minister is aware that paramilitarism, impunity and the protection of human rights workers are important issues, and he is addressing them. However, I press him to set out the steps that the Government can take, and are taking, to ensure that those issues take a prominent place in our contribution to the pending 57th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights.

11.30 am

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): I begin by saying that I recognise the inherent difficulty that is faced by any Government—as opposed to an NGO or, indeed, a Back Bencher—in pursuing a human rights dialogue with countries with which we have a relationship that is complicated by factors other than human rights. The Government have made considerable progress in working out how to deal with such dilemmas. In the modern world, we expect a degree of consistency in the way in which we relate to countries across the board. When I occupied the Minister's role, I was always conscious of the fact that it was far easier to beat up Burma than to be critical of some of the larger states. We must try to get the balance right.

I shall refer to a number of countries with which it is genuinely difficult simultaneously to maintain a relationship and a right to criticise. That right does not spring from some automatic moral onus. We can influence the behaviour of Governments—sometimes non-Governments—who allow the systematic abuse of human rights only by exercising a proper approach and maintaining a proper dialogue.

The Geneva hearings are important both symbolically and because they bring the world community together in a human rights jamboree. However, I am tempted to say that human rights are not only for Geneva, but for life. In reality, human rights abuse in countries such as Colombia takes place day in, day out. For the victims, the erosion of opportunity—sometimes even of life—is absolute, and that is not improved by an annual jamboree. We need year-round consistency. I am not criticising the Government—they have done more than any Government of recent times to take that agenda forward.

The first country that I want to talk about is Afghanistan. It is sadly ironic that in recent days the vast attention of the media has been focused on the destruction of Buddhist monuments. Of course, it is right and proper for the world community to criticise the Taliban Government for that destruction, which is an offence against human dignity. However, they have not faced that sustained level of criticism for their systematic erosion of the rights of the population of Afghanistan—especially women, who have borne the brunt of the conflict for a long time. At one point, Afghanistan had some 6 million refugees, both internally and over the borders in Iran and Pakistan, and even now it has about 2 million people living outside its borders. The systematic abuse of the rights of women has been a consistent theme. In extreme cases they have faced death, and violence—especially sexual violence—has been part of a systematic policy of eroding their position in society.

Women do not have access to the world of work in Afghanistan. Women who have tried to work—something that we would consider to be a normal

right—have suffered extreme penalties. Taliban extremists in Kabul have attacked women who have the permission of the Taliban Government to work for international aid agencies. Families that have tried to educate their daughters suffer astonishing attacks from zealots in the Taliban community. We ought to condemn that to the Kabul Government, but I freely admit to the Minister that it is difficult to know how to influence them. We must be consistent in our approach and say that their demands cannot be distinguished by reference to Koranic provision because many Koranic scholars would condemn their activities in Afghanistan as an outrage not only against women, but ironically against the code of Islam.

I have always been conscious that western European states have sought to maintain an ambiguous relationship with China. We perceive China as an emerging military and economic super-power, which are two things that it will become. Therefore, I would argue that we want good relations with the Government and people of China. In my city there is a large Chinese community, which actively operates between modern China and modern Britain; all the bridges that it builds are good and healthy.

However, the Chinese human rights record requires comment and criticism. The Chinese Government have allowed people from various positions in their society to be tortured. Political dissidents, people who exceed family planning laws, vagrants and common criminals have all suffered. I shall quote, although my Chinese pronunciation is not good, Mr. Hou Zongbin who, as chairman of the National People's Congress Committee for Internal and Judicial affairs, is a senior representative of the Chinese state. In December 2000, he reported on the findings of the NPC teams inspecting the implications of criminal procedure law in 12 provinces. He said that torture to extract confessions is

"rather serious in certain places, causing terrible social consequences"

and must be

"conscientiously dealt with rather than tolerated."

It is important that even in the Chinese state there are people who are trying to tackle issues such as torture. Nevertheless, we have a duty to ensure that the Chinese know that in our search for the best possible relations the protection of the Chinese people from the abuse of their human rights is an important measure of its Government's progress.

People from both sides of the divide in Kashmir live in Britain. Indeed, both sides are represented in my city. The last thing that I want to do is exacerbate tensions not only in Britain, but, through British Kashmiris, back in Kashmir. Although today's debate has nothing to do with a final settlement of the situation, I must say that I applaud the ceasefire, provided that it is genuine, imposed by the Indian Government. Despite the relative period of calm, violence and abuse against the civilian population by the Indian authorities is so extreme that we must place our concerns about the Indian Government, with which we would normally have the best possible dealings, on record. When we see an erosion of human rights, our friends must know that they are not immune to criticism.

I shall finish with a reference to Colombia, but I shall not reiterate what has been said this morning. I have great affection for Colombia and its people; it has a role to play in the world. Ironically, human rights abuse in Colombia, unlike elsewhere, is not an instrument of state policy or even accepted by the state as being incidental to its other ambitions. It is more complicated. Colombia has been involved in a civil war of many sides and there is enormous capacity for confusion in allocating blame and demanding improvement. With my hon. Friends the Members for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne), I believe that President Pastrana's ambitions are acceptable to everyone in this Chamber. However, the sad reality of every recent Colombian Government is that their ability to control significant players has been less than we take for granted in the role of a modern state.

Many senior Colombians have tried to persuade me that the civilian Government are bringing pressure to bear on senior military officers to bring pressure to bear on the middle officer ranks. The crude reality is that too often the association between the army of the state and paramilitaries is so close as to make little difference and my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East referred to that. The consequence is that the activities of the state are directly involved in the mass abuse of the rights of the Colombian people. I was going to quote 228,000 displaced people last year, but my hon. Friend says that it might be 300,000. Whether the figure is 228,000 or 300,000, the scale of human suffering and misery is almost unbelievable in a modern Britain.

We must retain Colombia at the top of the United Nations hearings agenda because international witness pays dividends for public perception of how matters are dealt with back home. The hearings are important and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East for introducing the debate at this time. It is important that the Government hear what is said in the Chamber during the Geneva hearings. The erosion of human rights does not occur only in countries that have been and will be mentioned today. It is a worldwide phenomenon and this country, with its free Parliament and a happy inheritance of relatively high respect for human rights by our institutions places on us the moral onus to maintain a human rights vigil 52 weeks a year, every year. I trust that following our debate the Government will consistently maintain those responsibilities.

11.43 am

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): Last week, the all-party group on human rights held a meeting and heard four excellent speakers with direct experience of Chechnya, so I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) for introducing today's debate. However, it should, more properly, take place on the Floor of the House, and it should be a full day's debate. It is ridiculous that we are expected to encompass these important issues in such a short time and those who initiate debates on these important issues in future should insist on a full day's debate. I should like to discuss many countries, but I shall confine my comments today to Chechnya, which is suffering a forgotten war. I am ashamed that, as my hon. Friends said, those of us who are free and living in a democracy where we can be heard sit back while terrible things happen in Chechnya.

[Ann Clwyd]

The four speakers that we heard last week included a representative of Human Rights Watch, which is based in Moscow, an elected Chechen Member of Parliament, who, of course, has never taken his seat, and Anthony Lloyd, a reporter from *The Times* who was based in Chechnya. They highlighted continuing human rights abuses by both parties, and it is right to emphasise the involvement of both parties because although it is mainly the Russians who commit atrocities, the Chechens also bear some responsibility.

The general conduct of the Russian campaign in Chechnya has been a matter of concern, especially the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force against civilians. The razing of Grozny last year attracted a lot of press coverage, and it has also been reported that most of the territory within Chechnya, to which there is very little access, has been devastated. Most civilians, including more than 100,000 displaced people in Chechnya, have been left to fend for themselves with practically no assistance from the Russians. The Russian forces are accused of arbitrary detention, torture, extortion, disappearances and the continuing harassment of civilians. Unfortunately, those practices are reportedly a routine part of Russian operations. The notorious filtration camps such as that at Chernokosovo—in which Chechen men were allegedly systematically raped, beaten and killed—were widely reported last year.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. When talking about Chechnya, we should not forget the four brave British citizens who were so foully murdered in that country.

Ann Clwyd: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for reminding me of that incident.

I can recommend an excellent book published by Human Rights Watch, entitled "'Welcome to Hell': Arbitrary Detention, Torture and Extortion in Chechnya", from which I should like to quote a couple of passages. It is reported that Russian guards said to one detainee:

"Welcome to hell. You're lost now. You will die a slow and painful death. We will teach you to respect Russian officers."

A former detainee said:

"They used the iron part of their sticks to beat me on the bottoms of my feet. They put a cloth in my mouth so I couldn't scream, and they handcuffed me. They made me lay down on my stomach with my head under the table. They took off my boots and socks, and beat my soles, especially on the heels. Then they made me stand against the wall with my hands up, lifted my shirt and beat me on the kidneys with the sticks."

Human Rights Watch has also reported the comments of the man who talked to the all-party group on human rights last week.

Last week, there was also a chilling report in *The Guardian* by one of Russia's most respected journalists, who writes for the Moscow newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. She travelled deep into Chechnya to investigate reports of torture, rape and detention camps run by the Russian army. If there were any doubts about the veracity of the shocking stories that she heard, they vanished when she herself was detained by Russian troops. The journalist had turned victim, and she gave a graphic account in *The Guardian* of the way in which she was treated.

There were further reports this week of the discovery of what appears to be a mass grave near the main Russian garrison on the outskirts of Grozny. The number of corpses found has risen to more than 50, and investigators from Memorial, the brave human rights group in Russia, have reported signs of torture. Several corpses had ears missing. Most had their arms bound behind their backs, and many had been blindfolded. Several of the dead had disappeared after being detained by the Russians at the end of last year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East mentioned Sir Nigel Rodley, the UN rapporteur on torture. He has asked to visit Grozny in Chechnya but, so far, has not been told whether he can do so. That is regrettable, although the two rapporteurs responsible for children and armed conflict and for violence against women have been allowed to visit the area. I hope that the Secretary-General's other representatives who have asked to visit the area will be allowed to do so.

We are concerned about the lack of accountability of the Russian forces. The Russian Government have repeatedly refused requests for independent scrutiny of the alleged violations, except for the visits by the special representatives, and are deemed to be acting in bad faith in the conduct of their investigations. Only one agency has the authority to investigate crimes in Chechnya and, according to Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, only 47 investigations of crimes against civilians have been launched. None deals with allegations of torture of civilians held in custody, which apparently was committed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs or army service men. In addition, there have been no indictments in connection with the alleged mass killings in three areas and one of last weeks' speakers referred to the black hole into which complaints that are referred to Russian officials disappear.

I pay tribute to Lord Judd, who spoke at our meeting. He is the Council of Europe's special rapporteur on Chechnya and has produced several good reports on the situation there.

All last week's speakers referred to the climate of impunity that now exists in Chechnya. Russian troops believe that they are free to do as they want because they are certain that they will not be held to account for their actions. Senior Russian Government sources refer to the elimination of terrorists rather than the elimination of terrorism and that is worrying.

Unfortunately, most other Governments have shown themselves unwilling to take effective action to ensure that the Russian Government brings those violations to an end. For example, no cases concerning alleged violations of the European convention of human rights by the Russian forces have been referred to the European Court of Human Rights. It was suggested last week that Governments should pressure the Russian Government to accept independent observers in Chechnya to investigate violations that have been reported to the authorities, especially the large number of documented disappearances on which no action has been taken.

No Governments have recognised the Chechen Government, whose election was upheld by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and former President Yeltsin. Mr. Idigov, an elected Chechen Member of Parliament, who was here last week, and former official representative of the elected President of Chechnya, told our group of his inability to meet representatives of western Governments to discuss the Chechen conflict. The Russian Government are also unwilling to talk to the rebel leadership to try to bring an end to the conflict.

Will the Minister try to give Chechen representatives an opportunity to address groups of people and Governments? If they were allowed to do so at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, which will meet on 19 March, it would be a valuable contribution to a wider discussion of the issue.

The Chechen forces are responsible for violations of civilian immunity, mainly by killing, injuring or threatening civilians who work with the Russian-installed Administration in Chechnya. We must also ask what future the rebels foresee for the Chechen people and whether universal respect for human rights is part of their future agenda.

The conflict is taking place behind closed doors. Non-governmental organisations and independent journalists face significant obstacles to gaining access to, and working in, Chechnya. Unlike in many other conflicts, there are virtually no aid organisations on the ground—we know some reasons for that—and very few witnesses to what is happening. A few weeks ago, Frank Judd said:

"The failure of Governments to act is one of the saddest reflections on the whole ugly story".

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to throw some light on the matter.

11.55 am

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I also congratulate the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) on securing the debate, and I endorse the remarks of the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). It insults suffering people all over the world that we have only an hour and a half this morning to discuss the problem. We ought to have a full debate.

The proposed agenda for the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva later this month is huge. We can do no more than scratch its surface this morning. It includes many issues and mentions 22 countries where human rights abuses are occurring. I will not deal with each in detail; if I did, hon. Members would never speak to me again.

We must seriously examine the language of the agenda. It includes terms such as affirm, reaffirm, commit, ratify, adopt, eliminate and maintain momentum. Where is the action? We are always reaffirming, but we never seem to get much action. Is the commission just a talking shop? The trouble is that there is no effective penalty against states that refuse to implement human rights. We hear, and we have heard this morning, appalling accounts of torture, abuse and murder. I could add to them at length. The commissioner travels around the world—on a very sparse budget compared with the rest of the UN—deploring and denouncing, but the UN must be reformed if it is to be a more active organisation and not just a talking shop.

I call on the world to stop the rhetoric—we could talk endlessly about human rights—and start to address the underlying causes of human rights abuse. In yesterday's debate on the International Development Bill, we talked at length about poverty. We must do more about trade agreements that discriminate against poorer countries. The AIDS epidemic, the scale of which has been recognised only in the past few years, seriously damages human rights. There is a lack of good government and democracy. There is a need to control the arms trade. Four years on, we still do not have a draft Bill about that. Where is it? The drugs trade is another huge problem.

I will not deny that there has been some progress. The International Criminal Court is good news, and the legislation for it is currently going through Parliament. When, however, will we ratify the protocol on child soldiers under the UN convention on the rights of the child? The land mine convention was an excellent move, and we were all pleased about it. However, the cluster bombs that have now come on the scene are probably doing more damage to people and their human rights than landmines ever did. There has been depressingly little progress on that front.

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe said last year, when he was a Foreign Office Minister, that in an ideal world the Commission for Human Rights would be free of country-specific texts. Sadly, it is not. Although I promised not to talk about all the countries, I will briefly mention two or three.

I endorse all that has been said about Colombia. I too have been there, and I stayed in a village in the jungle where the most appalling abuses of human rights were taking place. The drugs trade—the problem that overhangs Colombia—has not been mentioned. We must ask ourselves whether we are tackling that correctly on an international level—I merely throw that out to the Minister. The United Nations should be discussing the issue. The problems of Colombia will not be solved until we do something about the drugs trade. Even if Plan Colombia has any effect—which it will not; it will only increase the suffering of the people of Colombia—it will merely divert the growing of drug crops elsewhere in the world and create yet another problem spot. I therefore urge the Government to look at that problem.

I wanted to touch on Sudan but, sadly, there is not much time in which to do so. Colombia is one hell-hole that I have visited; southern Sudan is another, with people bumping along the bottom of existence. They have no food; they are taken into slavery, abused, burned, raped and pillaged. It is a mediaeval society about which we have done little in the 40 years since we left Sudan. The Sudanese people expect us to do something; they were our people at one time and we united the two parts of their country. However, there is precious little progress or resolve among the international community to do anything about that problem.

The main country I wanted to address this morning is China, which is a very different problem; the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) touched

[Dr. Jenny Tonge]

on it. Last year, the United States proposed a resolution condemning China's human rights record and in response the EU tabled a no-action motion to prevent discussion—many people say that that was just to protect our trade interests. The same may happen this year. China has nevertheless ratified the UN covenant on economic and social rights. It has not yet done the same in regard to civil and political rights but there seems to be a glimmer of progress.

According to Amnesty International—and the hon. Member for Manchester, Central—the wide-ranging crackdown on peaceful dissent continues in China: 260,000 people are in labour camps, there are great abuses of human rights in Tibet, the members of Falun Gong are persecuted and 18,000 people suffered the death penalty in the 1990s. In the USA, the death penalty is still imposed on people under the age of 18. I would call such people children—and they are being killed by the American Government. Will there be a UN action against the United States for that infringement of the rights of the child? That is an important topic and the USA should lead the world on it.

China is undoubtedly changing and progress is being made. Should we support that progress and condemn the human rights abuses? Should we encourage trade and cultural contact or suppress them until China changes? Should we stop the Olympic games in 2006 because of China's human rights record? Dealing with countries such as China is a dilemma for us; what I have said applies equally to Burma, which has been mentioned, and even Turkey. Maybe we need a carrot and stick approach. Will total condemnation and isolation only make things worse? I would like to know the Minister's views on those issues.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): Let me make one thing clear: it was China who tabled the no-action motion and the EU voted against it—but it was passed anyway. That is a very important point. The hon. Lady said that it was the other way around.

Dr. Tonge: I thank the Minister for that. I apologise; I misread my notes.

I wish to highlight an issue that has not been mentioned, which I hope the Government will raise at the UN Commission. Human trafficking in women and girls is the most extraordinary and sickening development in recent times. Two million women work as prostitutes worldwide; there are thousands in London. Some of them pay people traffickers £25,000 to come over to work in London as sex slaves, nothing more nor less. Paul Holmes of the Metropolitan police vice squad has said how many thousands there are in London, but doing anything about sex slaves and the problem of people trafficking in London is not one of the Met's performance indicators. I know it is not the Minister's area of responsibility, but it is a worldwide problem. People are coming from eastern Europe and it is happening around us in London. The international community spends millions of pounds on tracking drug traffickers. When will we start to spend the same amount on combating people trafficking? We must have some action from Geneva.

Lastly, I remind the Minister that many of us signed a renewal of the declaration of human rights. It was first signed over 50 years ago in 1948. The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) signed it. We were in the Dining Room with the Foreign Secretary. I think that we used the same pen as him, which was pretty riveting stuff. What does it all mean, if it does not result in improvements? Liberal Democrats believe that the time has come to move from the process of declaration to the implementation of our commitment based on that universal declaration.

12.6 pm

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) on securing this debate. I also congratulate all those who have spoken. It seems to be the same crew every time, and here we are again. It is particularly apposite because the 57th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights will be held in Geneva from 19 March to 27 April. Like the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), I regret the fact that this debate is in Westminster Hall rather than on the Floor of the House and that the Government have not allocated any time for a debate before such an important meeting.

As the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) said, the provisional agenda is comprehensive, covering everything from racism and religious intolerance to summary executions and the effective functioning of human rights mechanisms. Like her, I shall not read out the whole agenda. I simply ask: who will represent the UK at that meeting? Will the Minister place copies of the UK's position on each item of the agenda in the Library to summarise the lines that we will take on all the important matters that will be raised? I hope that the UK will be present throughout and will make a firm contribution. As the hon. Lady reminded us, we all signed up to a renewal of our views on human rights two years ago. This Government have made much of their vaunted ethical and moral foreign policy.

In the brief time left to me I should like to raise three specific issues. The first concerns Burma. I should like to pay tribute again to Wilfred Wong of the Jubilee Campaign, which consistently provides us with information about Burma. Recently it sent out some filmed evidence of atrocities currently being inflicted on Burma's internally displaced minorities. Would the Minister accept a copy of that video and let me have his comments on it? As I understand it, the British Government have yet to acknowledge that there is a genocide and neither has there been any financial assistance to the Kareni or the Shan. There are more than 342,000 internally displaced Kareni and Shan people in Burma, many of them hiding in the jungle from the Burmese army who normally kill them on sight.

Mr. Battle: That is not true. We are assisting them, although not in Burma as we do not deal with the Burmese Government. We are assisting in the refugee camps that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary visited in Thailand. That is the way to do it. That is where most of the Karen are.

Mrs. Gillan: I said that the Government have not given any financial assistance to the internally displaced

Karen. I said that they have not given any financial assistance to the 600,000 internally displaced; I was specific in choosing my wording. I appreciate that there is help in the camps, but I want to know what help is being given in the country. It is not outwith the bounds of possibility for help and assistance to be given.

Like the hon. Member for Richmond Park, I want to raise the issue of China, because, once again, the United Kingdom will not be sponsoring a resolution condemning China's record on human rights, for which the Conservative party has consistently pressed since it has been in opposition. When the Conservative party was in government, we co-sponsored the resolution. The United States will introduce a resolution on China's human rights practices at the meeting of the Commission's meeting in March, I hope that the Minister will say now whether he will co-sponsor the resolution encouraging China to take positive, concrete steps to meet its internal obligations to protect the fundamental freedoms and civil liberties of the Chinese people. I am not encouraged to think that the Minister will give me that assurance, which is a great shame; when asked whether he would support the resolution on the Chinese Government his weak and weedy written answer was as follows:

"We and our partners are considering the EU's approach to China at the forthcoming 57th session . . . This process has not yet been concluded.—[*Official Report*, 23 January 2001; Vol. 361, c. 562W.]

It is a little while since 23 January and I hope that the Minister will tell us today that he will sign and co-sponsor the resolution; anything less is unacceptable.

Less than two weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) and I went to Zimbabwe, where we met some of the bravest people that it has ever been our privilege to meet. We met residents of the high-density area of Harare, whose freedom and jobs are disappearing out of the window, farmers who have been casually thrown off their farms, and workers and their children whose homes have been taken from them who are forced to live in sheds that once housed working machines. We met farmers who have not been allowed to plant seed on their farm for more than a year and whose farms are going to rack and ruin. We met lawyers—the judges in Zimbabwe are the last bastion of the rule of law. We met Morgan Tsvangirai, the brave leader of the opposition MDC party, whose offices have been bombed and activists beaten up, some just for wearing an MDC tee-shirt.

Since we left Zimbabwe, in the last few days the seventh white farmer has been murdered—Mrs. Olds' husband was also cruelly slaughtered two years ago and within hours of his death Mugabe went on television saying that white farmers were "our enemies".

Where is the voice of the United Kingdom Government in all this? We have been deafened by their silence. The Chief Justice has been thrown out of office, foreign journalists have been expelled, the economy is in free fall and there will probably be food shortages by the end of the year, but the United Kingdom has done nothing.

What has Mugabe done in the past few days? He has taken off on a tour of Europe and been fêted by our so-called European partners while we stay silent. *The Times* this morning reported that not only did Mugabe have an excellent and friendly meeting with Mr. Chirac, but he was treated to a standard protocol fanfare from 75 plume-helmeted soldiers of the Garde Republicaine. Where was the protest from the United Kingdom Government at that reception?

I agree wholeheartedly with the *Daily Mail* editorial today, which stated that President Chirac alone is not to blame and that while the United Kingdom Government stays silent

"EU development commissioner Paul Nielson rolls out the red carpet for Mugabe, while the Belgian Prime Minister . . . actually invites him home. The terrorised people of Zimbabwe see their tormentor feted wherever he goes."

The livelihoods of people in Zimbabwe are slipping away from them; their homes have been taken and violence is continually threatened, yet Europe fêtes Mugabe and the UK Government remain silent. It is about time that we heard a voice from that Government. I should like to stiffen the Minister's backbone and the so-called ethical and moral foreign policy. The French and Belgians have breathed a new lease of life into a man who, by any stretch of the imagination, is clinging on to power through violence, creating chaos and destroying his country. When will the UK speak up for the citizens of Zimbabwe? When will the UK realise that there cannot be honesty in government unless we tell our European partners about our distaste for their actions and stand up for the people of Zimbabwe, who rely on us. Given the actions taken by the French and Belgian Governments, I certainly do not hold out any hope for a common European foreign policy—not that I ever did.

Today, while we discuss human rights, I am giving the Minister an opportunity to tell us on the Government's behalf where Labour's voice is and whether they appreciate freedom and hate tyranny. If he cannot in this debate condemn Mugabe's actions and join us in calling for sanctions concerning the closest supporters of Mugabe, he is practising the politics of convenience and betraying everything that this Government and country should stand for and certainly the people of Zimbabwe. The Minister is a decent and honest man, so I hope that the first words that he utters will be a condemnation of Mugabe.

12.16 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. John Battle): My first words are that I hope that I will not be condemned for not being an honest and decent man, but I will return to the issue of Zimbabwe. It is a most serious concern, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs. Gillan) for raising it.

I start by complimenting my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins), who has a record of raising matters of international development, justice and peace. I am tempted to say to him that, as other hon. Members know, campaigning on human rights in other parts of the world is not always popular when we are trying to be re-elected and to represent our own constituents. I do not mean that cynically in relation to the immediate election, but raising international affairs is not the easiest job in our society, and I compliment all those who do so regularly.

The hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham talked about the same old crowd, but I am impressed by this morning's turnout. I also share the view that we

[Mr. John Battle]

should be debating the issue on the Floor of the House. I will take that suggestion back to my Department, because there are ways in which we can demand a full debate. Whether in the parliamentary Labour party or as Ministers, we can raise themes to debate properly on the Floor of the House. This debate is taking place before the 57th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, so it is timely.

This year, I held a meeting in the Foreign Office with a range of NGOs to get their input. We talked to the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, Anti-Slavery International, Article 19, the UN association, Disability Awareness in Action, Human Rights Watch, the Law Society, the Catholic Institute for International Relations, minority rights groups, the Refugee Council, Save the Children, Amnesty, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the Index on Censorship and others. I cannot name them all, but there were more organisations. The purpose of the meeting was to hear their voices, to see what issues they wanted us to discuss and to ask them to suggest amendments that we should work towards in getting consensus and resolutions passed by the UN. Those organisations warmly welcomed that.

Having recognised the input of NGOs, perhaps we should do more to recognise the input of right hon. and hon. Members. As we have heard this morning, they have real expertise to offer on these matters. I will happily take back with me the proposal that we have a serious debate every year on the Floor of the House in anticipation of the commission, which would allow us to decide what our key themes should be. I will say why. Amnesty International's first priorities were Russia, Chechnya, Colombia, Sierra Leone, China and Saudi Arabia. Zimbabwe was not on that list, but perhaps it should be. I thank the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham for her contribution on Zimbabwe, which raises serious concerns. Many other countries were listed, as well as themes such as torture, the death penalty, forced disappearance, children, abduction and slavery in Sudan. The range of the agenda was there at the meeting, but perhaps we need to extend the parliamentary debate. Next year, we may be able to work together in different ways to achieve that.

The forum was a welcome contribution and we must not underestimate the wealth of knowledge and experience of NGOs and others who help us—Members of Parliament and Ministers—to understand what is happening on the ground. In the age of the e-mail and the fax, we can learn much more about the impact of the denial of human rights on local communities. We do not have to wait for telegrams from embassies, which should no longer be regarded as the source and fount of all knowledge about a country. We can receive direct information from our global communications systems—a helpful tool to encourage us to be more alert and responsive. We need to take further action, as the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Dr. Tonge) said when she encouraged us earlier to move on from resolution-based politics.

We have tried hard; we shall continue to do our best to put human rights at the heart of foreign policy; but we have a long way to go. I do not resile from the task; promoting human rights is one of my passions. Of course we promote British interests and pursue British values, but they must be based on the rights enshrined in the developing corpus of international human rights law. Getting the laws and the words right is one thing, but I accept that implementation is crucial.

In its 2000 audit of the Government's foreign policy, Amnesty International referred to

> "a record of real achievement—including the constructive role the UK has periodically played around the world, the passing of the Human Rights Act and the increasing importance accorded to human rights and international justice in UK diplomacy abroad."

We would have a solid delegation at the UN session. Yes, and our delegation will be led by Mrs. Audrey Glover CMG, the former head of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and a former senior Foreign and Commonwealth Office legal adviser. She will do a fine job; I hope to be there alongside her at the meeting. I shall address one of the sessions on 22 March. We will be there, and I can confirm that we shall be fully engaged in all the issues that are debated.

Mrs. Gillan: Will the Minister attend for a longer period than it takes to deliver his speech? How many days will he spend at the conference?

Mr. Battle: We are sending a full team to negotiate the wording and it will be in place for the whole period. Different sessions take place on different countries among different teams, so I could not physically attend every workshop to debate the wording the whole time. That is not the role of Ministers, but I shall be there as long as I can. I am going there to listen as well as speak.

Mrs. Gillan: How long?

Mr. Battle: I think that my diary will confirm that I shall be there for two full days. I am more than keen to attend for as long as I can. The hon. Lady might like to know that I am probably due to answer parliamentary questions on the Floor of the House and that I have other responsibilities in Parliament. I repeat that I want to attend the session for as long as I can, and that I have every confidence in the team. I want to move on because I have so much ground to cover in my remaining time.

Britain lobbied hard to be re-elected to the 53-member Commission on Human Rights and we secured a place last May for another three years. We were elected top of the western group and we should not take our place at that table for granted. We have to campaign for it and we need a respected track record to be there. Only six of our EU partners are on that commission, not including the current presidency.

We are keen to ensure that we retain a good track record. We shall actively contribute to EU initiatives on Sudan, Burma, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Israeli settlements in occupied Arab territories, Iran, Iraq, Chechnya, East Timor and Colombia. We shall also campaign on the death penalty and rights of the child. The hon. Member for Richmond Park mentioned trafficking in people, an issue that is thankfully moving up the agenda. It is every bit as serious as the international drugs trade. All those matters will be on our agenda and I shall ensure that the hon. Lady's representations are heard.

A key UK objective in all UN human rights forums is to uphold the human rights principles that all Governments signed up to at the world conference on human rights in Vienna in 1993. It is increasingly understood that human rights are the legitimate concern of the international community. Human rights are universal, a seamless garment applying equally to all human beings everywhere. Everyone with a name and a face has a right to be represented in terms of basic human rights.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East praised the work of the special rapporteurs, which I welcome. However, I should pick him up on one small point. He paid tribute to Sir Nigel Rodley, and I endorse that praise. However, I understand that Sir Nigel Rodley has no plans to step down at this session of the Commission on Human Rights, even though he has recently been elected to the Human Rights Committee. We will work closely with the Danes on their draft resolution on torture, which will renew the special rapporteurs' mandate. It is not a fait accompli—he has not finished his work yet, and I do not want to give that impression.

A number of countries—Norway, Canada, Iceland and the Czech Republic— have indicated that they will issue standing invitations in respect of UN thematic procedures. NGOs have been lobbying EU member states to do the same. We are in favour of the practice of issuing standing invitations and have been consulting other Departments to ensure that they are happy with that arrangement. I am optimistic that, when I get to Geneva, I will be able to make a positive announcement on that issue so that we can move the internal workings on to make them more implementary rather than simply resolutionary.

It is our policy to encourage all Governments to ratify the core UN human rights treaties with minimum reservations, but I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Richmond Park. Internationally, emphasis and attention must now be given to implementation. Governments have freely undertaken obligations under the treaties, and they must fulfil them and co-operate fully with UN mechanisms. The UK is no exception: all our Departments have to respond in detail to the questions of special rapporteurs, and so they should.

We want to continue our efforts to eradicate torture and will continue the Foreign Secretary's anti-torture campaign, the second phase of which was launched in December 2000. We want the World Conference against Racism to be successful. It has been set up, and we want to follow it through and be actively engaged. I would like to go myself—if that would make the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham happy, it would make me happy—but events before the date of the conference might preclude that. We try to do as much as we can to ensure that as many countries as possible open their doors to UN rapporteurs and scrutiny. Openness to scrutiny is a start along the road of implementation.

We are committed to taking preventive action at all levels to protect children caught up in armed conflict. We have ratified International Labour Organisation convention 182 on the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including the forced or compulsory recruitment of children for armed conflict. We are working with the ILO and NGOs on a global lobbying campaign aimed at achieving universal ratification of ILO convention 182.

Mrs. Gillan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Battle: I have three minutes to reply on Colombia. I have the whole world to cover, and Colombia was a key focus.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) mentioned China. We raise the matter of human rights regularly with China. Dialogue took place in February and, when Mary Robinson was there, there was some progress on China. We will not step back from pressing the Chinese on Falun Gong and the treatment of people who practise Falun Gong and are being harassed, even in this country. I personally raised that with the Chinese ambassador. We insist that they answer for a list of people in China whom we know are being tortured or are missing, and we will not step back from that. It is important to keep momentum behind that dialogue. We have the mechanism to push it, but there has not been sufficient action. We are not happy with progress on that matter.

Mrs. Gillan: What about Zimbabwe?

Mr. Battle: If the hon. Lady would stop nattering, I would be able to get to the points that need to be addressed. I will ensure that our positions and resolutions at the Commission on Human Rights are available in the Library for hon. Members to read. That back-up will enable me to respond in detail on all the countries that have been mentioned.

I met Father Francisco de Roux in Colombia. I do not have time to respond in full to the two hon. Members who raised the issue of Colombia, but I thank them for doing that. That situation has worsened. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office is on her way to Washington, where she will discuss the implementation of the American Plan Colombia.

Mrs. Gillan: On a point of order, Mrs. Michie. Is it right that a Minister should reply to a debate, even in Westminster Hall, and ignore some of the main points that were made? The Minister has failed to reply to urgent questions on the Government's attitude to Zimbabwe. Is it in order for a Minister not to respond to a debate?

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): What the Minister says is entirely up to him. It is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Battle: If the hon. Lady would but listen, she would know that I have made it clear that we take the situation in Zimbabwe very seriously. I cannot go into detail on that because I want to reply to the hon. Member who introduced the debate. I am prevented from doing so by the hon. Lady, who is hijacking the debate.

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Order. We must now move to the next debate.

Railway Crossings (Stone)

12.30 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Level crossings on public highways are causing my constituents serious problems. There is one in Hixon, three in Stone, one in Barlaston and another at Blythe bridge. There is also a level crossing on a private road at Wedgwood. Each has its own characteristics, but there are overall serious safety issues, particularly in the light of the proposed high-speed trains that will travel at 125 mph on the west coast main line. Serious traffic congestion problems are also causing my constituents enormous inconvenience. I am informed that in 1997, Railtrack confirmed to the highways committee of Staffordshire county council that it intended to remove all level crossings on the north Staffordshire branch of the west coast main line. That is the best solution. In late 1998, Railtrack still wanted to remove crossings wherever possible but asked the county council to investigate other options. The Health and Safety Executive requires the upgrading of all crossings to manual operation, with full-width barriers monitored by closed circuit television.

I shall give details of the crossings involved. There is an automatic half-barrier at Hixon, which was the scene of a major rail disaster in 1967; there have been two accidents in the past 18 months, with collisions between trains and cars, one of which was fatal. I am glad that Railtrack, in conjunction with the county council, has decided to provide a £2 million bridge for pedestrians and vehicles. That is an important precedent. There is an automatic half-barrier at Aston-by-Stone which raises serious safety concerns, particularly for children and local residents. It is adjacent to a major housing estate of 700 houses. The crossing at Church lane lies on the only access point to the local housing estate and the barriers fail frequently, cutting off the estate—and access for emergency services. The crossing at Meaford is manually controlled from an adjacent signal box. The one at Barlaston cuts the village in two, causing heavy traffic delays and congestion. The one at Wedgwood is normally closed outside the working day. At Blythe bridge, the crossing system fails periodically and repair staff from Nottingham can, I am told, take up to two hours to arrive. There should be a bridge or underpass at Aston-by-Stone and an alternative route provided at Church lane. Meaford crossing requires at least a traffic management scheme and, if possible, an alternative route. Further analysis is needed at Barlaston, with the option of bridges or other routes; in the short term, closed circuit television systems must be provided immediately.

I am grateful for the representations that I have received from Staffordshire county council, Stone town council and Railtrack. I have also had replies from Tom Winsor, the Rail Regulator and Sir Alastair Morton of the Strategic Rail Authority but as yet no reply to my letter to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. All the proposed improvements cost money. Excepting the bridge at Hixon, which is going ahead at a cost of £2 million, the county council has estimated that the bridge at Aston-by-Stone would cost £3.5 million, the one at Church lane £1 million and at Barlaston £2.5 million. That is a total of around £8.7 million.

Yesterday I took part in the debate on the special grant report, which supports local authority private finance initiative schemes, including that of Staffordshire county council, one of the list of 74 authorities. The Under-Secretary for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, by whom I mean the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), who responded to the debate in Committee yesterday, said that approximately £8 billion is being provided in credits, the maximum amount of grant in any one case being £160 million. I asked the Under-Secretary to confirm in principle that the special grant could be made available to Staffordshire county council to fund the closure and the radical solutions needed to deal with all the level crossings in my constituency, given the safety and traffic congestion problems. I doubt whether many constituencies have as many as eight level crossings in such a confined area, a situation crying out for special treatment. Indeed, road schemes, bridges and tunnels are all specifically mentioned in the nightmarishly complicated, explanatory notes relating to the private finance initiative. The Under-Secretary is investigating the matter and will write to me about it.

We are about to hear in the Budget speech about the massive war chest of billions and billions of pounds that the Government hold. That has been generated by increased taxation, some of which has fallen on my constituents. I therefore urge the Government to provide the necessary money for their safety and convenience. Where trains travel at 125 mph, there is a general rule that crossings should be closed—a point that was confirmed to me by the Rail Regulator. That is why, in 1997, Railtrack proposed to the highways committee that all the crossings should be closed.

There should not be an ultra vires problem with the PFI route, because once the bridge, tunnel or other route had been provided, the railway would continue unaffected, and the special grant procedure would apply to the provision of the new facility standing on its own. Yesterday, the Under-Secretary said that if, having investigated the matter, she found that a problem was caused by a railway crossing with a railway running one way and a road running the other, that would be a potentially hybrid situation that could present legal obstacles to providing the money by special grant. My answer to that—which is a reasonably good one, given that I have specialised in ultra vires problems for some time—is that once the crossing and apparatus had been removed and the bridge provided, what would have been provided in terms of PFI would be a new facility, the bridge, owned by the county council and connected with the highway on both sides. The problem of the involvement of the railway would thus be eliminated. The railway would still be there, but it would go under the bridge, which would become vested in the county council as part of the local highway.

It is essential to bear in mind the fact that the county council or Stafford borough council could fund schemes themselves. However, I have a written reply dated 27 February from the Under-Secretary for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), which gives the figures for levels of spending on highways per head of population in Staffordshire compared with other counties. It reveals that, for 2000-01, Staffordshire has, by a massive margin, the lowest level of capital

expenditure per head in the entire country, at £1.39. That is a disgrace, the responsibility for which lies with the Labour Staffordshire county council and the Government for their appalling failure to remedy Staffordshire's inadequate funding under the standard spending assessment system. Responsibility also lies with Railtrack, which, as we know, is cutting its investment programme. If it was prepared in 1997 to propose the closure of all the crossings because of high-speed trains, surely the money must be found as an urgent priority.

I have been in detailed communication, in correspondence and conversation, with the Rail Regulator, Tom Winsor. He has told me in writing that the Strategic Rail Authority could include the level crossings in the SRA's incremental output statement programme. I wrote to Sir Alastair Morton, and received a reply yesterday in which he stated that the local authorities, including the Labour county council, have not been in contact with the Strategic Rail Authority about improving the level crossings. I regard that as extraordinary and disgraceful, because improvements for level crossings are primarily a matter for the local highways authority and for Railtrack.

Mr. Winsor also wrote to me, saying that

"under condition 7 of its network licence...Railtrack is obliged to maintain, develop and enhance its network in accordance with best practice in a timely, efficient and economical manner so as to meet the reasonable requirements of its customers and funders to the greatest extent reasonably practicable having regard to all relevant circumstances including matters of financing. In that respect, therefore, the first question is whether Railtrack is already being funded to do the relevant work on the level crossings in question. Generally, as part of my periodic review of Railtrack's access charges (announced on 23 October 2000), Railtrack is funded to operate, maintain and renew the existing network, with enhancements (such as new capacity) being funded separately and in addition to the sustained network.

If Railtrack is already funded for these level crossing works, I have powers of enforcement under the Railways Act 1993, sections 16A-I (as inserted by section 223 of the Transport Act 2000) and section 55. If it is not, and the access charges and network grants which the company is to receive in the next five years do not finance these improvements, it is of course open to anyone else to provide the necessary funding."

Hence my earlier remarks. Mr. Winsor continues:

"This could be a local authority, one or more train operators or the Strategic Rail Authority."

As I have pointed out, I have been in touch with the Strategic Rail Authority and discovered to my grave concern that the local authorities have not made contact. Mr. Winsor continues by pointing out that, under the statutory arrangements, he is able

"to compel Railtrack to carry out the necessary works on terms, including as to price and quality, determined by me. You will see from section 16E"—

the statutory provision in question—

"that, before I order Railtrack to do the work, I must be satisfied that Railtrack would be adequately rewarded. In essence, this means that it will be paid a fair price. That process of determining adequate reward would take account of the efficient cost of the works, any financing costs which would be incurred and any benefits which will accrue to Railtrack."

He then repeats the statutory provisions.

The Minister will appreciate that the concentration of railway crossings constitutes a serious problem, and there is also an enormous problem with safety and traffic congestion. Ultimately, the question is one of funding. The Rail Regulator has the power to require Railtrack to complete the work. Railtrack itself had originally intended to close all the crossings, but as a result of pressures on finance that will not happen.

My constituents and I are grateful for the provision of a bridge at Hixon, which has set a precedent. However, the fact remains that, as Mr. Winsor said,

"Railtrack is obliged to . . . develop and enhance its network in accordance with best practice".

He has made it clear that, if Railtrack is funded, he can enforce the necessary changes. He adds that

"elimination of level crossings is necessary"—

I should be grateful if the Minister would grasp this point—

"where linespeeds exceed 125 mph".

I would strongly argue that the dividing line between 125 mph and 126 mph should not be allowed to affect my constituents' safety. Under the Transport Act 2000, if Railtrack is given a fair price for doing the work, the Rail Regulator can take action, as we have seen. The situation regarding level crossings cannot be allowed to continue.

Cost must be weighed against safety and convenience. The Labour Government, the Labour county council and the Labour borough council can combine with Railtrack to solve the funding problem, but only if they have the will to help my constituents by tapping into the monumental sums at the Chancellor's disposal on this Budget day. There is no excuse for inaction, so if the normal financial channels are not available because the county council has inadequately funded the highways, and if Railtrack is reluctant, why not use the special grants under the private finance initiative?

One way or another the money is there, so I trust that the Minister will promise to find a means by which to tap it.

12.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) on securing this important debate on safety at level crossings in north Staffordshire. I also thank him for his courtesy in giving me notice of some of the detailed matters that he wanted to raise. However, I must chide him for his unreasonable complaint about the failure of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to reply to him. The hon. Gentleman wrote only nine days ago, on 28 February, as part of what is evidently a late flurry of activity on his part. I assure him that he will receive his reply shortly.

Her Majesty's railway inspectorate gives detailed guidance on safety provision at level crossings, which determines the standard of crossings in relation to the type of railway operation. The Level Crossings Regulations 1997 are an order-making procedure enabling level crossings to be upgraded. In general, orders would be confirmed under delegated powers by the railway inspectorate. However, if the orders were subject to objection, they could be referred to my Department and the Secretary of State for decision. In other words, the Secretary of State has a quasi-judicial role in such matters. Hon. Members will therefore

[Mr. Keith Hill]

appreciate that Ministers are unable to comment on current cases. More significant improvements, such as removing a crossing and replacing it with a bridge, would generally be subject to planning permission or transport and works Acts orders. The Secretary of State determines those orders, so Ministers are unable to comment on the merits of individual cases.

The west coast main line, which passes through Staffordshire, is one of the country's main rail arteries, linking London with the west midlands, Merseyside, Manchester, north Wales and Glasgow. The crossings that concern the hon. Gentleman are on the north Staffordshire line. Renewal and upgrading of the west coast main line is probably the largest, and certainly one of the most complex, investments in railway infrastructure in the world. The current estimate of the total cost of the project is £5.8 billion, which will enable Virgin Trains to run more, faster trains on the fast lines and make enhancements to meet the Strategic Rail Authority's requirement for additional capacity for local and freight services on the slow lines. Faster trains create a requirement to upgrade level crossings to ensure safe operation. Replacing the level crossing with a bridge, upgrading from a half barrier to a full barrier or, in some cases, closing the crossing and diverting the road can achieve that.

The six crossings on the north Staffordshire line between Colwich junction and Stoke-on-Trent especially concern the hon. Gentleman. Railtrack has identified level crossings on this section of the west coast main line as being unsuitable for anticipated increases in train speeds and has developed proposals to respond to that. It has discussed its proposals with the county council, the railway inspectorate and other public bodies, and it has issued a press notice indicating its intentions at each crossing.

I propose to discuss in turn each crossing that concerns the hon. Gentleman. First, Hixon is the most southerly of the level crossings, and provides the most direct route between the villages of Hixon and Stafford. The crossing takes the form of an automatic half-barrier. Railtrack has decided to replace the crossing with a bridge, and planning permission has already been obtained.

Secondly, the Aston-by-Stone level crossing is on the B5027, on the edge of Stone. The residents of approximately 700 houses must use that crossing to reach Stone. It is an automatic half-barrier crossing, unprotected by signals on the railway line or closed circuit television.

Mr. Cash: It is clear that the hon. Gentleman is relying, to a certain extent, on the same briefing paper that I used; I can hear it being repeated. We do not need to cover all my points again, but I would like to know what will be done about funding. That is the crucial element. I am not arguing for the issue to be dealt with according to the county council's suggestions, but we need a solution, and that will entail money, whether it is for a bridge, a tunnel or whatever.

Mr. Hill: It is important to put on the record the proposals that are being made so that we can understand the scale of additional works that may be necessary. I am attempting to outline those proposals so that we can clear out the brushwood before we deal with the wider issues raised by the hon. Gentleman. The hon. Gentleman raised the large and complex issue of funding arrangements only in the past 24 hours, and the Government need time to consider those serious proposals in detail. I want to give him some assurance, but he must let me make my speech so that we may all understand what we are talking about.

If the hon. Gentleman will indulge me, I will return to the subject of the Aston-by-Stone level crossing. For operational reasons, that type of crossing is effectively closed to traffic for two minutes, compared with 40 seconds for the existing half-barrier crossing. The extended closure time for the full-barrier crossing would cause delays to road traffic. That is of great concern to local residents, who consider that a bridge should be provided.

The county council has conducted a feasibility study for a bridge, which is estimated to cost £3.5 million. Railtrack concluded that that cost was excessive. It subsequently decided that, to minimise delays to road traffic, it would not increase the line speed through the crossing, thereby maintaining safety without inconveniencing local residents.

Thirdly, the Meaford full-barrier crossing is in the centre of Stone. The county council and Railtrack agree that a bridge would be impractical there. Railtrack plans to improve the safety of the crossing by adding CCTV, which will be linked to the signal box. It is also considering whether the introduction of new traffic management systems in the vicinity of the crossing will improve safety further.

Fourthly, the Church lane crossing affects the only access point to approximately 100 houses on the edge of Stone. The current CCTV system has proved unreliable, and residents have expressed concerns about being cut off from their homes at some times. Railtrack is committed to replacing existing equipment to improve reliability without increasing the time in which the barriers are in operation.

Fifthly, the next crossing, adjacent to Barlaston station, is manually controlled. Railtrack has considered a bridge option at a cost of £2.5 million, but has announced its decision to upgrade to a CCTV system.

Finally, Railtrack has proposed to upgrade to a CCTV system another manual crossing on the private roads serving the Wedgwood factory and visitors' centre.

Mr. Cash: I also mentioned Blythe bridge.

Mr. Hill: The hon. Gentleman signalled in advance his intention to talk about Blythe bridge. I am glad to be able to respond by saying that I am aware of the two incidents that occurred at Newtons level crossing at Blythe bridge, which has a user-operated level crossing with a telephone. In two separate incidents on 17 June and 9 July 1998, trains struck stray cows on the line. A further incident occurred on 27 October 1998 at Blythe bridge when a car obstructed the line. However, Her Majesty's railway inspectorate considered that none of those incidents was worthy of investigation. Therefore, I do not expect Railtrack to take any action.

The hon. Gentleman has raised important issues concerning the possibility of special grant through the PFI, but I have said that we are considering bridges and alternatives to level crossings. The hon. Gentleman is right in saying that this part of Staffordshire has an unusually large number of level crossings, although I was surprised to learn the extent of the problem. We are discussing significant sums of money, and there are limits in the PFI structure on borrowing powers by local authorities. In December, the Government announced generous arrangements that more than double local transport planned provision for local authorities, and we cannot move rapidly to commitments on such significant expenditure.

Mr. Cash: I hear what the Minister is saying and I am encouraged by his positive approach and recognition of the problem, which would have to be accompanied by resources if a result were to be achieved. However, I must remind him that capital expenditure per head in Staffordshire is the lowest in the country at £1.39, and that is the Minister's figure, given in reply to a question only a few days ago. That is phenomenal, and is clearly connected with the lack of provision that I am seeking to redress.

Mr. Hill: Allocation of resources is, as the hon. Gentleman implied, a matter for local highways authorities. However, in general terms, the Government believe Staffordshire to be an enterprising and successful local transport authority, which makes its own judgment on whether it puts funding into integrated public transport schemes or road maintenance. We have more than doubled the funding available for road maintenance and investment under local transport plans, and I expect to see important consequential increases in investment in roads in Staffordshire.

To sum up, the Government are committed to the development of an efficient, customer-friendly and safe national railway network. The upgrade of the west coast main line is a key part of that overall strategy. The core investment programme to modernise the infrastructure of the west coast main line, including renewal of track, signalling, electricity supply and structures is the basis for the modernisation plans. Work is already under way to bring about the necessary improvements. Major work at Birmingham and Euston has recently been undertaken, and approximately 30 per cent. of the work has been completed at a cost of £800 million.

On detailed provision for specific level crossings, I must again make it clear that this is initially a matter for Railtrack and Her Majesty's railway inspectorate in discussion with local interests. However, legislation on level crossings requires the Secretary of State to determine orders when there are substantial objections.

Mr. Cash: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: No, I am sorry. I want to complete my speech.

Her Majesty's railway inspectorate has made a submission to the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on level crossings, and my officials are considering the information prior to advising Ministers on that important issue. I have already said that while those submissions are under consideration, and prior to a decision by the Secretary of State, I am unable to offer any views on the merits of any of the alternatives in specific cases. However, I confirm the undertaking already given by my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary to write to the hon. Gentleman on the possible PFI arrangement for the crossings. Meanwhile, I remain grateful to him for his contribution to this debate and deepening the Government's understanding of the issues.

Ethical Education

12.59 pm

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): The object of my debate is to raise the issue of moral education. I wanted to raise the issue in a general way, but the Table Office told me that I had to make it specific to a Department, so I thank my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, the hon. Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith), for coming here to field my remarks in so far as they relate to schools.

My central claim is that morality is a complex subject worthy of our attention. That is not a trivial point. Our aim should be for all children leaving school to be able to understand the complexity of morality. They should be able to grasp key moral ideas and understand the structure of ethical arguments. They should be able to make moral judgments and understand how the capacity to engage in moral discourse is integrally related to the development of moral character. The exploration of morality has occupied philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, historians, poets, novelists and political scientists. Any one of us has but a shadowy grasp of the world of ethics, but we should all aspire to develop such an understanding of the subject as would enable us to live a good life.

Although morality is complex, the list of "ists" that I gave of those who have sought to understand it would leave most of those who graduate from our schools numb with boredom. The view of many of them is that morality is trivial. They see it as a sphere in which there are many conclusions but little use of reason, and which produces much certainty—as contributors to "The Moral Maze" evince—but involves little mutual understanding. While most school graduates know that much study is required to explain why a table can support a vase of flowers, most think that they are experts on morality. They feel that they need use little reasoning power to form conclusions about whether their own, or their mates', behaviour conforms to the moral law. Although they might not put it that way, comments such as, "It's just not on", or "He's gone too far", can function as moral judgements.

Our educational system and our society trivialise the complex subject of morality. I suggest to the Minister that the Government should pay attention to that paradox and that there should be new initiatives in education explicitly to address the matter. I sought this debate because of the demand that the father of little Damilola Taylor made for moral regeneration in our society. If we can stop trivialising morality, perhaps it will be taken seriously.

There are two particularly strong agencies of trivialisation, which may serve partly to explain why Parliament has so far failed to react to Mr. Taylor's impassioned request. Our children are failed by an education system that marginalises ethical inquiry, but they are failed, too, by a press that trivialises morality, particularly by sexualising it. The press, for the most part, sees the realm of the ethical as the realm of the sexual, not least because that seems to be a recipe for exciting the curiosity of a large readership.

One reason why morality is seldom broached in Parliament is because no Department has specific responsibility for it. Moreover, hon. Members who raise the issue are liable to be subject to malevolent treatment by the press. Someone who talks in public about morality is viewed as a target to be shot down, even if that requires extensive inquiries into his or her past, which will, of course, produce stories of the "Moralising MP stole lollipop from nursery friend" variety. Such malevolent trivialisation often takes a sexualised form, as in the "Minister had love nest" sort of story. I make it clear to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary that I was thinking not of her, but of religious ministers. I do not deny that each of us can use the fact that others are sexually attracted to us to hurt, degrade, denigrate, betray and exploit them, but the immorality lies in the hurting, degrading and exploiting, not in the fact of seeking out and having a sexual relationship.

Perhaps because of such pressures, we end up with a Parliament that does not broach this subject. That is partly because the last time that such subjects were raised, under the premiership of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), those who did so were ridiculed, and partly because their credentials as a source of ethical authority were vilified. As it happens, I think that the idea that one could conduct a sensible ethical debate under the slogan "back to basics" or the rubric "a return to common sense" was hardly more sophisticated than the trivialisation it sought to transcend. Nevertheless, to take on the debate at all showed courage, and the fact that it ended in dismal failure is now taken as a warning that the area of the ethical is one that politicians enter at their peril. The result is a society that acquiesces in the ignorance of our young people about the subjects that are most important.

It is perhaps contentious to describe this subject as the most important of all, but what I want for my own children and, though I am naturally attracted to the idea that they will pass zillions of exams, what would make me most proud, is their turning out to be good people. Contrary to the tabloid model, by "good people" I do not mean that I do not want them to have a sexual identity. A propensity to sexual activity is a normal part of life, and the more extreme religious systems notwithstanding, to be a sexual being is fully compatible with being a good person.

Young people emerge from our schools with a trivialised understanding of moral ideas. Talk of virtues is regarded as antiquated. Literature written by great practitioners such as Milton, George Eliot and Dickens, in part to explain the formation of moral character, is regarded as dull, over-lengthy and out of date. The word "wicked" is a term of commendation, and young people in the public eye who might function as models for behaviour—such as Eminem—are more likely to describe their abuse of another person than to recommend an attitude of care and considerateness. We are left to live with some of the consequences of that neglect of the ethical. Those who graduate from school are often far more interested in earning a great deal of money than in constructing a life that will involve service to one's fellow human beings. It is becoming progressively harder to recruit to caring professions—teaching, the police, social work—and ever easier to recruit to causes and careers that are handsomely rewarded monetarily. In the late 18th century, Mandeville wrote an ironic text in which he argued that virtue is vice and vice is virtue, but only at the end of the

twentieth century did "Greed is good" become a slogan for a way of life. Those who try to teach ethics are referred to by terms of abuse such as "moraliser", "preacher" and—after investigation of the contrast between what they say and what they do reveals the inevitable character flaws that we all share—"hypocrite". Given the cultural propensity to denigrate morality, it is astonishing to discover the resilience of core ethical ideas. In my constituency, for instance, 115 young people have signed up to devote a portion of their spare time to helping others through a young person's volunteer bureau. Last week, so many people turned up to the funeral in my constituency of Martin Lynch, who was both a head teacher and man of virtue, that the service had to be held in a cathedral. They, at least, had been set the example of a good man. Although our society is morally abstentionist, the human capacity to do good still emerges. We must re-establish as an explicit aim the moral education of our young people, so that such facts are not remarkable but commonplace.

What form does the trivialisation of the ethical take? From my experience, as a university teacher, I found that it took two forms. I found that most of those who arrived at university had emerged from school with a view that ethics was subjective, a matter of taste, and, hence, that it is a waste of time to discuss the realm of morality. There was a pathetic ethical theory of the 1930s that gave some vestigial intellectual support to that view. One might call it the "hurrah-boo" theory of ethics, which held that if one said that an action was morally good, one was only saying, first, that one approved of it and, secondly, hurrah! That reduced ethical argument to the level of a pub discussion between a fan of Rangers and a fan of Celtic. You, Mrs. Michie, might be an authority on such discussions.

The second strong influence on our schools and culture is the obedientiary view of ethics, which means that all one need do to be moral is obey. That has strong roots in the religious tradition in so far as it is authoritarian. In that tradition, to say that an action is good is to say that God has commanded it, and, hence, one must do it, which is a view accepted by most religions. Although that view of ethics works well for young children—I approve of it for that purpose because it lifts them up so that they can stand on the first rung of the ethical ladder—by the time a pupil has reached the age of 12 or 13 obedience to authority has less hold, regardless of whom, be they parental or transcendental, the young person is being enjoined to obey.

An obedientiary model may be reasonable for a five-year-old—"You must do it because I am your father." It may, however, prove uncompelling to a 15-year-old—"Just who are you to lay down the law?" It is imperative, therefore, that we ask what kind of ethical understanding we seek to engender in young people. Only if we address that question, can we provide a clue to schools and colleges about how they might manage the transition from an obedientiary ethic to one based on a footing that will help older children and adults to understand that ethical judgments are substantive.

Some people will say that the Government are addressing the issue. There is, for instance, the citizenship agenda. I welcome that because it addresses part of what it is to have a developed ethic. I was canvassing recently and spoke to a man whose door was slightly obstructed by toys, which I thought might belong to his children. I told him that I was his Member of Parliament, to which he replied, "Not interested." I was unable to resist saying that it was just as well that some people were interested, or the social system of yesteryear, which ensured that the children of most people were denied educational opportunity, would still be in place. He said, "Look, mate, I'm only interested in number one." Indeed, he said that aggressively enough for me to vacate his doorstep shortly afterwards.

Perhaps the citizenship agenda will produce people who understand what a local council does, how democracy works and what one gets for paying taxes. I do not doubt that that will be a massive improvement on a society that was democratic in name, but which relied on tabloid newspapers and radio shock-jocks to tell people these things. It is hard to be a citizen if one does not know of what one is a citizen. The fundamental flaw is that one cannot use a course in citizenship to teach ethics because some people are citizens of states that require them to behave in immoral ways. The citizen should always be empowered to judge ethically the state of which he or she is a member. The standard example of an immoral state is the Nazi regime, but it may be sensible to admit that the phenomenon is quite common. An education in ethics transcends an education in citizenship, because it gives people the tools by which they might judge with confidence whether the state actually deserves their compliance.

The Government have introduced critical thinking into the curriculum. I welcome that initiative, not least because I taught it for many years. The ability to anatomise an argument, to understand its structure and to ascertain the extent to which its conclusion is justified is a crucial skill that empowers pupils and students to base their judgments on something more than prejudice and dubious authority. However, critical thinking is not enough. The most crucial use of the power of reasoning is on moral subjects, and there is strong evidence that critical thinking courses will not provide the pupil or student with an understanding of ethical theories that would make possible the application of such skills to the ethical domain. Between citizenship and critical thinking, the Government have produced a tasty sweet. The sweet, however, is a Polo mint, and ethics is the hole in the middle.

I do not have time to spell out the implications of the trivialisation of ethics on our wider society, but it has repercussions, even in Parliament. I was struck by recent debates on the use of embryonic stem cells for research, during which the Government's spokesperson used, primarily, a utilitarian ethical system—which she then explicitly disavowed. The debate on Alder Hey children's hospital primarily employed a deontological, or rights-based, ethical system. My own view is broadly Kantian, which is bound up with the idea that one should not use one's capacity for free action to do things that curtail a similar freedom for others. An essential respect and reverence for other human beings is involved in that. In view of the time allowed, I cannot do more than hint at my own moral position.

What I have sought to do is show that ethics is a complex matter that should not be treated as trivial. Some will say, "Who are you, to make such claims?" I would respond that, just as one does not have to understand the whole of human history to be able to

[Mr. Tony McWalter]

teach history, one need not be omniscient about ethics, or be morally perfect, to be able to transmit some ethical wisdom to the young. We, the older generation, often relinquish that responsibility too readily because it is thought of as too difficult. We then end up with young people who lack the capacity to conduct a moral discourse or to consider ethical judgments rationally. That some young people behave so well, given the poor grounding that we give them, says something for human ethical resilience.

One result of pupils understanding the complexity of morality may be a heightened respect for moral law. Such respect would require many parties—teachers, politicians, parents and editors of newspapers—to recognise that trivialising morality renders a grave disservice to our fellow human beings. The father of Damilola Taylor called for moral regeneration in our society. I ask the Minister to help that process by ensuring that both the citizenship and critical thinking curriculums give explicit attention to ethical subjects. That might help the next generation to be better at teaching, parenting, publishing and politicking than we have been. The memory of a little boy who died because some people did not see him as a human being, but as an object, deserves nothing less.

1.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment (Jacqui Smith): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) on securing the debate. As he pointed out, the debate is very wide. It stretches beyond any single Department and into the realms of individual and family responsibility and how our communities and other influences, such as the media, operate.

For that reason, it is not possible for schools and the education system to be the sole forum for dealing with the problems that my hon. Friend rightly identified. Because we know that our teachers and schools can be effective, we must ensure that our schools and education system provide opportunities for young people to learn about ethical and moral dimensions. I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I use the remaining time to concentrate on what schools and the education system can do.

I welcome my hon. Friend's commitment to ensuring that young people are taught about ethical, moral and philosophical issues. As a Government, we have taken broad strides forward in the education system, especially by investing in developing pupils' critical thinking. We have introduced a new national curriculum, which includes, for the first time, a framework for personal, social and health education and citizenship for all children from the ages of five to 16. For the first time, a statement of values forms an integral part of the national curriculum. Part of that statement of values in the national curriculum handbook relates to the self. It states:

"We value ourselves as unique human beings capable of spiritual, moral, intellectual and physical growth and development."

That clearly sets the context for what we expect our schools to deliver and our children to learn within the national curriculum. Of course, ethical issues are also covered in a wide range of curriculum subjects. Certain aspects of science, history and geography develop children's cognitive abilities and investigative skills. However, I want to concentrate on ethical education.

There are already good examples of schools that are developing in young people the skills that enable them to make the kinds of decisions that my hon. Friend described. Schools that teach those skills demonstrate respect for the individual pupil, resulting in less disaffection. For example, Mason Moor primary school in Southampton has demonstrated the value of an emotional literacy strategy derived from philosophy in giving pupils appropriate means to express their emotions, rather than using verbal or physical violence. Pupils as young as five and six are developing a rich spoken and written vocabulary within the literacy hour, making the important curriculum link. The school has reported the impact of this work on behaviour—it is reflected in increasing attendance and reduced exclusions.

My hon. Friend said that he wants his children to leave the education system not only with the high standards of education towards which the Government strive, but as good people. I remind him that the Green Paper, "Schools building on success", which the Government published last month, explicitly set out our plans to promote standards and education with character. It emphasises the importance of creativity, flexibility, reasoning, logical thinking, and social and moral responsibility through citizenship. It stresses the need for schools to develop a positive, respectful and can-do ethos. Ethical education has a key role to play in future education provision.

A major step forward since my hon. Friend last introduced a debate on moral and philosophical issues—an interesting and wide-ranging debate that I was able to read before coming here today—has been our new personal, social and health education and citizenship framework. I shall turn to some of the shortcomings that my hon. Friend identified. However, I should point out—as we are talking about something that has to make a practical difference in schools—that the framework is supported by £12 million of standards fund money this year and £15 million next year. We are not asking schools to deliver progress without the necessary support and funding to spend on curriculum materials, resources and training.

Our new personal, social, health education and citizenship framework will provide children with the opportunities identified by my hon. Friend to think seriously about moral, social and political issues. It will encourage the development of inquiry, reflection and debating skills. It will enable young people to learn to take responsibility for themselves, to understand the implications of certain actions on a day-to-day level and for society. Young people should be taught at every age to consider social and moral dilemmas. For example, pupils aged between five and seven might learn about fairness and the difference between right and wrong. Between the ages of eight and 11 they might be taught about respect and understanding between different races and how to deal with harassment. The ages of 12 to 14 are particularly important as children grow and develop, so they could learn how their choices as consumers affect other people's economies and environments. At key stage 4, 15 to 16-year-olds could

consider social and moral dilemmas such as genetic engineering. The personal, social and health education framework emphasises the development of respect for other people and the sort of attitudes that my hon. Friend identified. I shall refer to that later.

My hon. Friend suggested that citizenship covers only political literacy. Important though that is, I would argue that the citizenship curriculum has been framed to provide important opportunities for spiritual and moral development through awareness and understanding of meaning and purpose in life and of different values in society. It also supports moral development by helping pupils to develop a critical appreciation of issues of right and wrong, justice, fairness, rights, and obligations in society. It also places an important emphasis on active involvement. My hon. Friend gave examples of young people volunteering in his constituency, and that is important as we develop our work to promote citizenship education in schools. We are emphasising those three strands. Political literacy is important, but so is the active involvement of young people in decisions about themselves, their schools, their community and broader moral issues. From September 2002, citizenship education will be a statutory entitlement for all children in secondary schools.

My hon. Friend referred to sex, and I accept some of his points about the way in which our society deals with issues concerning sex, which are reflected in the Government's decisions to improve sex and relationship education. Many young people believe that their previous sex education put too much emphasis on the mechanics and too little on the importance of developing relationships, and research supports that view. Through personal, social and health education, and our guidance to schools, we are putting greater emphasis on developing the important skills for relationships and respect for themselves and others.

It is worth referring to the Government's policy on bullying. It is important that all schools have a policy for tackling bullying. The revised guidance that we issued last year emphasised that and the importance of schools involving young people in discussion and debate on how to operate policies on bullying most effectively. Personal, social and health education and the way in which that is reflected throughout the school provide an important opportunity for young people to engage in discussion about their own behaviour, the way in which they treat other people and the rules and decisions that are necessary in a school to make it the sort of environment that we would want for all our young people.

The debate is wide ranging. I have addressed only the areas where the Government, schools and teachers are playing an important part in developing young people who are able to make the kind of moral decisions that my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead outlined. That is not a job for schools alone. We have a wider responsibility as individuals, parents and in our communities. However, I hope that my hon. Friend recognises that not only the Government, but the education system that we support, will continue to play an important role.

Agriculture (West Dorset)

1.30 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I am grateful to the Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for coming to the debate, especially as she has probably realised that my main aim is to lobby her.

I shall begin by explaining the current situation in relation to foot and mouth in West Dorset. For the record, I want to say that I have spent much of the morning, in between commentaries on the Budget, receiving calls from constituents enraged by the decision of the Jockey Club. It might have been insensitive to raise that, and I know that it is not the Minister's responsibility or fault, but I want the Jockey Club's authorities to register that if they had wanted to earn the disfavour of the agricultural and rural communities, they could hardly have taken a better step.

In a sense, foot and mouth is non-existent in West Dorset. We are—or, at lunchtime, we were—among the privileged agricultural areas that do not have any cases. Some are very close, and my own house lies within the 8 km range around some cases near Chard. However, it is not foot and mouth itself that is affecting West Dorset. That makes the situation all the more important and interesting from a national perspective. We have seen the extent to which, even where foot and mouth itself has not struck, its effects have struck deeply.

I am profoundly grateful for the short-term relief provided by the licensing scheme. I was involved in trying to enable one of my local abattoirs to receive licensed stock, and that has now happened. I pay tribute to the officials in the veterinary service in Taunton for enabling that. I would not want any of my remarks to be construed as an attack either on officials of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, or on the Minister herself. However, the effects of foot and mouth on agriculture in West Dorset can be described, without hyperbole, as disastrous.

The examples that I could give of the disaster number hundreds, rather than dozens. One example is a constituent from Monkton Wyld, near Bridport, who is a lowland sheep farmer. In a letter to me, he said:

"Due to the export ban, which normally accounts for 30 per cent. of our lamb sold, market prices have crashed by more than 25 per cent. ... We have now lost a huge export market ... The loss of this export market and consumer confidence is a huge"—

and possibly terminal—

"hit to our industry."

That is purely symptomatic of a range of correspondence that I have received.

We have seen serious effects in both the sheep and beef sectors. As the Minister will be aware, there is a heavy concentration of dairy production in my constituency. The long-term effects of the previous beef export ban meant that there was not a huge amount of beef exporting, but such as there was has now ceased again. The long-range effects of the current crisis, added to the previous difficulties, will be severe for the beef sector.

My constituency also has some of the most efficient pig producers in the UK, including advanced process industries that combine dairy production with pigs in processes that run in cycles. The pig industry in West Dorset suffers from exactly the same problems as the beef and sheep industries. There is a near disaster in all those sectors, and in the last week or two it has been for some of my farmers not just a disaster, but the end.

There will also be the cost of restocking, which one can expect will be greater than the original cost of stocking, because of the effects of this crisis. There are also ricochet effects on a much wider range of businesses outside agriculture. I have received a letter from a constituent in Poyntington near Sherborne who is a livestock and general haulier. He writes:

"We are a small family run livestock haulier. Five years ago we ran a flourishing business with 6 lorries and 8 staff. Due to the BSE crisis, the pig industry on its knees a few years later, the fuel cost rising 42 per cent., we had no choice but to sell 4 lorries and make all our staff redundant, many of whom were very experienced livestock handlers."

That business now faces a further attack on its profits. My constituent writes:

"We feel that with all the knocks and bumps we have had, especially this week"—

that was last week—

"where we will not even earn a single penny due to the livestock movement ban ... we are now surely entitled to compensation."

I have heard that call from many quarters.

Everything that I have said so far, not necessarily with particular reference to West Dorset, but as part of a general national phenomenon, will be well known to the Minister. West Dorset is no different from many parts of the UK in the current crisis: farmers face catastrophic or near catastrophic demise. Why has this single, and as yet not too prolonged, crisis had this effect? The answer lies in the background.

I was lucky enough to have an Adjournment debate on agriculture in West Dorset in April 1998. The Minister's predecessor, the current Minister of State, Department of Social Security, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr. Rooker), said:

"It is expected that the situation in agriculture will be temporary ... I accept that there are difficulties in all sectors of agriculture, but we expect them to be temporary."—[*Official Report*, 20 April 1988; Vol. 310, c. 569-70.]

He was entirely honest. That was the genuine expectation at that time. As the Minister knows well, however, the difficulties have not been temporary. They have not been permanent, but, as Keynes famously remarked, in the long run we are all dead, and this has been a very long run. We have seen persistent drops in farm incomes from levels that, two or three years ago, we thought would be the nadir. They now look close to a zenith.

Throughout West Dorset an increasing number of young people are deciding either to leave the industry or not to enter it. We have seen problems in every sector of farming simultaneously. That is the worst feature of what is now a prolonged crisis. It is not the case that one thing has gone badly and another well so that farmers can switch from one mode of production to another. My farmers are not whingers. I have never met a group of people more inclined to be upstanding, entrepreneurial and effective, and to look after themselves without complaint. I do not mean that they do not complain about the weather or whatever, but those complaints are is not serious. They get on with the job. They intend to look after themselves and to provide for their families.

They work hard. They have been working uphill these past three or four years and many are now crawling uphill, as an emperor once had to do to see the pope.

Against that background, what would have been a severe disruption to the industry, or a serious inconvenience, has become a disaster. I am grateful that some steps have been taken. I am grateful that the efforts that some of us made to ban people walking across fields have resulted, in my own area, in action by Dorset county council over the past 48 hours to stop such people.

I am grateful for the agrimonetary compensation; my farmers will welcome it with open arms. I am also happy that efforts have been made to relieve some constraints on movement across roads from one field to another. Although it is a pity that it was not pre-planned, I am also grateful that so much work was put in so quickly and effectively to the construction of the licensing scheme, which is a lifeline for some of my farmers.

I want to take this opportunity to offer a laundry list—perhaps I should rephrase that. I beseech the Minister to consider a series of moves that I believe are necessary. Some of them are short-term, some medium-term and others long-term. All would have a significant impact on the disaster in the agriculture industry in West Dorset.

I believe that there is an overwhelming case for using some of the contingency reserve to meet precisely the kind of civil emergency that contingency reserves are designed to deal with. I accept that the agrimonetary compensation is helpful, but considerable additional compensation will be necessary in the light of what is happening in export markets. Without that support, many of my pig or sheep farmers will not survive.

The Minister might have made a start on this, but we need to address urgently the question of a fair market price under the licensing scheme. It is a problem about which I have received many calls and correspondence in recent days. I make no accusations against the abattoirs or supermarkets; it would be irresponsible to do so, and I am sure that they are doing their best. However, our farmers believe that they will be subject to serious pricing problems, unless a market price is established. I understand that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is already considering mechanisms by which some kind of proxy market could be established by next week, and I urge that to be done at full speed. I offer my co-operation, and I am sure that hon. Members from nearby rural seats would offer their help, in getting those mechanisms agreed and established.

We also need to widen the relaxation of the restrictions on animal movements on welfare grounds, and I will give the Minister some examples that have come to my attention in recent weeks. There is still an urgent need for sheep to get back to the main holding for lambing, which is not permitted under today's loosening of cross-road restrictions, and for calved heifers to get back to dairies for milking. Of course, my farmers accept that it will be necessary for movements to be carefully controlled in those areas. In the pig industry, the transport of weaners to fattening units presents exactly the same problems. Such problems are an inconvenience for a few days, but they are becoming a crisis. Action must be taken now.

I will now turn to the medium term and to problems that have been raised with me over the past few months and years by farmers. Action was needed anyway, but the need has increased as a result of the present crisis. Almost all my farmers in the dairy sector are extremely worried by the continued increase in the prevalence of bovine tuberculosis. There is no doubt that the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food is the good guy in that debate, but I fear that its hand is not yet sufficiently strong in Whitehall. The BSE inquiry referred to compelling evidence of a connection between badgers and bovine TB. We understand that the Krebs experiments are not yet complete, but the fact is that bovine TB is, in effect, putting farms out of business in West Dorset. I would be happy to take the Minister around some farms if she wanted to see for herself. If action is not taken, we could see a crisis that is parallel in parallel in dimension to the current and BSE crises.

I have repeatedly raised country-of-origin labelling with Ministers, and so have other Members who represent rural constituencies. It is a persistent, and justified, gripe among farmers in my constituency that there is no clarity about the genuine origin of meat processed in the United Kingdom, and many consumers believe that they are buying welfare-friendly animal products when they are not. I admit that the Meat and Livestock Commission is not blameless, and I will ask why it is not doing more about the red tractor arrangements.

The Farm Business Advice Service is widely welcomed in West Dorset, and is all the more needed in the current crisis. More farmers will be on the edge, and the advisory service may help them to get over the edge without descending down the abyss, if I may mix my metaphors horribly. Alas, it is not available: the experience of farmers in my constituency is that they cannot get any more help from the service; 81 farms in Dorset—3 per cent.—have received help, but many others have been told that funds are not available.

On the subject of cattle passports, despite my repeated efforts and those of others, the British Cattle Movement Service remains a serious bureaucratic difficulty for farmers. I shall not trouble the Minister by quoting from letters that I have received from farmers with problems because the BCMS does not work correctly. There is no ill intention; it simply does not work well.

A radical review of the operation of BCMS and urgent consideration of the system of inspections is required. It is a paradox that the current disaster was not prevented by a highly intrusive system of inspection, although I accept that not everything can be prevented. One pig farm in my constituency was completely disrupted for about a week recently while an inspection was carried out. I do not deny the need for careful inspection, but it is being done in a way that makes it extraordinarily difficult for many farmers to continue their ordinary business, and that must be looked at.

I welcome progress in the organic aid scheme, but it is still not right and there is not enough aid. I have had prolonged correspondence on behalf of constituents with various levels of its bureaucracy; it seems that the strictest interpretation is always applied, and people find themselves excluded from the scheme.

The disposal of fallen stock is a disaster waiting to happen. I will not enter into the hunting debate, but the Minister knows that the steps that her Government have

[Mr. Oliver Letwin]

taken mean that the problem of fallen stock will probably be exacerbated by a ban on hunting. It is already a serious problem. We are trying to gather the forces of the National Farmers Union and the county council and so on, but central assistance is needed. MAFF must make an effort to catalyse local discussions. It is difficult to imagine how we will resolve the problem of fallen stock without incineration, and, alternatively, of how to get incineration without the local population objecting to it. It is a conundrum, and we need help from Whitehall.

Crisis-ridden as they are, my farmers welcome the statement that there will be a long-term review of agriculture. They would not want it to start tomorrow, and nor would the Ministry, which, like the farmers, has plenty on its hands at present. Such a review is needed, however, and if it is to be effective, it needs to consider the deep causes of the current problems. It must also consider renegotiation of the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy and asymmetric legislation between this and other countries on animal welfare, as, at present, animal cruelty and jobs are merely being exported. It must consider the failure of the milk market, which I know has been examined before, but not adequately. The long-term relationship between environmental protection and agricultural subsidy must also be assessed. I persist in believing that agricultural subsidy is not justified on industrial grounds. The correct industrial configuration is a free market. Agricultural subsidies are justified in terms of environmental protection. This country has yet to undertake a serious analysis of the costs of maintaining the rural environment without farming and of the extent to which farming is diminishing rather than increasing the need for subsidy. The subject must be analysed with great care; without that, we shall never reach a stable view of agricultural subsidy.

I apologise for speaking for longer than I had originally intended and hope that the Minister will forgive me for squeezing her time to reply. In a sense, it is more important that these messages reach her Ministry than that we hear her reply. Doubtless, similar messages will come from other parts of the country. Actions must be taken in the short, medium and long term. If they are not, what is presently a crisis, and what has been, alas, a crisis for the past four or more years will lead to the gradual evaporation of agriculture in West Dorset and similar places. A whole society and a way of life will be lost. Farmers, my whole population and I do not want that to happen.

1.51 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Ms Joyce Quin): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) on securing the debate—his second on the subject, as he told us. I fully understand why he chose this subject for an Adjournment debate. He said that he wanted to lobby me, which is not an unusual experience for agriculture Ministers. I have taken note of his various points and shall endeavour to respond to as many as I can. I am also happy to write to him if he wishes.

I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the farming community in West Dorset, and I appreciate the manner in which he advanced them. No one could disguise the fact that these are difficult times for farming. As the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, the current foot and mouth crisis is compounding other hardships that the farming industry has had to face across the country, not least severely depressed farm incomes, which are at their lowest level for many a year.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the earlier debate and to the replies of my right hon. Friend, the former Minister of State. The strength of our currency—perhaps I should say the weakness of the euro—meant that economic problems persisted much longer than many people anticipated. Developments in world commodity prices meant that downward pressure continued. Some agricultural sectors experienced improvements. Although farmers went through a difficult time, pig prices recently improved. The situation has not been entirely static, but I accept the hon. Gentleman's basic point that farmers experienced difficulties for much longer than anyone imagined or predicted.

Unsurprisingly, the hon. Gentleman spent some time reflecting on the problems caused by the current outbreak of foot and mouth disease and its effects on farmers in his constituency. He pointed out that although no cases have been confirmed in West Dorset, its farmers have, like others, been badly affected by the necessary movement restrictions and other measures that have come into force. The hon. Gentleman mentioned that he lived in an exclusion zone. Although I live in an urban area, I, too, am in such a zone, because farms very much on the fringe of the urban area in which I live have also been affected and there have been confirmed cases there. I therefore understand from a personal point of view—as well as from the point of view of an Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Minister—the situation that he has described.

The number of confirmed cases stands, I am told, at 81, and thousands of animals have been destroyed. I welcome the strong support that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues in the Opposition have given to the measures that the Government have taken and the general support for the containment, control and eradication strategy that is under way. I also welcome what he said about the fact that we have managed to get some animals moving to slaughter and therefore some British meat back on the shelves in our shops and supermarkets. Those issues have been discussed at both national and European level in recent days. It will interest the hon. Gentleman to know that, at yesterday's meeting of European vets in Brussels, our approach was endorsed and that the slaughter policy, which has come under debate, was felt by them to be the most appropriate policy.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the difficulties that have been raised with me by sheep farmers about the imminence of lambing and the difficulties that that is causing, particularly when ewes are in locations where it is not desirable for them to lamb. We are very much aware of that issue and are considering it as sympathetically as we can, while recognising the need for constraints to ensure that we do not help to spread the disease further.

We urge farmers to be responsible and supportive, as we believe that the overwhelming majority has been. We also continue to urge the general public to keep away from footpaths on livestock farms. I welcome what the

hon. Gentleman said about some of the controls on footpaths that have been introduced in his area. It is fair to point out that, in considering foot and mouth disease, we must try to learn the lessons of the previous large-scale outbreak that we had in 1967. The number of cases started to drop after that time, and we then had a lull. Unfortunately, however, because the controls were not as effective as they should have been, we had a renewed and very damaging further series of outbreaks. Therefore, despite our sympathy for the farmers' very real need to be able to move animals in certain circumstances, everyone would want us to be absolutely sure that any lull does not lead to a relaxation of measures that could create massive problems in the long term.

The hon. Gentleman referred, understandably, to the losses being experienced by farmers in his constituency. The policy of successive Governments has certainly been not to pay consequential losses, because of the difficulties of drawing a line on where they begin and end, of defining them and of the public bill involved. None the less, we are considering ways in which we can help the rural communities and farmers most affected.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the payment of agrimonetary compensation. I believe that it is helpful; it is certainly helpful to some of the livestock farmers who have been affected. I hope that, like me, he will welcome the fact that we have not only agreed to pay that money but have entered into an arrangement with the European Commission by which we can pay the money much more speedily than is normal. The Commission has accepted that we are in a unique position and that it is important to be able to make the payments over the next few weeks, rather than having to wait four or five months, which would have been the normal arrangement in such circumstances.

The hon. Gentleman referred to pig farmers in his area. They do not benefit from agrimonetary compensation, because the European rules do not cover them. For that reason, we have been considering ways of making the pig industry restructuring money available to meet the circumstances of pig farmers been affected by the foot and mouth disease outbreak.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the loss of exports that parts of the agricultural industry in his area are experiencing. Again, that points to the fact that we need—

Mrs. Ray Michie (in the Chair): Order.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 8 March 2001

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Civil Legal Service

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned—[*Mr. Dowd.*]

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. David Lock): I am pleased to have the opportunity to debate public funding for civil legal services. It is almost a year since the launch of the community legal service, which introduced several crucial reforms to the old civil legal aid system. It was a manifesto promise and fundamental to the implementation of the Access to Justice Act 1999. In place of the old fragmented, unco-ordinated system of legal aid, the CLS is a comprehensive network of legal service providers working together to ensure that people have access to good-quality, local legal advice.

The lack of vision and focus of the old legal aid system was one of its greatest failings. Providing access to justice is not only about funding those who are eligible and wish to pursue or defend a case. People have differing legal concerns and want to access advice in different ways. People are no longer prepared to be told, "ask a solicitor", and in the past many people have found it difficult to follow that advice. By contrast, through the community legal service we have identified priorities, targeted resources and created partnerships with other funders.

The CLS has a clear vision of funding for legal services. It recognises the importance of other advice providers, such as the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, and understands the need for a variety of information points, including leaflets, telephone help lines and a comprehensive website. That vision at the heart of the funding reforms is of improved access to legal services for everyone. I have no intention of dwelling on the past. The current developments of the CLS and our vision for the future of civil legal services are of much greater interest. However, it is important to remember that the old system was in desperate need of reform.

It may be helpful if I remind hon. Members of some of the principal failings of the old legal aid scheme. Expenditure increased each year, yet the number of people receiving help remained the same. Spending was fragmented, with no connection between legal aid services and the services provided by other funders. Lawyers had no incentive to provide cost-effective services. Areas of greatest need were not targeted. The quality of service varied according to where one lived. Some areas were devoid of advice centres. Other areas offered an overwhelming mass of unconnected options and no way of finding out which option might be the right one. The old system lacked the flexibility to tackle such problems effectively and a completely fresh approach to providing legal services was needed.

The CLS identified three key vehicles for ensuring access to good-quality, local legal services: partnerships, which bring together all the local funders and providers of services, so they can plan provision on the basis of meeting local needs and priorities; the CLS quality mark, so that members of the public can identify suppliers of quality assured legal services and the CLS website, which is called, "Just Ask!" With the launch of the CLS came the community legal service fund, which replaced the civil and family legal aid budget. The fund is administered by the Legal Services Commission. In the same way as the method of providing legal services needed to be reviewed, the funding of legal services had to be modernised.

There are three tiers to that modernisation. First, funding is now allocated on the basis of priorities, which are set at both a national and local level. The Lord Chancellor's national priorities include cases involving the welfare of children, domestic violence and cases that help people to avoid or climb out of social exclusion.

Secondly, the priorities have been given effect by the introduction of contracts, which enable the Legal Services Commission to target taxpayers' money on the areas of greatest need and choose which services to provide. They are also an incentive to provide good quality services cost-effectively. The quality of service is closely monitored because all suppliers must pass the Legal Services Commission's quality assurance standards. From April, suppliers that are under contract to the commission will provide all civil and family legal services.

Thirdly, the merits test for legal aid has been replaced by the funding code. That code also gives effect to identified priorities by deciding which cases should receive funding and setting more or less stringent tests, according to the priority of the case category. The code helps to ensure that only worthwhile cases receive funding.

This year, the Government expect to spend about £810 million on the community legal service fund. Over the next three years, we expect to spend, on average, £700 million pounds a year, of which £235 million will be spent on legal help.

Some hon. Members will have made a mental note comparing this year's expenditure of £810 million with the lower average sum of £700 million a year for the next three years. That lower expenditure reflects the fact that personal injury is no longer within scope. Additionally, since April last year, we have refocused expenditure on national and local priorities by the letting of contracts and the introduction of the funding code. That has allowed more money to be released to support the CLS. More money than ever is being spent on legal help—formerly civil legal advice and assistance—so that a greater number of disputes can be resolved more quickly without involving the courts, and thereby avoiding the higher costs that would be incurred.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I could not hear what the Minister said about the figures. I think that he mentioned average spending of £700 million on the CLS, not this year, but in each of the next two years. He then said that a proportion of that money—something like £200 million—will be spent on a particular purpose.

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

However, I did not hear what it was, and he did not tell us how the balance will be spent–or if he did, I did not catch it.

Mr. Lock: Approximately £700 million will be spent on the community legal service fund. That is not the same amount of money as is spent on procuring legal services—that is a much higher sum—because the costs of winning cases are returned to the fund and, therefore, the money is circulated. One can draw an analogy with a water cistern. The money is the amount that is used to top up the cistern every year, rather than the total amount flowing around it. Of that sum, approximately £235 million will be spent on contracts for legal help, which is the successor to the green form scheme.

Approximately £70 million of the balance will be spent on money and damages claims, and the vast majority of the remainder will be spent on family litigation. The spending on money and damages claims represents a small proportion of the number of claims that are funded and represents only the top-up each year that is required to support such claims.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Will my hon. Friend give his assessment of the likely consequences on additional services that are not claims for money, damages or property, if the community legal service was abolished by a future Government?

Mr. Lock: At various times, there have been proposals to run money and damages claims through a contingency fund. That would not be appropriate if we continued with conditional fee agreements because there would be adverse selection and the fund would quickly go bust.

It would be impossible for advice on a range of issues, such as benefits, housing and immigration, to be run on a contingency fee basis; it would not work. Equally, family cases cannot be run on a contingency fee basis. For example, how could contingency fees be used to fund the parents of a child who had been taken away by a local authority? They have the right to be represented, whether or not they have a good case. I am not aware of any way of moving such litigation out of the subsidised market, although perhaps we shall hear more about that later this afternoon. It would be a disaster for the lawyers and a much greater disaster for the clients who need those important services.

Some people argue that greater access to legal advice will lead to more people taking cases to court. The Government, however, take the opposite view. Good advice and assistance at an early stage can often prevent a legal problem from getting worse and lead to an early resolution, thereby avoiding the need to involve the courts. I am aware of complaints that the Government are not spending enough on public legal funding, although such expenditure must be considered against other Government priorities such as health and education. No matter how worthwhile and deserving we might believe legal funding to be, it will never be as high a priority as other areas such as education and health.

The Government have a duty to obtain the best possible value from the money that is available to invest in public legal funding. We have achieved that aim. The success of contracting and the funding code in reprioritising expenditure has released funds to be spent on expanding legal services. I should like to talk about three key examples of that—contracting and innovation, remuneration and eligibility.

Through targeted funding and expansion packages, as well as the continued development of new and innovative methods of service delivery, there are now sufficient numbers of contractors in most categories to ensure access to services across the country. We firmly believe that, through contracting, higher standards can be achieved to improve the quality of publicly funded legal services and value for money in the future. Levels of service are subject to constant review, and if the need for additional funding in any category of law is established, additional funds can be made available.

We acknowledge that not all suppliers have found the transition to the contracting system easy, but I assure hon. Members that I spend considerable time listening to practitioners, whose views are taken into account in policy making. One matter raised by practitioners is the amount of administration involved in the contracting process and the quantity of forms. I have been involved in a review of the amount of paperwork in the contracting system with Mr. Steve Orchard of the Legal Services Commission. I have also asked the LSC to consider the design of forms and ensure that information is requested in the simplest possible way and only when it is really needed.

We have also introduced incentives since April 2000 to encourage firms to expand their services in areas of law that have been targeted for priority funding within the community legal service. The first of those was introduced on 3 April 2000, when the Lord Chancellor announced details of an additional £46 million legal help package, which is intended to boost legal services in areas such as immigration, education, community care and mental health. The number of contracts in those categories has increased significantly as a result, and nowhere more so than in immigration and asylum work. Of the £46 million package, £23 million was made available solely to develop legal services in immigration and asylum. The additional funds have enabled the LSC to fund immigration training courses to allow firms to expand and retrain staff. It has also enabled the Legal Services Commission to introduce several targeted expansion packages aimed at encouraging new and existing firms to undertake more immigration and asylum work in areas of need, which were identified following the Home Office's dispersal programme. The remaining £23 million of the legal package has been used to fund new and innovative methods of service delivery across all priority categories of law, including second-tier, outreach and telephone services to contracted organisations.

Remuneration is an essential consideration when creating a system that can provide good advice and accessible services. Good-quality people are required to meet the legal needs of local communities. We must examine continuously what services the LSC should procure and what it must pay. We have listened to the concerns that the legal profession has expressed about remuneration, and we recognise that many public sector lawyers are dedicated, efficient and caring individuals who provide important services to the poor and disadvantaged for modest returns. We recognise that

the fees earned from publicly funded work fall short of the fees paid in the private market, but the public purse cannot—and, indeed, should not—try to match those fees.

To safeguard the good range of quality assured legal firms that do CLS work, in addition to the increases made last year, the Lord Chancellor recently announced proposals for a package of remuneration increases for family law and social welfare solicitors. The increased rates are aimed at solicitors working in CLS priority areas such as domestic violence, children's welfare and social exclusion.

The package has been generally well received by the profession. It includes increases of about 10 per cent. in legal help rates in most priority categories of law and the introduction of payments for file review. To encourage greater specialisation and expertise within publicly funded work, the Government also propose to introduce a further guaranteed minimum 15 per cent. enhancement for legal representation for solicitors who have achieved accreditation to either the Solicitors Family Law Association panel or the Law Society children's panel. However, many respondents to our consultation expressed concern about the proposal not to increase rates in other important categories such as welfare benefits and debt. I am pleased to announce that legal help work in all the categories that are not included in the originally proposed increases will now receive an increase of about five per cent.

I turn to eligibility. Since April 2000, the CLS has been targeted on those who most need help. However, the Government believe that the CLS fund has the potential to help even more people. In July 2000, we published a package of proposals to reform eligibility for funding. These proposals have several objectives: to make the financial limits fairer and more consistent; to ensure that the financial conditions reflect priority needs; to introduce a simpler means test that could be used for all levels of service and that would be easier for applicants to understand and to ensure that there is a fair balance between publicly and privately funded litigants.

This week, following consultation on the proposals, the Government published their conclusions and a plan of action for achieving their objectives. First, we will increase significantly the eligibility limit for legal help. In the past, people were often forced to seek help through legal representation because they were not financially eligible for legal help. In future, we hope to be able to set exactly the same financial eligibility limits for all levels of service. The proposed increase to the legal help limit is a crucial step towards that goal. The changes announced last week will bring about 5 million more people within the scope of legal help.

The Government will not introduce contributions for people who benefit from legal help. Therefore, the people who are brought within its scope by the increase will receive legal advice entirely free of charge. That will also make the scheme much more easy for solicitors and advice agencies to administer. When the legal help limits are increased to the same as those for legal representation, a further 2 million people will be brought within its scope.

The simplified means test will apply to all levels of service. As it contains a gross income cap and a small number of allowances, applicants will need only to supply a little information to have their means assessed. That will make the means-testing process more transparent and easier to understand.

The changes will be implemented from 1 October 2001. The effect of the changes is that the package will cost more. Over the next three years, the estimated additional cost will be £30 million. That money can be released because of the control mechanisms for spending that the Government have already introduced into the system, and which were not present under the old legal aid system.

The Government have decided not to introduce contributions from equity. During the consultation period, the main argument against such contributions was that they could deter people on low incomes from applying for publicly funded legal services. We have listened to the public's concerns on the matter, and we have decided not to go ahead with the proposal.

I conclude this part of my observations by mentioning some of our future plans for developing the community legal service. The new relationships formed through the CLS have distanced us from the old thinking and structures and unleashed a great deal of energy and new ideas. We want to encourage that, especially in the context of partnerships.

At the end of last year the Lord Chancellor announced that we were setting up a partnership innovation budget worth £15 million over the next three years. That money should produce new initiatives to help those communities badly served by existing services, such as socially excluded groups, and provide services in rural areas for the disabled, for example, who find it difficult to get to a solicitor's office or access legal services in other ways. The funds will provide essential seed-corn money for new initiatives by local partnerships. The proposals for the partnership innovation budget have been put out to consultation, but we are working to a strict timetable, as we want the first money to be paid out to successful bids by this autumn.

There are now clear alternatives to the Government's proposals for a community legal service. The Conservatives have published their plans for civil legal aid, which make chilling reading for the clients, because they propose to abolish all the provisions to which I have referred. The partnerships and the co-ordination of funding will be forgotten.

Mr. Patrick Hall (Bedford): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for giving way. Is he aware that the community legal service partnership steering group in the Bedford area has only recently started its work, and that the partners involved are extremely positive about their task of mapping the needs for specialist legal advice and representation among the local population and the availability of that advice? The partnership is intended to plug the gaps by attracting funding for that purpose. Does the Minister agree that leaving those gaps unfilled—which would be the case if the Conservative party gets its way—would leave large numbers of people without access to legal advice, with damaging personal, social and economic consequences?

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point, based on his own experience in Bedford.

[Mr. Lock]

Throughout the country there are 165 partnerships that do the work that he describes. Some have existed only for a short time, others for a couple of years. They analyse the needs in their area for legal services, which provide ladders out of social exclusion, and work out how people in their area are able to access those services and where the gaps are. They can do that only by prioritising the funds available and co-ordinating the funds between different providers. The Legal Services Commission is not the only body that funds legal advice: local authorities, the National Lottery Charities Board and Government Departments are also involved. Without that co-ordination, it is impossible to be sure that people will receive the services that they need in the priority areas of law in places such as Bedford.

I commend the work of the Bedford partnership, to which my hon. Friend has given his support. The enthusiasm shown in Bedford is matched throughout the country, so it is a tragedy that the Conservative party proposes to abolish not only the partnerships but the quality mark and to return to a demand-led system in which any lawyer could take any case, whether or not that lawyer had expertise in that area of law. They propose, too, to establish a contingency legal aid fund for money and damages claims but would allow conditional fee agreements to continue. That fund, it is said, would pay costs to losing parties and anyone, regardless of income limits, could take part. All that would be financed through a 10 per cent. levy on damages for cases that win.

We considered in detail the concept of the contingency legal aid fund during the consideration of the Access to Justice Bill. I assure the House that the Opposition proposals are a combination of economic illiteracy and political foolishness of the highest order. Our best guess is that the fund would work only if it won approximately nine cases for every one that it lost. A tough merits test would be set, and only cases with a 90 per cent. chance of success would need to apply. Even then, in our judgment, adverse selection, with the better cases being dealt with through conditional fee agreements and the more dubious ones staying in the fund, would ensure that the proposal would collapse under the weight of its own contradictions in a short time. However, that is not the worst aspect of the proposals, as I understand them—no doubt the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) will correct me if I am wrong. The abolition of the community legal service fund and the return of £525 million a year from legal aid to the Treasury would mean that funding for legal help for family cases would be abolished in its entirety.

Labour Members value the help that is provided for debt, housing, domestic violence and immigration cases. The answer to people who cannot afford to pay for legal services themselves is not to turn the clock back to before 1948 or say that the state should not fund them, but to accept our duty to such people and provide them with quality advice when they need it.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): Is there not a risk that the proposals might offend the Human Rights Act 1998?

Mr. Lock: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Let us take the example of a local authority that takes two children into care whose parents want to resist the application. The full force of the state would be applied to take the children into care for what the state perceived to be the children's best interests. Is it right or possible under the Human Rights Act to say that the state will provide no funding to help those parents in dealing with lawyers, social workers and the court case to determine whether it is in the children's best interests to be taken into care? I would be astonished if it would be compliant with duties under the Human Rights Act to allow the state to take children into care without providing any legal help to the parents to assert their rights in a forum that is likely to involve language that they find difficult to follow, legal concepts that are new to them and serious consequences. Leaving them alone without any help would be a travesty and, undoubtedly, a breach of their human rights.

I am confident that Labour will win the general election and that the Tories' plans for the funding of legal services will not come about. However, they are destructive and damaging and go against the grain of all our experience over the past three years of building a community legal service with quality mark services throughout the country and the enthusiasm and commitment of many people to providing civil legal services.

Having come so far and done so much in the community legal service, it would be a travesty and a tragedy if it were all to be ripped up by the Opposition. I am confident that that will not happen, but a year on, the reality is that the CLS is enabling more people to receive good-quality advice early on from quality assured providers, which undoubtedly contributes to the public good.

2.58 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I declare an interest as a practising member of the Bar, although I have not for many years done any publicly funded work. I regret that the Parliamentary Secretary did not find time to express our sadness at what the President of Zimbabwe is doing to the legal system in that country. Although Zimbabwe is a long way away, it inherited its legal and judicial system from this country, and the undermining by an authoritarian president of the judiciary's freedom to exercise its lawful duty—President Mugabe has summarily and unconstitutionally caused the removal of office from the Chief Justice of Zimbabwe—is a matter of great regret.

It is also a matter of regret that neither the Foreign Secretary, nor the Lord Chancellor nor the Parliamentary Secretary has thought fit to deprecate the activities of the President of Zimbabwe in that field. It is equally regrettable that the conduct of the Lord Chancellor throughout his tenure, and especially recently, has caused the reputation of his Department and that of the Office of the Lord Chancellor to fall into disrepute. It is also regrettable that, as head of the judiciary, the Lord Chancellor has become involved in party political fundraising by inviting lawyers to spend large sums to attend a dinner. In so doing he will muddy the waters of the civil justice system and allow members of the public and members of the legal profession who received invitations to think that their future careers as providers of civil justice, both publicly funded as advocates and as members of the judiciary, have been interfered with.

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I also regret that the Home Secretary, who is a member of the Bar, sought fit to attack publicly funded lawyers, who give their services to the people of the United Kingdom for little remuneration. Both the Lord Chancellor and the Home Secretary have done themselves and the Government no good at all. I assure the Minister that lawyers who practise in the publicly funded civil justice system are appalled at the way in which those two senior Cabinet Ministers have behaved.

A letter in *The Times* on 2 March, from the chairman of the Bar, Mr. Roy Amlot QC, refers to the Home Secretary's recent criticism of publicly funded lawyers. He wrote:

"His latest diatribe surely points up the need for an independent legal profession able to withstand an authoritarian government, the dangers of a salaried government-run defence service, and the vigilance and ability the Bar and solicitors can bring to avoid further miscarriages of justice."

That is the immediate context of today's debate.

Recently, I received a letter from the general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union, Mr. Barry Reamsbottom, which refers to the Lord Chancellor's Department's announcement. He wrote that

"they intend to carry out a wide ranging reform of the court service in their consultation document "Modernising the Civil Courts". The document proposes major changes, in fact the first major organised changes since 1840."

The Public and Commercial Services Union which

"represents over 5,000 members at all grades within the Lord Chancellor's Department and county courts, is concerned that this will mean over 140 of the 222 county courts"

in England and Wales

"closing and losing up to half the current staff."

At this stage the union

"does not know which courts"

are to be closed or where they are, but it is undeniable that the closure of a large number of county courts will severely inhibit access to civil justice.

Mr. Lock: Has the hon. Gentleman read the document, "Modernising the Civil Courts"?

Mr. Garnier: Yes, I have.

I return to the second area of context that is germane to the debate. Shortly after the Government were elected in May 1997, the Lord Chancellor and his Minister, who is now the Secretary of State for Defence, began their plans for reforming the provision of publicly funded civil justice. It was announced in autumn 1997 that the effect of the Government's proposals would be to create

"a faster, cheaper and more open civil justice system that"

would be

"available to everyone who needs it."

It was claimed that it would be

"a civil justice system in which there is fairness between the very poor, the very rich and the very great majority in the middle. The Government's aim is to make access to justice a reality, not simply a slogan."

The then junior Minister went on to proclaim that he and his colleagues in Government would

"transform the legal aid scheme and allow it to bring help where it is most needed and can do most good." —[*Official Report*, 21 November 1997; Vol. 301, c. 531.]

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman. Perhaps he could tell us how cutting £500 million pounds from the community legal service, as he would propose if he were in government, would improve access to justice?

Mr. Garnier: I regret to say that the Minister so misdescribed my proposals that it would take too long even in this three-hour debate to correct every inaccuracy. In any event, this is a Government-sponsored adjournment debate on the Government's proposals. The purpose of Parliament, although the Government and their Back Benchers may have forgotten it, is to hold the Government to account. The hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) and I are here to do precisely that. I fully accept that the area of legal public policy has not, sadly, attracted a huge number of Back Benchers of any party into this Chamber. It is not a party political point, but it is none the less regrettable that the only members of the Government party here—there was a Whip here a minute ago but I believe the Minister's speech already pushed him out of the room—are a PPS, who has to be here, although she is dealing with other matters and not concentrating on the debate, and the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore), who at least has the decency to attend, albeit that he is barracking from a sedentary position. He has not been wholly favourable to every Government proposal on civil justice. No doubt he will be causing the Lord Chancellor further trouble following the Office of Fair Trading report, which came out today. I dare say that he cannot wait to remove from the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General the suffix "Queen's counsel".

Mr. Dismore: And from the hon. and learned Gentleman.

Mr. Garnier: No doubt when the hon. Gentleman gets around to it and manages temporarily to shut his mouth, he will want to make the requisite arrangements to remove the suffix from me as well—good luck to him. However, that does not appear to be the current policy of his political master; that is to say, the noble and learned Lord Chancellor. No doubt when the junior Minister returns to his private practice after the election he will wish to reconsider the comments of the hon. Member for Hendon.

The Minister asked me about the Government's document, "Modernising the Civil Courts". I read out the contents of a letter that I had received from the general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union about the closure of 140 of the 222 county courts. The word "closure" no doubt stung the Minister because he is the man who, when standing as a candidate for election in 1997, promised the electors of Wyre Forest that he would oppose through thick and thin the closure of Kidderminster general hospital. Hardly a day had passed following the election when he completely changed his tune. Here we have a Minister who pretends

[Mr. Garnier]

to be the champion of the poor, the disabled and children in the realms of civil justice, who said one thing before the election and within minutes, in order to advance his political career, said quite another. I fear that after the general election he may have more time to consult the people of Wyre Forest and those in the queues at Kidderminster general hospital.

In his announcement in autumn 1997 the then Minister, now the Secretary of State for Defence, said that civil justice was

"too expensive and too exclusive."

He said:

"The very rich have access because they do not need to worry about the costs of litigation. The very poor have access because they are financed by the legal aid fund paid for by the taxpayer. However, the vast majority of people who go out to work and fund legal aid through their taxes dare not risk pursuing their rights through the courts. Those people cannot litigate because lawyers' fees are so high and because they cannot afford the risk of losing and having to pay their opponent's costs as well as their own."

He continued:

"The great majority of the population are not eligible for legal aid. They are effectively excluded from obtaining access to justice in our courts. That cannot be right and it must change. In future, legal actions brought by ordinary working people will usually be paid for by way of one of two routes: conditional fees and legal expenses insurance. The Government are proposing to extend conditional fee—or no-win, no-fee—arrangements to most money recovery civil proceedings, except family cases. Clients will be put in a stronger position to negotiate with their lawyers the fees that they are willing to pay to bring a case. At a stroke, legal help will become affordable to deal with disputes with insurance companies, banks, builders, mortgage lenders and pension funds—provided, of course, that the lawyer has sufficient confidence in his or her legal judgment of the case to enter a no-win, no-fee arrangement."

He concluded—I suspect more in hope than with any other emotion:

"At last, the vast majority of people will be able to afford to uphold their rights in court if they need to."—[*Official Report*, 21 November 1997; Vol. 301, c. 532-36.]

The one problem that he was unable to deal with, and which the Government remain unable to deal with, was the requirement that if access to civil justice was to be provided through conditional fee arrangements, a mature insurance market was required to underpin them. At the time—and subsequently—the Government signally failed to demonstrate that CFAs have been so underpinned. I had discussions with representatives of one of the biggest legal insurance providers only this morning. They were sceptical about whether CFAs were turning out to be the answer to the removal of legal aid in more or less every cause of action brought about by the Government.

How have the Government managed to perform? They said that—

Mr. Dismore: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr. Garnier: During the long sittings of the Committee that considered the Access to Justice Bill, I accused the hon. Gentleman of having a spring in his back. I am sure that he is itching to criticise the Lord Chancellor about the QC system. If he manages to catch your eye, Mr. O'Hara, we will listen with rapt attention, as always.

What I find interesting about the way in which the Government have approached the whole question of destroying legal aid—[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. I am being extremely patient about sedentary interventions, but they are becoming a little too frequent and intrusive.

Mr. Garnier: I find it interesting that the Lord Chancellor, at the outset of the Government's period in office, said that his watchword would be consultation, listening and responding to the advice of those who knew more about the matter than he did. In October 1997, in his Law Society speech in Cardiff, he said that he was there to announce an integrated package of proposals, on every one of which

"I intend to consult the profession."

He said:

"Change is on its way, and the best thing to do with change is to manage it through consultation and in a spirit of consultation."—[*Official Report*, 21 November 1997; Vol. 301, c. 550.]

If there is one thing that this Lord Chancellor is noted for—and for which his junior Minister has become noted—it is to consult by megaphone and not to listen to the voices of those who are trying to respond. In this field of public policy, the Government have not listened to anybody, but have simply trampled all over the rights and interests of a host of people, many of whom are now hugely disadvantaged.

I have no doubt that the late Clement Attlee is spinning in his grave at the way in which this so-called Labour Government have destroyed access to justice. They have cruelly and cynically called the Act of Parliament that overlays this debate the Access to Justice Act. It can be more properly described as a denial of access to justice Act. I think that most practitioners in the publicly funded civil jurisdiction would agree.

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: Will the hon. and learned Gentleman tell us how many constituents have complained to him that they have been unable to gain access to an adviser in a legal issue in which they are concerned, during the past year?

Mr. Garnier: I cannot give the figure off the top of my head, but a good many have complained to their solicitors, who have then complained to me.

It is not just in my constituency. When I was shadow Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, from 1997 until the summer of 1999, I made it my job to meet provincial law societies around the country, and the law societies and their officers in London and in other major urban areas that have many solicitors' firms. I got the message, nationally and locally, from individual practitioners, from officers of local law societies and from the national Law Society, that the Government had not undertaken—I was about to use an unparliamentary expression—the consultation that the Lord Chancellor had promised. Those societies recognised that the Government had just bullied their way towards the goals that they desired, without taking notice of anybody else's concerns. They continue to do that.

At the outset of this shiny new Government, the Labour party published a policy document entitled "Access to Justice". On conditional fee arrangements, it said:

"We regard conditional fees as an experiment to be monitored closely and in the light of the Scottish experience".

It did not expect the introduction of conditional fee arrangements

"to make a significant improvement to access to justice. They are at present little more than a gimmick designed to mask the chaotic state of the legal aid scheme and the courts service."

That was what Labour believed before the last election. Within minutes of the election being over, it decided to change its mind, without carrying out any adequate research, displaying any consistency of thought or policy or caring two hoots for the consequences of its actions on those who had been protected by the legal aid system before the passing of the Access to Justice Act 1999.

Much criticism could be made of the way in which the Government have imposed conditional fee arrangements on the public. I have always made it clear that I have no principled objection to conditional fee arrangements, but I find fault with the Government because they have sought to strip out, except in one or two areas, access to legal aid in its entirety, and replace it wholesale with the use of conditional fee arrangements.

There are, and will be, cases in which conditional fee arrangements work, especially in personal injury work, where the real issue, as often happened under the legal aid system, is not liability, but quantum. If a lawyer picks up a case that he is reasonably sure will be more about quantum than liability, of course he will take a CFA because he knows that he is in no danger of not being paid. However, as the hon. Member for Hendon candidly admitted earlier in this Parliament, the personal injury side of the legal aid fund made a profit. I was not as optimistic or bullish about the profit element, but the fund's net expenditure up to the abolition of the legal aid system was around £36 million a year.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): The hon. and learned Gentleman knows my views on conditional fee agreements. Does he agree that when a personal injury case involves quantum, the lawyer who pushes his client into a conditional fee agreement will ensure that he receives not just his fee, but a substantial uplift?

Mr. Garnier: That is a consequence. Lawyers with conditional fee arrangement cases have a personal interest, as opposed to a professional disinterest, in the outcome of the case. I cannot provide this Chamber with examples of lawyers who have encouraged a client to settle on unfavourable terms because it might be favourable to the lawyer. That information is not available and the hon. Gentleman would not expect me to have it. However, the thrust of the Government's policy is to push us towards the American system of funding justice.

The conditional fee arrangement system is, if not explicitly, at least by implication, a move towards the contingency fee system. Before hon. Members become over-excited, I candidly admit that the principle of conditional fee arrangements was introduced under my noble and learned Friend Lord Mackay. However, it was under the present Government's Access to Justice Act 1999 that the system was introduced wholesale and I submit that, if the Government remain in office, we can look forward to increasing erosion of professional disinterest in the provision of civil legal services and a further move towards a contingency fee system such as that in the United States.

Mr. Dismore: This problem arose during our consideration of the Access to Justice Bill. The hon. Gentleman seems to think that conditional fees and contingency fees are the same, but they are completely different. Will he tell us which American states operate a conditional fee system, as opposed to a contingency fee system based on the level of damages, which is what the hon. Gentleman advocates? He wants the American system; the Government do not.

Mr. Garnier: I think that we are talking at cross-purposes. I know precisely the difference between conditional fee arrangements, which Lord Mackay admitted to this jurisdiction, and contingency fee arrangements, which apply in the United States. I do not need a lecture from the hon. Gentleman on the subject.

I am suggesting—the hon. Gentleman may disagree and no doubt he will tell us why at great length—that the Government's wholesale move towards expansion of the conditional fee arrangement system is a move towards the American contingency fee system in the provision of legal services. I say that with some confidence because there have been meetings at the Labour party headquarters at Millbank at which I understand the Parliamentary Secretary was unable to be present. However, Professor John Peysner, professor of law at Nottingham law school, chaired those Labour party policy meetings, and, with Mr. Brian Raincock, an interesting figure in the legal insurance world, and other citizens advised the Labour party on how best to advance non-publicly funded legal services to replace legal aid. It is no secret that Professor John Peysner is a supporter of the American system.

Mr. Burnett: The hon. and learned Gentleman is making a powerful and correct point. I regret to say that I cannot remember the exact title of the statutory instrument that we were debating in Committee—I think that the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) was the Conservative spokesman—but I believe that the question of conditional fees was raised. I pointed out at the time that, in effect, the Government were being put under pressure to acknowledge and agree to unlimited uplifts. They resisted, and I hope that the Minister agrees that a conditional fee agreement would lead to unlimited uplifts that were nothing but contingent fee agreements.

Mr. Garnier: The hon. Gentleman exposes a further reason for the Government to be embarrassed about their handling of the provision of legal services in this area of public policy, and he will doubtless tell us more about that in due course.

The Minister drew to our attention to a document entitled "The Government's Conclusions Following Consultation: the Community Legal Service—financial

[Mr. Garnier]

conditions for funding by the Legal Services Commission", which was published this week. I received a copy of it in this morning's post, for which I am grateful, along with a document entitled "Community Legal Service: financial conditions for funding by the Legal Services Commission", which deals with the revised eligibility limits.

The outcome of the Government's deliberations has been the subject of some criticism. It is fair to say that the president of the Law Society has in part welcomed the announcement, not least because the equity in a house need not be taken into account when assessing eligibility for legal aid, but in the Law Society's response the president said:

"There is still a long way to go before eligibility for legal aid is at a level which ensures effective access to justice for all".

Before I am criticised for not completing the president's sentence, I should point out that he adds that

"today's announcement is an important step in the right direction."

I suppose that that is true, but it is an unusual step for the Government to take if they have taken on board criticisms of the consultation paper that were made last autumn. I think that it was Lord Goodhart who, on asking in the other place last November about responses to the consultation document, was told by the Lord Chancellor that 34 responses had been critical and two or three were in favour. I may have got the exact figures wrong but the ratio is broadly correct.

In any event, today the Law Society, whose voice can be heard in this Chamber only through Members of Parliament, issued a response to the proposals that the Minister outlined a little while ago. It states:

"The Society has considered the eligibility proposals in the light of the extent to which they meet the objective that public funding should be available to ensure that all citizens can enforce their legal rights."

It has considered the proposals from two perspectives: the public interest, and the impact on solicitors' businesses and the likely consequences for the public. It roundly

"rejects the Government's view that, unless additional measures are put in place, either clients, or by implication, their solicitors, will seek to lengthen their cases, having no incentive to bring them to an early end. The Society is concerned that the Government appears to consider that financial considerations occupy the entirety of, or indeed are uppermost in clients' minds in the conduct of litigation."

That is in line with the Government's continual insulting of lawyers who work in the publicly funded sector. The Lord Chancellor inaccurately, stupidly and rudely accused legal aid lawyers of being fat cats—[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. It might be appropriate to withdraw "stupidly".

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: On a point of order, Mr. O'Hara. The Lord Chancellor appointed the hon. and learned Gentleman as a Crown court recorder, so perhaps the word was not out of place.

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (in the Chair): That is not a point of order.

Mr. Garnier: That is not funny, let alone relevant. The Lord Chancellor appointed me a Crown court recorder, but I did not have to pay £200 for the privilege.

The Law Society has rejected the Government's view, but its attack on the publicly funded legal profession is of a piece with the unfortunate and uncalled for remarks of the Lord Chancellor. He has had to accept the unwisdom of calling legal aid lawyers fat cats, which was in line with the Home Secretary's unfortunate remarks last week. Interestingly, the Government seek to bend the facts to suit their propaganda and spin, which is designed to infect the public's mind against lawyers who do this valuable work. The Government have come up with nothing sensible and their conduct in dealing with the legal profession, and especially the publicly funded legal profession, has been shoddy.

Mr. Lock: Does the hon. and learned Gentleman recall the enormous cut in eligibility that occurred shortly after he entered the House in 1993. Would he agree that that cut was reversed by this week's announcement that provided 5 million more people with legal help. Can he explain how returning £525 million from the community legal service fund to the Treasury would assist eligibility?

Mr. Garnier: I cannot recall that cut and I joined the House in 1992.

The Law Society concludes that although one aim of the community legal service is to ensure that needy people can pursue their legal rights, the new proposals will act as a disincentive on many needy citizens. The proposal would adversely affect homeowners—especially in areas of high housing costs—employed people who incur travel and/or child care costs and those who are in receipt of tax credits. The groups most likely to be affected would include pensioners, working single parents and disabled citizens who are in receipt of benefits. I spoke on behalf of those groups during the consideration of the Access to Justice Act 1999 and the debate in the House on 21 November 1997.

The Government have never paid attention to my remarks, but they might pay attention to bodies such as the Law Society and those who practise in the publicly funded civil jurisdiction before continuing their attack upon the way in which the publicly funded legal profession works. It is not surprising that the Law Society concludes:

"At a time when many solicitors are considering carefully the impact which publicly funded work has upon their viability as businesses, the new proposals and in particular the proposals concerning collection of contributions will serve only to drive solicitors away from publicly funded work thus limiting the availability of publicly funded services to those most in need."

The Government's record on that aspect of public policy is bad and it is getting worse. Their response has been so arrogant that I suspect few members of the legal profession will vote for the Labour party in general and the Parliamentary Secretary in particular at the next general election—whatever its result may be.

3.34 pm

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I would like to tackle the Government's announcement earlier this week, which has been largely welcomed. I want to raise some points about eligibility with the Minister.

I expect that the Minister will receive a number of submissions about the announcement and the papers that the Government have circulated. I would like the

Minister to address three points concerning the financial eligibility for civil legal aid and say whether the Government have plans to change the rules for eligibility—[*Interruption.*]

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. If there is to be communication between those in the Chamber and those outside, it should be by note, and not verbal.

Mr. Burnett: Thank you, Mr. O'Hara.

A reconsideration of eligibility by the Government would be welcomed by a number of people across the land. My first point concerns housing costs—including council housing costs—and whether allowances should be made for council tax and service charges. My second point concerns employment costs, including full travel costs, child care costs and other necessary subscriptions. My third point, which was alluded to by the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), concerns equity in a dwelling. What proportion of the equity value of an individual's home does the Minister believe should be taken into account when assessing eligibility? Will the Minister respond to those points in his conclusion?

It is imperative that we have a system that is available to large sections of the public. We all agree that we cannot offer a blank cheque. I look forward to hearing the Minister's view on eligibility.

During the debates on the Access to Justice Bill, we discussed at length the amount of legal aid that would remain for civil cases, year on year. We know that, as far as criminal legal aid is concerned, the quantity will be demand led.

Although the Government's announcement is welcome, I am anxious to know about their long-term strategy for funding civil legal aid. If the Government are re-elected, will there be a finite group of individuals with specific incomes and needs who will always qualify for civil legal aid, or will there be a finite sum for the legal aid budget that is indexed to inflation or earnings?

I did not hear all of the Minister's speech, but I believe that he referred to a growth in civil legal aid of about 5 per cent. per annum. We were keen, during the debate on the Access to Justice Bill, to see the criminal legal aid fund separated from the civil legal aid fund. We understand that the civil legal aid fund cannot be left to grow like Topsy; there must be constraints. However, I am anxious to know the Government's long-term strategy. We expressed the concern that legal aid will be left to wither on the vine and that concern is shared on both sides of the Chamber.

Test and lead cases are important and affect not only miners and people with legitimate claims, but organophosphate victims, about whom I have written to the Minister recently. We hope that the Government are seriously considering funding test and lead cases and class actions, which are in the long-term interests of the taxpayer. By setting a decision, individuals will have the chance to claim their damages not as a result of a plethora of cases, but following one test and lead case.

Mr. Lock: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the wider public interest in cases has been set out as a priority for the Government within the funding code. Does he accept that decisions about the funding of individual cases should be taken not by Ministers, but by the Legal Services Commission under the funding code? The Government have done as much as they can, which is to identify the importance of cases with public interest within the code and have then passed the matter over to the LSC, which is operationally independent, as it should be.

Mr. Burnett: I agree. Such action is entirely fair. We should have some acknowledgment, however, that a finite pool of money can be drawn on for such cases, which are in the taxpayer's interest. If we can consolidate a series of cases, it is cheaper than it would be case by case.

Much was made of the abolition of civil legal aid for personal injury cases during the debates on the Access to Justice Bill. Have the Government had second thoughts about that? Now that there has been a change to the system, I do not know whether there are any reliable statistics on whether the Government have saved any money as a result of that abolition. When we debated the Access to Justice Bill, I said that if we stripped out the value-added tax element and the benefit savings, there were unlikely to be any savings in the legal aid budget if we abolished legal aid for personal injury cases. The then Minister's comments to me were that the Government anticipated that there would be the same amount of cases post-abolition as before, and therefore the same amount of value-added tax would be levied and paid to the Exchequer.

Mr. Lock: It may assist the hon. Gentleman to know that the cost to the legal aid fund for personal injury cases in its last year of operation was more than £100 million. It could have been as high as £170 million. I do not know the exact figure. More than 100,000 litigation insurance policies have been written in support of conditional fee agreements. About 60,000 claims—the number is rising—have been undertaken through Claims Direct. All the evidence that the Department has from the insurance industry—defendant insurers, not legal expenses insurers—is that claims are increasing substantially. There does not seem to be a reduction in the number of people who are claiming under defendant insurance policies.

Mr. Burnett: I am grateful for the Minister's explanation, but I would appreciate knowing either this afternoon or in due course the Government's best estimate of legal aid costs that they have saved through abolishing legal aid for personal injury cases, bearing in mind the benefit savings of the litigation. He has answered the benefits point by saying that litigation has increased, which means that the value-added tax element has increased and that significant savings have been made. I should like to know exactly how much they have been, or, at least, be given a best estimate.

The Government's solution to individuals who have personal injury cases and to the fact that it is difficult for middle-income Britain to get access to justice is to increase widely the class of case that can be dealt with through conditional fee agreements. As may be obvious from my earlier intervention, I object on principle to CFAs on the grounds that they cause a conflict of interest between lawyer and client. None the less, they exist and we must live with them.

[Mr. Burnett]

A paper was published in January by the Society for Advanced Legal Studies on the ethics of conditional fee agreements. The chairman of the committee that produced this excellent piece of work is Mr. Richard Southwell QC. Will the Minister confirm that he has had an opportunity to study that paper?

Mr. Dismore: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman has seen the article by David Marshall of the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers in this week's edition of the Law Society *Gazette*. He comments on the paper that the hon. Gentleman mentioned and says that it could only have been compiled before all the new changes came into effect.

Mr. Burnett: I have not see that article and am grateful to the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) for bringing it to my attention. None the less, I would like to make a few points arising from the excellent paper compiled by Richard Southwell QC, and look forward to hearing what the Minister says about the conclusions and recommendations set out in it.

Have the Government considered the role and conduct of insurance companies in the litigation process? Have they done an appropriate amount of research and independent scrutiny into that role? I referred to the conflict of interests between solicitor and client caused by conditional fee agreements; nowhere is that more pronounced than when a commercial insurance company is involved. We are worried that the insurance companies may drive the litigation, select the lawyers to act and tell the client when, or when not, to settle.

I hope that the Government have done research and scrutiny into the role of insurance companies. Are they satisfied that there is a sufficient open market for insurance for CFAs and that it is not a cartel? Do they believe that not only are there sufficient providers but that their policies are provided at a fair and competitive rate, and that their terms and conditions will not contradict the best interests of litigants?

Will there be a firm cap on the total costs at a particular percentage of the damages? I would hope that that could be applied compulsorily but, none the less, I look forward to hearing the Minister's view. The paper to which I referred also mentioned the cooling-off period between the presentation of a CFA and its signing. The paper referred to that as a period of contemplation between the explanation of the draft CFA to the client and the client being requested to sign.

Will the Minister say something about the definition of the terms success and win? One of the problems of conditional fee agreements is that lawyers are given an incentive to get their clients to enter such agreements, thereby doubling their fees. Lawyers are also given an incentive to settle the case too quickly, getting insufficient damages for their clients. Richard Southwell's paper suggests that success and win should be properly defined.

During discussions on the Access to Justice Bill, which is important in relation to conditional fees, we raised a point about experts and other witnesses. It is hoped that no expert can participate in litigation based on a speculative, contingent or conditional fee agreement.

I have raised five points and there are further points that relate to the Bar's code of conduct. There should be stronger provisions that require barristers always to act in their clients' interest, and not in their personal interest. Problems of inter-chamber conflict should be covered by a specific provision in the code of conduct. Judges should play an appropriate part in maintaining and raising ethical standards in the legal profession.

We must learn to live with conditional fee agreements, however. Subsequent Governments will come under great pressure to change from conditional fee agreements to contingent fee agreements, as they have in the United States. Such pressures will be unstoppable. However, we have a system of conditional fees and it is an important part of civil litigation. It replaces much of the legal aid that was previously available. I hope that the Government are monitoring the system and I look forward to hearing from the Minister about exactly what progress they have made, through monitoring, to try to make that system fairer.

3.52 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I declare an interest because I am a solicitor and I have specialised in personal injury work for over 20 years. Unlike the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), I am not moonlighting because I regard myself as a full-time Member of Parliament. I do not think that hon. Members should have the time to practise in the courts, as he does.

I was appalled by the hon. and learned Gentleman's disgraceful attack on my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor regarding the fund-raising dinner. I was at that dinner, and I do not think that there is any chance of me currying favour with the Lord Chancellor for judicial or Queen's counsel appointments. Indeed, by the time that I am old enough to be a QC, I hope that such appointments will have been abolished.

I welcome the introduction of the community legal service. In Barnet, my local authority, we have worked with the authority and community to develop a partnership with the Lord Chancellor's Department to provide, for the first time in the borough, access to legal services through an advice centre. I am grateful for the encouragement that the Minister and the Department have given that project.

I am sorry that the hon. and learned Member for Harborough has left the Chamber because I would like him to hear some points that follow on from his speech.

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. I understand that the hon. and learned Member for Harborough will return. The hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) may wish to defer some of his observations until that point.

Mr. Dismore: In that case I shall pass over my points that relate to conditional fees until the hon. and learned Gentleman returns.

Mr. Burnett: The hon. Gentleman has reminded me that I did not declare an interest. I am a tax solicitor,

although I no longer practise because, like him, I am a full-time Member of Parliament. I apologise to you, Mr. O'Hara, for not making that point earlier.

Mr. Dismore: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has had the opportunity to clarify the position. As the hon. and learned Member for Harborough has decided to absent himself from this Chamber, I shall respond to the points made by the hon. Member for Torridge and South Devon.

Mr. Burnett: My constituency is Torridge and West Devon. I do not want to appear too pedantic, but strictly speaking it should be Devon, West and Torridge, although it is referred to colloquially as Torridge and West Devon.

Mr. Dismore: Clearly, the hon. Gentleman is from somewhere in the west country. I am afraid that my knowledge of geography does not extend that far.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the report by the Society for Advanced Legal Studies, and I was grateful that he took a short intervention from me on that point. He would do himself a favour were he to read the article by Mr. Marshall in the Law Society *Gazette* in which he makes some important points. It shows the extent to which the report by the Society for Advanced Legal Studies is out of date, and that its methodology is suspect. Only one member of the working party is likely to have had significant experience of CFAs in practice, and the working party as a whole appears to have undertaken no independent evidence gathering.

The hon. Gentleman referred to a cap on the level of damages, but the committee undertaking the inquiry seemed to be unaware that that no longer appears in the Law Society's model agreement. The original purpose of that provision was to protect the client, although that issue no longer arises, given that the losing party and not the client now pays the risk element of the success fee. It is important to stress that under the new rules on CFAs and the new civil procedure rules accompanied by the practice direction, CFAs must be the most closely regulated method of funding litigation ever. When my hon. Friend the Minister replies, I hope that he will clarify some of those points in more detail. The study, which I have looked at briefly, is behind the game compared with how things have developed.

As the hon. and learned Member for Harborough has returned, I shall deal with some of his points about CFAs. First, he prayed in aid Mr. John Peysner, an academic from Nottingham university. I can only assume that he has not read this week's *The Lawyer* magazine, because it contains a lengthy article by Mr. Peysner on this subject. Mr. Peysner writes:

"In many respects the present policy of supplementing and replacing legal aid by conditional fees, backed by after-the-event insurance (AEI), has been remarkably successful. Risk-based litigation has had a very limited role in the UK. And while conditional fees have been available since the early 1990s, they were little used, and the Scottish speculative fees system has never really taken off. The secret was to offer the stick—the removal of legal aid—with the carrot, AEI giving clients protection against the opponent's costs and, if required, their own lawyer's fees. The ability to recover the success fee and insurance premium after the Access to Justice Act seems to have completed a neat and self-sufficient package."

If the hon. and learned Gentleman is quoting from academics, he might like to quote from their most up-to-date work, such as that published this week, rather than that to which he referred earlier.

The hon. and learned Gentleman also prayed in aid information from the Law Society. I have the Law Society brief, which was faxed to me today at 13.19 pm. Michael Napier, president of the Law Society, said:

"The Law Society welcomes the announcement for an improvement in eligibility for legal help. This will provide access to justice for a number of people who are at present excluded.

We also welcome the Government's decision to abandon the plan to require those with house equity above £3,000 to contribute towards the cost of legal representation."

Again, therefore, the hon. and learned Gentleman is a bit behind the game. I know that he is a Queen's counsel, and QCs are not good at doing their own research—they tend to ask solicitors to do the research for them. As a solicitor, I like doing my homework and research, unlike the hon. and learned Gentleman, who tries to commission it from other people. I can only assume that he has been badly briefed by whoever did the job for him on this occasion.

The issue of conditional fees created a lot of controversy when it first arose. As Mr. Peysner said, however, they have proved remarkably successful. In his intervention on the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon, my hon. Friend the Minister provided some statistics to show how well it has been working. Nevertheless, a few potential glitches were identified during the debate on the Access to Justice Bill, and a couple of them have worked their way through. If the system does not deal with them as it develops, the Government must do so.

The first glitch concerns the recoverability of after-the-event insurance premiums, particularly in cases that are not litigated. I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware of last month's decision at Chester county court, which upheld the recoverability of insurance premiums. The success fee in that case was 40 per cent. The technical calculation would have produced a success fee of about 35 per cent. On appeal, the judge decided that it was sufficiently within the deputy district judge's discretion to admit the original 40 per cent. charge. The after-the-event premium was in the region of £200 to £300, which is not excessive.

A few months ago, my hon. Friend responded to an oral question that I put to him at Lord Chancellor's questions by emphasising that the Government believe that insurance premiums should be recoverable, and that that was the intention behind the legislation and the subordinate legislation. That answer can, no doubt, be used on a Pepper *v.* Hart basis to construe the legislation.

I regret that the insurers are, apparently, planning to challenge the decision in the Court of Appeal. One or two of its members take a slightly dinosaur approach to conditional fees, so I hope that, if it construes the legislation differently, the Government will look sympathetically at the detailed wording of the subordinate legislation. Will the Minister find out

[Mr. Dismore]

whether the Court of Appeal can deal with the matter expeditiously, because if the uncertainty continues, that could create considerable difficulties for practitioners?

Mr. Burnett: The hon. Gentleman has made a sweeping comment that some members of the Court of Appeal are dinosaurs in their approach to conditional fee agreements. Will he explain that?

Mr. Dismore: There is little doubt that, before the Government began their reform programme, the Court of Appeal took a very suspicious approach towards the conditional fee issue. That is evidenced by its decisions on the old CFA arrangements that were introduced by Lord Mackay, and it has not liked the way in which the Government have taken the issue forward.

I am not castigating the entire Court of Appeal. Some of its judges are far-thinking. However, a couple of them are suspicious of the Government's approach to the matter but, when the issue comes before the Court of Appeal, I hope that it will examine in particular my hon. Friend's response to my question about the intention of the scheme.

I also want to highlight collective conditional fees. They have greatly improved access to justice for trade union members. Traditionally, trade unions have provided the backbone of legal aid support, particularly for personal injury claims. They are also the backbone of a range of other services, such as employment tribunals, which are not covered by CFAs. Trade unions were potentially at a disadvantage until arrangements could be made to introduce collective conditional fees. The arrangements that have been produced are more complicated than they might have been had my hon. Friend and his colleagues in the Lord Chancellor's Department accepted the point of view that I expressed on the indemnity principle in the Access to Justice Bill debates.

The issue has been referred to the civil procedure rules committee for further consideration, but if we can get rid of the indemnity principle, that would provide a major step forward in simplifying the operation of the conditional fee scheme. Section 31 of the Access to Justice Act 1999 allows for rules of court to limit or abolish the indemnity principle. The indemnity principle acts as a bar to progress given the introduction of another aspect of conditional fees; the whole concept of fixed fees and capped fees. There is much pressure to introduce them, particularly for fast-track cases. Realistically, we cannot have fixed or capped fees in fast-track cases until the indemnity principle has gone. The whole concept behind fixed fee arrangements is that the client will pay the fixed fee come what may. If the case is successful the fee is passed on to the insurers, and, in personal injury cases, to the defendant.

If the work done amounted to less than the fixed fee, that would infringe the indemnity principle, and the system of fixed fees could not operate. If we strive for greater simplification of the way in which civil justice is funded, the indemnity principle will inevitably go. Under today's commercial arrangements, it no longer serves the purpose for which it was originally intended in funding litigation involving individual or collective clients. It is a relic of the past that should go.

I raise the activities of companies such as Claims Direct. I am concerned that the arrangements under which such firms operate no longer provide the advantages that existed before recoverability of insurance premiums and success fees from insurers. Those firms have an enormous marketing operation, and I am concerned that members of the public should be aware that they may not be getting as good a service as they would if they went to a solicitor on the Law Society personal injury panel.

I contrast the Government's efforts to improve access to justice, especially for victims with personal injury claims, with the views expressed by the hon. and learned Member for Harborough on his class scheme. He must explain how his scheme could possibly interact with the success of the conditional fee arrangements. I have challenged him several times on that issue, especially on the distinction between conditional and contingency fees, and I do not believe that he understands the difference. Perhaps that is not surprising. Barristers do not want to get their hands dirty with the nitty gritty of funding—they only want to pocket the cash at the end.

Mr. Garnier: On a point of order, Mr. O'Hara. That is a gross insult that impugns my integrity. The hon. Gentleman should withdraw it at once.

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (in the Chair): Would the hon. Member for Hendon like to reconsider his remarks?

Mr. Dismore: I would be happy to, Mr. O'Hara. I simply made a general point about the practice of barristers that was not aimed at the hon. and learned Gentleman, but which might explain why he does not understand the difference between conditional and contingency fees. Barrister's fees are negotiated by their clerks. Barristers do not involve themselves in the nitty gritty of negotiation and, frankly, few barristers understand the detail of how costs are assessed and how cost schemes work. These days, barristers are beginning to get a better grip on conditional fees in the world of personal injury because they are now offering those fees. I understand that the hon. and learned Gentleman does not practice in that world, so I suspect that he does not have direct experience, which may explain why he does not seem to understand the difference between the two types of fees.

Mr. Garnier: May I interrupt the hon. Gentleman, as he is so keen to insult me continuously and unattractively? His comments tell us more about him than about the quality of his arguments. As it happens, I have done a conditional fee arrangement case. Should the hon. Gentleman wish to visit my chambers, I would be happy to show him the valuable work that my chambers and I give to the public.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for that offer, but I have seen the inside of many barristers' chambers, and I do not suppose that his are very different.

Mr. Burnett: I practised in a field of law in which I was only occasionally required to refer a case to a barrister for an opinion. Without exception, I received an excellent service from a strong, independent Bar. I hope

that the hon. Gentleman will reconsider his castigation of the profession on which he has just pronounced without any qualification. It is not in the best interests of the House to make such sweeping statements.

Mr. Dismore: I was not suggesting that barristers are not competent in arguing their cases in court. Some are, and some are not. I was referring in particular to their grip on costs, how costs are calculated and funding methods. In 20 years in practice, I have always found that their knowledge is not what it should be. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman's experience is the same, but in dealing with assessments of costs, I have found that, with the exception of one or two barristers who specialise in that field, their grasp of the facts and issues is lacking. It is always the solicitor's job to get his hands dirty with the nitty-gritty of such work.

I digress from the main thrust of my argument, which relates to the difference between a contingency legal aid fund and conditional fees. Conditional fees are not linked to the level of damages awarded. A client whose conditional fee case is successful will not see his damages eaten away as they would be under a contingency fee system.

Under a contingency fee system, lawyers are funded out of damages. Conditional fees are completely different, because they are linked to the amount of work that the lawyer does on the case, and are subject to scrutiny. The problem with contingency fees—which is the American system—is that they are linked to the compensation that the client recovers. The lawyer's interest is therefore directly linked to the amount of compensation. That is less healthy than a conditional fee. Moreover, the people who lose out, in the personal injury world, are those who suffered the injury, and they need compensation in full. Despite what hon. Members may read in the newspapers, compensation in this country is not over-generous for personal injury. Under a contingency legal aid fund scheme, such as has been suggested, damages would be eaten away, and that would be abhorrent.

Mr. Burnett: Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that conditional fee agreements have shortcomings? I hope that he has read the correspondence that I have seen, which suggests that, under conditional fee agreements, a huge amount of the damages—more than 80 or 90 per cent.—has sometimes been taken up in fees. Although I do not espouse contingency fee agreements, at least they motivate the lawyer involved to maximise the client's damages.

Mr. Dismore: I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's point. He is referring either to the conditional fee agreements that predate the reforms that the Government introduced, under which, unlike under present arrangements, the success fee was recoverable from the client, or to the Claims Direct scheme, which, he will recall, I criticised only a few moments ago because I believe that it rips off clients, which a legitimate conditional fee agreement does not do.

Contingency fees would take us down the American road. I have reservations about that because, unlike conditional fees, contingency fee arrangements put pressure on lawyers to maximise damages. It is their professional job to do that anyway, but there is always the risk that the client could lose out if the case is pushed too far in that direction through, for example, failing to beat a part 36 offer or payment. For those reasons, I find the concept of a contingency legal aid fund scheme abhorrent.

At the last election, I spent a lot of time researching the concept, because I believed that it might provide a way forward for legal aid reform. I ultimately concluded that it was a non-runner. The hon. and learned Member for Harborough must be about four years behind where I was when I was researching the scheme.

My first concern about the CLAF scheme is that the client loses money that he or she can ill afford. My second is that I cannot see how a CLAF system could run alongside the conditional fee agreement system. There would always be a risk of adverse selection, which would weaken the financial viability of any CLAF. The fund would try to attract the stronger cases to ensure that contributions would be received from damages awarded. The figures that I have seen suggest that there would have to be a 90 per cent. success rate, because under the hon. and learned Gentleman's proposals, on average, 10 successful cases would be needed to pay for each case lost.

If solicitors were to decide, as they often would, to take stronger cases on a CFA basis, the claimant would not have to make a contribution from damages and the solicitor would earn fees commensurate to the risk taken, and so stand to earn more. The CFA system, therefore, is a win-win situation whereas the CLAF system is a lose-lose situation for both client and solicitor. There are ways of trying to prevent adverse selection, but they are far worse than the benefits that they create. The only sure way to prevent it would be to make use of the system compulsory in every case, and that is a non starter.

Mr. Burnett: I agree with the tenor of the hon. Gentleman's remarks. It is very difficult to run a conditional fee agreement system alongside a CLAF system, because the CFA system will, in effect, cherry-pick all the best cases. The hon. Gentleman said that adverse selection could be overcome. How?

Mr. Dismore: The only way to overcome adverse selection would be to make it compulsory for every case to go through the CLAF system. That would be unacceptable, and might breach human rights legislation on the right to a fair trial. There is no other way round the problem.

Adverse selection has been largely overcome in relation to conditional fees, because solicitors who undertake conditional fee agreements, through schemes such as Accident Line Protect, undertake not to operate on an adverse selection basis. That means swings and roundabouts for the insurers. Some adverse selection probably still goes on through the back door, but in practice it has been overcome by contractual arrangements. Those would not be operable in a nationwide CLAF scheme. Choice and the opportunity to have a case funded on a genuine no win, no fee basis would be lost under the Tories' scheme to take people's damages away and rob Peter to pay Paul.

The scheme is just another Portillo black hole, which has been dropped into the lap of the hon. and learned Member for Harborough. It is an attempt to find

[Mr. Dismore]

£0.5 billion to cut from the legal aid budget. Despite being challenged to do so, the hon. and learned Gentleman still has not come up with a sensible idea of where to find such a cut without seriously damaging advice services. Such services include those for women seeking injunctions to prevent domestic violence, for parents seeking court orders for custody of, or contact with, their children, and for parents challenging local authorities' decisions to take their children into care. Those matters are all currently funded through the community legal service system, which would fall by the wayside should the hon. and learned Gentleman get his way.

That is all that I want to say about conditional fees, but I will not disappoint the hon. and learned Member for Harborough by failing to refer to Queen's counsel. I am sure that he was eagerly anticipating such remarks, in the light of the report that the Office of Fair Trading published yesterday on the internet. The issue is fundamental to how civil justice is funded in the UK. In the Committee that debated the Access to Justice Bill, and on other occasions, I have argued at length that the Queen's counsel system is an anti-competitive, price-rigging cartel, whose sole purpose is to line lawyers' pockets at the expense of the public. I am pleased that the OFT's report agrees with me.

I was pleased to be invited to give evidence to the inquiry conducted by the OFT. Its fat and detailed consultants report makes some cogent criticisms of the QC system. I have advanced the case that it is not a genuine accreditation scheme, that it is not objective, and that the Government should play no part in it, should it continue—it should be run by the profession. I cannot see why we should have Queen's counsel when we do not have Queen's plumbers, Queen's electricians, Queen's accountants, Queen's lecturers or Queen's anything else. One of the criticisms in the OFT report is:

"Although no area of work is formally reserved to QCs, in practice major litigation almost always requires the use of a QC. This is partly because of a perception that judges are more likely to take notice of a QC and partly because, if one side hires a QC, the other feels at a disadvantage if it does not do the same.

Given this, we think that the system as currently operated restricts competition because:

There is anecdotal evidence of a quota on the number of new appointments, and the numerical evidence is consistent with the anecdotal;

Selection is done by government, rather than by any market-based process; and,

There is dissatisfaction among solicitors and some barristers about the fairness and accuracy of the selection process."

It goes on to say:

"We do not think that a mark of quality or experience is necessarily anti-competitive so long as award is governed by transparent and objective criteria and restrictions are on a qualitative, rather than quantitative, basis. On the evidence available to us, however, the current system does not pass these tests."

That is another indication of the fact that legal costs are higher as a result of the QC system.

The report continues, at paragraph 276:

"Even if there is no quota in operation (and we do not have sufficient information to establish with certainty whether there is or is not), the appointments system (despite recent reform following the Peach report)"—

which hon. Members have debated before—

"does not appear to operate as a genuine quality mark. The system is secretive and, so far as we can tell, lacks objective standards. It also lacks some of the key features of a recognised accreditation system, such as examinations, peer review, fixed term appointments and quality appraisal to ensure that the quality mark remains justified. We were told that many solicitors and some barristers criticise the lack of objectivity of the system."

In its conclusions, the report states:

"In our view, therefore, the existing QC system does not operate as a genuine quality accreditation scheme. It thus distorts competition among junior and senior barristers. Our evidence indicates that clients do not generally need the assistance of a quality mark, but if there is to be such a scheme, it should be administered by the profession itself on transparent and objective grounds. Furthermore, there is some evidence that an informal quota is in operation within the current QC appointments system, and that it appears to have the effect of raising fees charged to litigation clients.

We do not think that a mark of quality or experience is necessarily anti-competitive, so long as the award is governed by transparent and objective criteria, and restrictions are based on qualitative, rather than quantitative, factors. On the evidence available to us, however, the current system does not pass these tests."

That is virtually a complete precis of a speech that I made at greater length in the Committee on the Access to Justice Bill, as my hon. Friend the Minister and other hon. Members who sat on the Committee can confirm. I know that the hon. and learned Member for Harborough is a member of the cartel, and may therefore have an interest in maintaining it, but I feel entirely vindicated by the excellent work done by the OFT and its consultants.

When my hon. Friend the Minister replies to the debate, I hope that he will assure me that the Government will bear in mind the need to deal with competition within the legal profession to break down the restrictive practices that make justice more expensive and less accessible. That will ultimately provide a better and much fairer system for the public. I end with a plea to my hon. Friend that the Government implement in full the OFT recommendations.

4.23 pm

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster (Hastings and Rye): My comments will be briefer and somewhat more modest than those of my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore). I certainly do not intend to take on Queen's counsel. His contributions on that subject have been consistent, and it seems that that may bring rewards.

I applaud the Government on the concept and application of the new legal services arrangements through the community legal service. It is still developing and has not yet reached its goal, but it is certainly going in the right direction.

Like many hon. Friends, I was one of those country solicitors who entered the House in 1997. I should declare an interest in that I have retained my practising certificate, although in the hope that I will not need it. If I need it again—the theoretical possibility always exists—I know for sure that the profession to which I shall return will, with the advent of the CLS, be that much more robust and efficient in the service it provides to its clients and the opportunities it provides to practitioners who want to offer a service to the public.

I should add the caveat that if the Conservatives come to power, God forbid, their public service cuts would result in the virtual end of legal aid, which would be regrettable. Forgive me, Mr. O'Hara, for wasting time on such a remote scenario.

I congratulate the Minister on the way in which the CLS has performed during the past year and the changes that will be introduced in April. The CLS has scored well in three essential areas. First, it has ensured higher quality services. Secondly, it has made better use of the professional time that is paid for out of the public purse and has reduced unnecessary red tape. Thirdly, as a consequence, it has provided better value for public money than was achieved previously.

On quality of advice, there was a time when solicitors of limited knowledge advised on any matter under the green form system. Someone came to me once asking for complicated advice on admiralty law. I turned him away, but many solicitors would have failed to do so. My area of experience is employment matters, but I know that many solicitors have signed a green form and given advice of questionable quality. The problem is that many folk of modest means do not know when they have received bad advice, so they lose out. Better off folk often have contacts and know the professions, and experience shows that they often go to experts through recommendation. The average person—I do not like the phrase "working class"—does not have experience of the legal system and does not know any lawyers. People on the Broomgrove estate in my constituency do not know where professionals hang out. They certainly do not know who to go to beyond the legal aid sign in the window. They have been short-changed in the past. The care that the CLS takes in approving and auditing solicitors who can offer legal help is admirable, and gives a seal of approval which is often a better guarantee than that available to clients who pay but who enter a lottery when deciding from whom to seek advice.

Some criticism may be made of the new system, and one disadvantage of allowing only those who have been approved to offer advice is that folk sometimes have to travel. That is particularly troublesome in areas of lower population, as in Hastings in my constituency and along the Sussex coast. I suspect that it is an even greater difficulty in other parts of the country, but it is a price worth paying. However proximate, helpful and charming my general practitioner may be, I would rather go to King's hospital for my heart bypass than have him deal with it in the surgery. The same applies to legal advice. It is surely worth travelling to obtain the expertise to ensure quality legal advice.

I want to comment on the problem of unnecessary bureaucracy. Red tape has a bad name. I read recently that the Opposition were complaining about red tape, but they were talking about the minimum wage, the working family tax credit and so on. I am referring not to that sort of red tape, but to the interminable blue forms—which were covered by the green form—that I used to have to fill in to obtain legal aid for clients. The public purse paid not only for legal advice, but for form filling.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) will not know about filling in legal aid forms, but I do not expect him to, because he is not a solicitor. Solicitors did not intend to cheat the legal aid system, but that is how it was abused. Standard practice entailed filling in a green form and spending the next two hours dealing not with the issue, but with a blue form that went to the Legal Aid Board. During the process, one would receive telephone calls from people asking what had happened to their application. Applicants would often receive no advice for six weeks before discovering whether their application had been accepted.

I acknowledge that the previous Government started contracting through their franchise system, but the Government have developed that through the CLS, so they are putting their faith in expert practitioners. Those solicitors are not only expert practitioners, but they audit themselves in that they are allowed to determine which cases should proceed. The process admittedly occurs under strict guidelines, but it does not require form filling and red tape.

The new system provides better value because people are going to experts. We no longer pay people for looking up the law. When solicitors were paid by the hour, the less they knew—

Mr. Burnett: I must confess that I have never done legal aid work and I have not had much to do with getting costs. However, I thought that one could never recover costs for looking up the law because a lawyer, regardless of his or her speciality, is presumed to know the law.

Mr. Foster: Indeed, if that were true there would not be a problem. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman from both my experience in a legal aid practice on the south coast and my contacts in the profession that that is not the case. When expertise was not a prerequisite for giving advice, solicitors of wide experience but no particular expertise would take on legal aid cases without an audit. They would listen to clients' pleas, give the best advice they could and tell them that they would write as to the rest. I am assured that that no longer happens when contracts are in place, because only lawyers who are expert in a certain field are contracted to provide advice. Furthermore, it is more satisfying for the legal profession to give good advice rather than floundering around wondering whether they are exactly correct or whether they need to check. Experts who know that they are giving correct advice waste less time.

The changes have been good for both the profession and the public. Earlier in the debate I put it to the hon. and learned Member for Harborough that the litmus test we should use to determine the success of the Government's changes is what our constituents say. In the past year, I have had not a single complaint from a constituent about the non-availability of legal assistance, and nor, I suspect, has he. Other hon. Members would doubtless express concern if they felt that there was a problem. In the past year, no one has complained about an incompetent contracting solicitor, the non-availability of legal assistance, or the non-availability of assistance in pursuing personal injury claims through conditional fee agreements. For me, that is the litmus test. People write to me about all manner of other matters, but they do not write to say that legal services are falling short. I believe that the Government are doing an extremely good job, and I should like to thank them.

Mr. Burnett: I do not want to be disputatious, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that many of my

[Mr. Burnett]

constituents have complained about not being able to get legal representation. I should add that I have not examined the merits of their cases, but there is no doubt that a number of people feel that they do not have access to justice.

Mr. Foster: This is perhaps not the time to ask such a question, but I should be interested to know how many people felt that way and the relevant circumstances. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, he does not know whether their complaints were merited and involved non-accessibility. Certainly, none of my constituents has complained about non-availability of legal assistance.

It has been argued that conditional fee arrangements—I do not want to go too far into this issue—lead solicitors to give different advice from that which they would have given under the old system, but that cannot be right. Under the old system, if there was no good case to pursue, a solicitor was bound to say so. The same constraints apply under the conditional fee arrangements, although it is true that there may be a personal interest. As we know, the reality was that solicitors often said, "We'll have a go because legal aid is involved." That is a different practice, and although it was not widespread, it certainly occurred and should not be encouraged. The conditional fee arrangements will merely require greater thought to be given to the answer to a question that should always be put.

I congratulate the Government on the proposals, which are working well. I also congratulate the Minister on working hard to ensure a justifiable outcome for ideas that used to be criticised.

4.37 pm

Mr. Lock: With the leave of the House, I shall speak for a second time.

This debate has been interesting in some senses, because it has dealt with issues other than those relating to its title. It has also been somewhat tetchy and bad-tempered in places. Unfortunately, all the places were those where the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) intervened. He began with a rather personal attack on the Lord Chancellor, and proceeded to attack my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. However, when he himself was attacked by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore)—who has worked in this field for 20 years, and whose knowledge is considerable—he tetchily replied that such complaints reflect badly on the person who makes them.

Mr. Garnier: What is the Minister talking about? He should get on with the debate.

Mr. Lock: Yet again, the hon. and learned Gentleman fails to appreciate the effect of his comments. I accept that he is entitled to make such attacks—they are what we would expect in a low form of politics—but we are here to discuss the funding of public legal services, not to attack the Lord Chancellor and the Home Secretary. I agree that making remarks that have nothing to do with the funding of public legal services reflects badly on the person making the attack.

Mr. Garnier: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lock: No.

Mr. Garnier: On a point of order, Mr. O'Hara. I assume that had you not thought that the remark made by the hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) should be withdrawn, you would not have asked him to withdraw it.

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (in the Chair): That is not a point of order. The matter has been resolved satisfactorily. Hon. Members whose remarks caused offence have addressed it.

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to you, Mr. O'Hara.

We have had a strange debate. I raised what happened in 1993 concerning eligibility for legal aid with the hon. and learned Member for Harborough because it was interesting example. Year zero did not begin in 1997. Time and Government existed before then—a different party was in Government. In 1993, when the hon. and learned Gentleman was in the House, there was a drastic reduction in eligibility limits. In particular, eligibility for what was then green form advice was slashed, which meant that millions of people could no longer benefit from public legal services. Millions of people who had been able to get help on the range of issues mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster) suddenly found that their modest income—and very modest it was—could no longer receive legal assistance. One intention behind my announcement earlier this week was to put right the damage that was done in 1993.

Despite the fact that the hon. and learned Member for Harborough was a Member of Parliament in 1993, and a lawyer, albeit not a legal aid lawyer—legal aid has never been available in defamation cases—he is entirely unaware of the radical changes that then led to the reduction in eligibility. Those changes are the recent history of the legal aid system, creaking as it was with bills going up year on year—[*Interruption.*] I note that from a sedentary position, the hon. and learned Gentleman is attempting to change the subject. That sums up his attitude.

This Government has made a forensic attempt to examine access to justice. There have been difficult balancing acts and the Government have faced difficult issues. It is true that we can only spend money once.

It is fascinating that at no stage was the hon. and learned Gentleman prepared to say that these are important services for the public. He would not say that it was important that people who have housing cases should have access to a lawyer who can advise them when they are threatened with unlawful eviction, or that those who suffer domestic violence should be entitled to go to a lawyer to get an injunction for protection from their partner. He would not say that taxpayers' money should be invested in such an important area.

The reason for his attitude is that, worse than slashing eligibility, as proposed in 1993, the Opposition propose to take £525 million out of the legal aid system as part

of their effort to appeal to the electorate with tax-cutting proposals. Their proposals would drastically affect access to justice, but the hon. and learned Gentleman is not prepared to debate them. He will not explain or defend them, or say what effect they would have on clients. He only repeats the concern of the Law Society that the extent to which the Govt have increased eligibility is not enough. From the lawyers' perspective, I am sure that it is not enough, but they are not carrying out the balancing act of government in determining how much money goes to health and education and how much to legal services.

One person who should not cite the Law Society in support of his argument is an Opposition Member whose party is proposing to remove £500 million from legal services and who would deny access to important services to those who are currently eligible for them.

It was remarkable to hear a bitty attack on small parts of the Government's scheme, given that my hon. Friends the Members for Hastings and Rye and for Hendon, who have practical knowledge of the development of the community legal service, can say that it is working well, and bedding down well in its early stages.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough expressed a concern about insurance. As I mentioned in an intervention on the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett), some 100,000 litigation policies have been written to support CFAs and we think that Claims Direct has taken on a further 60,000 cases. Last November, the Law Society published facts and figures on different insurance products, and I commend it for that. The insurers that it mentioned included Accident Line Protect, which provides insurance for personal injuries and criminal negligence at premiums of above £300, and the Motor Accident Solicitors Society, which provides insurance for road traffic cases at a premium of £195.

Some policies now available provide that premiums are payable only on settlement of the case or at the trial. Other policies provide that the premium is to be paid only if the case is successful, so it is a disbursement at the end of the case, like any other. The hon. and learned Member for Harborough asked about the development of a mature insurance market. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon explained, that is happening only because of the removal of personal injury cases—the money can be spent better elsewhere—combined with the recoverability of both the success fee and the insurance premium. The hon. and learned Member for Harborough did not mention the latter point, but anybody who understands the operation of the insurance market knows that it is crucial. Without that recoverability, money that has to be paid to lawyers cuts into damages, which in our system are purely compensatory. That is the defect both of the system of conditional fees that we inherited and of the CLAF system that the hon. and learned Gentleman's party wants to use to replace the current legal aid system.

Mr. Burnett: The Minister referred to Claims Direct. Does he believe that its conduct is governed by sufficient rules and disciplinary procedures? If he thinks that it should be governed by more stringent rules, what should they be, who should provide them, and who should regulate the company's activities?

Mr. Lock: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government established the Blackwell Committee to examine the provision of non-qualified legal advice, especially in the fields of personal injury and employment. It has never been illegal in this country to provide legal advice outside court proceedings, and the process has never been regulated.

It is very important that the market for people with personal injury claims should be vigorous and active. People must have a means of asserting their rights. Claims Direct is part of that market. Lawyers who want to encourage business, and who have specialisms that non-lawyers do not have, can learn from the marketing techniques, advertising and client care that some non-lawyer organisations have developed. It is important to note that the Blackwell Committee found no evidence of substantial abuse—although there were some areas of concern—nor a sufficient case for regulating free action. The Government are considering that report, but I encourage lawyers who want to operate in the personal injury sector to look at their own client care and advertising, and to market their own expertise. If they believe—what is undoubtedly true—that they have expertise that Claims Direct and other claims management companies do not have, they must sell their benefits to the public. Now that insurance premiums and success fees are recoverable, there is no reason why clients should recover anything less than the full amount of damages to which they are entitled.

Mr. Dismore: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his last comment that no one should lose anything out of the damages. Did the Blackwell Committee consider the issue before or after the new arrangements came fully on stream? That would make a big difference to the outcome in terms of protecting the public. Will he also consider how a firm of solicitors could advertise on an equal basis with Claims Direct, which is a multi-million pound organisation which is floated on the stock exchange?

Mr. Lock: My recollection is that the Blackwell Committee reported in February last year and that the new arrangements were implemented in April. It is therefore important that the Department should continue to monitor the operation of the market. As for the relative size of some claims management companies and some associations of solicitors' firms, there are 100,000 solicitors in the country. The profession is diverse, but not poor. There are considerable benefits of solicitors joining together to market their expertise. I am sure that they will do so effectively. They have a skill to sell. They are a proper regulated body and the Government want to encourage the maintenance of a strong and independent legal sector. However, it is up to solicitors themselves to organise their own marketing and not complain if other companies come into an unregulated part of the market and advertise effectively.

I can provide the assurance sought by the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon in respect of equity in homes. When assessing an applicant's eligibility for funding, the first £100,000 of equity in a

[Mr. Lock]

home is disregarded. That has been the position for several years. It is about the average cost of a home. Contributions from equity will not be introduced as was proposed in the consultation paper last year. It was never proposed that equity below £100,000 would be taken into account for determining eligibility. It was only proposed for contributions and that is a step, which, thanks to other controls that the Government have taken within the funding of legal services, we now do not need to take. We have listened to those people who have responded to our consultation and have noted their reasons for objecting to that change.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon for his supportive comments. I noted with interest what he said about the anti-competitive, fee-fixing cartel, as he described the Queen's counsel system. Clearly, the Government will be reflecting carefully on the report from Office of Fair Trading, "Competition in professions". It has only recently been received and it would be inappropriate to give any concluded views now.

My hon. Friend also asked what would happen if the case that is presently proceeding to the Court of Appeal in Chester is reversed. I am sure that he appreciates that I cannot comment on individual cases. The Government's view is that it is entirely reasonable for solicitors to take out insurance at the commencement of a case that, because of the highly successful operation of pre-action protocols, will inevitably be before the issue of proceedings. It would not be inappropriate, nor is it the intention of the legislation, for there to be any bar on recoverability on insurance premiums that are paid at the commencement of a case.

Indeed, if the insurance premium were recoverable only when insurance was taken out at the point when the proceedings were issued, a substantially smaller number of insurance premiums would be issued and the risk associated with each one would be substantially higher. Therefore, each individual premium would involve considerable cost and the benefit of scale—which we have at the moment and which is why Accident Line Protect and the Motor Accident Solicitors Society can purchase premiums for a few hundred pounds—would be entirely lost. There are sound policy reasons for supporting pre-action protocols and for taking out insurance at the commencement of instructions, but the exact terms of the individual case would have to be determined by the court. It would be inappropriate for me to comment on an individual case.

Mr. Garnier: Is the Minister coming to the point about the numbers of county courts that will be closed—a point about which he intervened on me? Will he tell us whether the suspicions expressed by the writer of the letter to which I referred are unfounded? Will he tell us the precise number of county courts that the Government intend to close?

Mr. Lock: I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for reminding me about that. Although it is not strictly within the terms of the debate, I am more than happy to respond. I was surprised when he said that he had read the "Modernising the Civil Courts" consultation document. As he has read it, he must understand the distinction between a proposal to close an entity known as a county court and a proposal to move to a system of centralising. In that system, one would have the benefit of scale in the administration of the paperwork associated with county courts and the maintenance of a large number of hearing centres at which cases may be heard.

It is not important to the public that there should be a single building in which both hearings and paperwork are dealt with. They simply need to know that when they seek an injunction for domestic violence, or when there is a possession hearing, the hearing will be heard in a place accessible to them. The division proposed in the "Modernising the Civil Courts" paper between the traditional county court unit and the administration—between business centres and hearing centres—will not lead to the sort of the radical closure of courts, in the sense of the removal of hearing centres, described in the letter quoted from the Public and Commercial Services Union. I was surprised that the hon. and learned Gentleman, having read the paper, did not understand that that position had a fundamental lack of logic.

Mr. Garnier: Can I test the Minister on that?

Mr. Lock: No, I have answered the point and, besides, the hon. and learned Gentleman on several occasions refused to give way either to me or to my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon.

Mr. Garnier *rose—*

Mr. Eddie O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. It should be clear to the hon. and learned Member for Harborough that the Minister will not give way.

Mr. Lock: The real issue for the debate is the public funding of civil legal services. The development of the community legal service over the past year has been a great success, and I pay tribute to the hundreds of thousands of people involved. We have expanded the concept of legal services, so that they no longer involve lawyers alone. We acknowledge, for the first time, the valuable role played by law centres, citizens advice bureaux, housing advice centres and a myriad of other organisations that provide important advice and help to those that need it. I hope that through this debate and the work of the community legal service partnerships, the spread of funding will increase so that the community legal service continues to thrive and we have better legal services.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Five o'clock.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 13 March 2001

[MR. MICHAEL LORD *in the Chair*]

Coram Foundation

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Sutcliffe.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Howard Flight (Arundel and South Downs): I thank the Speaker for granting this Adjournment debate. The intervention of the Attorney-General in Coram's affairs has presented major problems for Coram and the many other charities that have been endowed with works of art. The issues are cross-party, and I will be as brief as I can, as I understand that the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) also wish to speak in support of Coram.

I am a great admirer of the excellent child care work that Coram undertakes and a common-sense supporter of the Charity Commission and the solution that it worked out with Coram for the proper care and maintenance of Coram's unique collection of 18th-century pictures, which have been given to the foundation by trustees and supporters. If I may, I will first address the historic background and then the legal issues and arguments that the matter has raised.

Coram was established in the early 18th century as the Foundling hospital. It has discharged its charitable objects, which are directed towards children, with great success, particularly in recent years. That was illustrated by the Prime Minister's launch of the national surestart initiative at Coram in 1998 and the launch of the adoption White Paper there last December. Coram has also had substantial collaboration with the Departments of Health and Education and Employment and the Home Office in recent years.

The child care work, which covers 15 London boroughs in total, is still conducted from the original Holborn site. Every day, Coram works with more than 1,000 children and young people in the care system and some 600 families with young children. It runs 29 projects in six main areas: adoption of children with complex needs; specialist fostering contact services for children who have been separated from their parents; services for young people leaving care; family support; parenting education; and multi-agency services providing a one-stop shop for local families. In short, Coram is widely acknowledged as one of the most successful and effective child care charities.

In the 18th century, when both Hogarth and Handel were trustees, they and other beneficiaries gave the foundation paintings and other works of art for the benefit and education of the children and to attract interest in the charity and donations from people who visited those art treasures. The most important pictures are by Hogarth, but the collection includes works by Hayman, Copley, Gainsborough, Ramsay, Reynolds, Wilson and many others, and sculptures by Rysbrack and Roubiliac. The value of that unique collection of 150 pictures held at Coram's premises in Brunswick square is at least £17 million. However, Coram is unable to preserve the collection adequately and cannot open it to the public for security reasons.

Eight years ago, the governors of Coram began considering the feasible options open to them with regard to the disposition of the collection, in compliance with the foundation's charitable objects, the wishes of the original donors to the collection and common sense. The options included selling the collection intact to a major museum or gallery, selling it intact in situ—the collection is housed in the original 18th-century courtroom, which was reconstructed within the 1930s building in Brunswick square—selling the collection piecemeal, maintaining the status quo or following the scheme advised by the Charity Commission.

In August 1998, on legal advice and after much work by Coram and the Charity Commission, the commission issued an order under section 26 of the Charities Act 1993, under which Coram established a separate new charity, the Foundling museum, with the dual objects of supporting Coram's work and looking after the collection. The central aspect of the section 26 order and the scheme is that the collection should be managed by the Foundling museum trust for a period of 25 years, which is long enough for national heritage memorial funding and short enough for the Charity Commission to accept the arrangements as lawful.

The agreement was conditional on the new Foundling museum obtaining a grant of £2 million from the heritage lottery fund and the museum raising another £3 million. The offer of a grant from the heritage lottery fund was received, but the funding has been superseded by a heritage memorial fund grant of £3 million. The new charity has already raised £2 million, and a further £1 million is close to being raised. A fundamental condition of the scheme is that the Foundling museum is there to procure donors to Coram who will purchase pictures in the collection. Coram will therefore receive substantial on-going funding from realising the collection, which should be easier to do as it will be open to the public. It will also achieve the object of keeping the collection together and in situ. The Charity Commission has not asked Coram for any further information to satisfy it that the scheme is appropriate and lawful.

On 7 March this year, Coram received a further opinion from the Attorney-General, rejecting Coram's response to the particulars of claim and putting pressure on it to sell the unique collection of pictures. Clearly, that has considerable implications not only for Coram, but for many other charities in analogous situations. Given the self-evident larger picture, the recent opinion that was sent by Treasury solicitors, which focused, surprisingly, on minutiae, was not up to the main issue. The Coram scheme has the support not only of the Charity Commission, but of the national heritage memorial fund and many leading individuals in the heritage sector. The essence of the Attorney-General's legal objection appears to be the requirement of national heritage memorial funding that the pictures be lent to the Foundling museum for 25 years and the assumption that Coram could not therefore realise those assets for 25 years if it needed the funds for its child care objects.

[Mr. Howard Flight]

First, I think that there has been a misunderstanding of the scheme, whereby Coram would expect to realise most of the collection at best prices in a far shorter period and will in the meantime obtain an annual rent at the equivalent of market value on its building. Secondly, the Charity Commission was satisfied on the issue and that the scheme was lawful. A charity may invest its assets in any authorised investment and may also take action that incidentally confers benefit on another purpose that falls outside its strict objects. Surely the Attorney-General is out of order in, effectively, directing the governors to sell the collection now. The trustees have the factors before them. The Attorney-General's recent opinion appears not to realise that £2·25 million worth of the collection is fixtures in the building at Brunswick square that cannot be sold apart from the building. Coram's enforced retention of that part of the collection if it sold the rest as directed by the Attorney-General would mean the expense and administration costs of maintaining those assets.

The suggestion of a hasty sale seems to indicate that the Attorney-General has not considered the matter in the context of a charity that has existed for 300 years and will continue to last for ever. The opinion pays no regard to the fact that the collection was originally given specifically for the decoration of the Foundling hospital premises and to help to raise funds for the charity as well as for the children's benefit. I ask whether the Attorney-General would therefore take the view that other charities with objects such as education that have been endowed with valuable works of art over the years that are not applied directly in achieving their objectives should likewise sell their collections.

The issue arose when one of the 25 governors disagreed with the scheme and raised it with someone known to him in the Attorney-General's office. Is that individual—the acting master of Jesus college, Cambridge—now proposing that, given the recent funding cuts to Oxbridge colleges, that college should sell its art treasures forthwith to apply the proceeds to funding higher education?

The common ground for all parties is that the valuable collection of paintings should be realised, in whole or in part, for the benefit of children, which is the charity's objective. It is not legally, morally or practically right for the Attorney-General in an authoritarian fashion to substitute for the trustees' views his view of the best way to achieve that. They formed their views following deliberations over many years and using leading legal advice and a scheme worked out for them by the Charity Commission. What is the point of having the Charity Commission, which is supposed to work out such schemes, if Attorney-Generals can reinvent law on a whim and overturn its initiatives?

The trustees have concluded that the scheme continues to offer the best solution to all the various concerns. It will get the best possible prices for the collection and the individual pieces in it, and enable Coram to continue to use the collection to attract support and to raise money as the original donors intended. Even if the collection were sold, it would obtain for the charity a return that could be calculated in financial terms while the arrangements were being set up. There is no established legal reason why Coram should not be allowed to do that.

The latest counsel's opinion received from the Attorney-General focuses on legal niceties and detail, but in some matters it gets that detail wrong. For example, the grant made by the national heritage memorial fund was from the heritage memorial, not the heritage lottery, fund and takes the form of an endowment. Only income from the endowment can be used to make up the shortfall of running costs, and the endowment would be returned if, at any time, the collection were withdrawn from the museum.

The counsel's opinion has lost the perspective of the big picture and failed to address the real issues. The Attorney-General seems to have chosen to make a case study from Coram for the overturning of established precedents, in this case of a scheme drawn up and approved by the Charity Commission. The particular wickedness is that Coram has already incurred substantial expenditure—some £100,000 of legal expenses that should have gone to child care—and that the Attorney-General has consistently declined even to meet Coram to work out a sensible solution. It is surprising that he has disregarded his Prime Minister's public support of the charity and the consistent support of the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for the scheme.

The Attorney-General has a moral duty to co-operate with Coram to find a positive solution. He should be a solver, not a cause, of a major and unjustified problem for Coram and, potentially, for other similar charities. If the Attorney-General's authoritarian direction stands, it will, among other things, seriously threaten the gifting of works of art to charities with the intent of their retention. By the stroke of a pen, Government could instruct a charity to dispose of such assets to use their cash value for other objectives. Many charities are in analogous situations. I ask the Attorney-General and his officers to reconsider their stand and to sit down with Coram to work out a positive solution to what is a complex problem, but one for which the Charity Commission has proposed a solution, as was its brief.

9.44 am

Mr. Frank Dobson (Holborn and St. Pancras): I will attempt not to repeat too many of the excellent points that were made by the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight).

Coram Family, formerly the Thomas Coram Foundation, is possibly the oldest children's charity in Britain that does not run a school. However, I emphasise that it does not live in the past. It has always tried not just to keep up with the times, but to lead the way in developing new methods of helping impoverished children and young people, particularly those growing up without the help of one or both parents. Today, the charity has around 130 professional staff and more than 100 foster carers and volunteers. It works with more than 1,000 children and young people in our care system and with around 600 deprived families in the locality. It runs 29 special projects, including one that deals with the adoption of children with complex needs, specialist fostering services and contact services for children separated from their

parents. One scheme especially dear to my heart is that for children leaving care, who have been neglected for far too long. Generally, the charity provides family support and education.

For decades, the foundation pioneered improved ways of helping children, which have been adopted nationwide. It has been a continuing source of innovation. Never in its history has that been more true than in the past few years: with the assistance of Government grants from the Department of Health, the Home Office and the Lord Chancellor's Department, it has funded new developments, including the adoption concurrent planning project, which has the support of the judiciary and the legal professions, the early excellence centre, a special project for black young men in care and a pilot project for helping teenage parents cope.

Coram Family is not an old-fashioned, establishment charity that is more concerned with paintings than children, resting on its laurels and musing on its past days of glory. It is up to date and leads the way in its field, which is no doubt why, as the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said, the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Education and Employment chose it as the location for the national launch of the surestart initiative, why the Prime Minister recently launched the adoption White Paper there and why, even more recently, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment launched the national children's fund there. It has perhaps partly been chosen as a venue because the shadow Cabinet held several successful meetings in the courtroom at 40 Brunswick square in the months running up to the previous general election. It is a way of putting funds into the pockets of Corams Fields while providing excellent premises.

The headquarters of Coram Family are located in King's Cross in my constituency. Like the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), I am proud to be a patron of Coram Family, although, like him, I am not one of its governors. I chair the separate charity, the Corams Fields and Harmsworth Memorial Playground, which is responsible for providing play facilities for local children on an adjacent seven-acre site. Both organisations take the name "Coram" from Captain Thomas Coram, the pioneer of child welfare who in 1739 established the Foundling hospital, the buildings and grounds of which covered the sites today occupied by Coram Family and Corams Fields.

It is partly because of that long-standing history that the debate is taking place today. From the outset, the Foundling hospital attracted the support of artists and musicians, none more famous than Hogarth and Handel. The collection of British art that grew up as a result included Hogarth's portrait of Thomas Coram, two of his other paintings and works by Gainsborough, Ramsay and Reynolds. The collection also comprised memorabilia relating to the generations of children who, for more than 200 years, had found shelter under the roof of the Foundling hospital. An organ and musical score were given to the hospital by Handel, who is said to have conducted the first London performance of "The Messiah" in its chapel.

After the Foundling hospital was demolished in the 1920s, the collection was moved to 40 Brunswick square, a building specially built to house the collection and to provide headquarters offices for the charity, which then became the Thomas Coram Foundation. The courtroom from the 18th-century Foundling hospital building was transferred to 40 Brunswick square piece by piece, including the plasterwork, murals, fireplace and doorways. The future of the collection and buildings with its intimate links with Coram Family—I cannot overemphasise the intimacy of those links—is now at stake. The governors of the foundation have found it increasingly difficult in recent years to ensure that the collection is looked after properly without imposing too much expense, in terms of both money and management time, on the funds of the charity, which must rightly and by law be devoted to the care of children.

Recently, the headquarters offices were moved out of 40 Brunswick square to a more suitable building nearby. The governors intended to take that opportunity to improve the care, display and security of the collection at 40 Brunswick square and to use the lower ground floor as an education centre for children, with particular emphasis on art and music. The governors considered a number of alternative ways of discharging their duty to devote the assets of the charity to the needs of child care, while at the same time keeping together the valuable collection with its close relationship with Coram Family. In 1998, they formulated a proposal for a separate trust, to be called the Foundling museum, to which Coram Family would lend the collection for 25 years. The proposal was to house it in Brunswick square, but better and more securely than in recent years. That would keep the collection together on its present site in King's Cross, where some of the items have now been located for more than 250 years.

During the 25 years, the Foundling museum and its premises would be used to help to raise funds for the children's charity. The governors hoped to realise the value of the collection, estimated at around £7 million, by selling individual items, subject to the condition that they remained at 40 Brunswick square. The capital thus released would be devoted to the child care objectives of the foundation. Acting in good faith, and, rightly, wishing to comply with both the letter and spirit of charity law, the governors sought the agreement of the Charity Commissioners to the proposal for a separate subsidiary Foundling museum trust. That they obtained, subject to a deadline of March 2000 for completing the necessary fundraising. They set about raising from outside sources the £6 million needed for the project.

To date, the governors have been pledged £5 million, including a £3 million grant from the national heritage memorial fund. In early 2000, they sought the Charity Commissioners' agreement to extend the fundraising deadline from March 2000 to April 2001. That appeal commanded the support of every governor except one—Peter Glazebrook, a law professor. He objected to the Attorney-General. Then, as I understand it, without seeking any information from Coram Family on behalf of the rest of the governors, the Law Officers wrote to tell Coram Family that the museum project fell outside its charitable objects and was therefore unlawful.

I do not know whether it is customary for the Law Officers to give an opinion in that way without first hearing both sides of the story. Such a procedure might be not only acceptable, but necessary in cases involving

[Mr. Frank Dobson]

serious criminality such as fraud or misappropriation of funds, but it seems unfair, unreasonable and completely over the top in relation to the public actions of a long-established and reputable charity, acting in good faith and with the prior knowledge and consent of the Charity Commissioners. Such practice by the Law Officers may be hallowed by time, but that does not make it right. Sadly, subsequent dealings between Coram Family's lawyers and the Law Officers' lawyers have been adversarial—a development to the advantage of none, other than those receiving legal fees.

When I was told of that unexpected, unwelcome and expensive development, I wrote to my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor-General and made no pretence of possessing any knowledge of charity law: I have none. I am prepared to concede that the governors' proposal may be wrong in law: I simply do not know. The procedures may be wrong in law, but again I do not know. What I do know is that it must be possible for sensible people of good will on both sides of the argument to resolve a shared problem by working together. I hope that my hon. and learned Friend will accept that that is the basic point that I have made to him repeatedly—by letter, telephone and face to face.

I was surprised and disappointed when my hon. and learned Friend indicated earlier this month that, should the foundation apply to the Charity Commissioners for an order to proceed further with the proposal, he would—I use the technical expression—"invite" the Charity Commissioners not to decide themselves, but to tell the governors to go to court. I shall spell out the possible evil consequences of such a court action in a moment. However, if instead of taking the current proposal back to the Charity Commissioners, Coram Family were to approach my hon. and learned Friend, spelling out the dilemma that it was trying to resolve and seeking his collaboration, would he be willing to help? Would he authorise his lawyers to get together with Coram Family's lawyers to work out a solution that met both the needs of their practical problems and his legitimate need to be satisfied with the lawfulness of what is proposed?

Throughout my dealings with him, my hon. and learned Friend has emphasised that it is not a political matter, but a matter of law, and that it is his duty as a Law Officer to ensure that the legal requirements are met. He is right to take that duty seriously, but an open-minded effort to establish common ground with the foundation could meet all his requirements. Surely a conciliatory rather than an adversarial approach is more likely to clear up the problem more quickly and less expensively.

I can do no better than pray in aid the support of the Lord Chancellor, Lord Irvine. He made his views clear in his keynote address to the millennium conference of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators. He reiterated the point already made in the White Paper "Modernising Justice" that effective solutions proportionate to the issues at stake were required. He added:

> "While these proportionate solutions may include going to court, for most people most of the time litigation should be the method of dispute resolution of last resort."

I share that view.

If the Lord Chancellor's wise words are not taken seriously, I shall fear for the child care work of Coram Family and for the historic collection. Adversarial attitudes and court actions cannot benefit the children who are supposed to benefit from the charity; they will benefit only those receiving the legal fees. It will be a bonanza for lawyers and a bonanza for art dealers may follow. I freely admit that neither of those comes high on my list of deserving causes.

I fear a bonanza for art dealers because the starting point for Professor Glazebrook and for the Law Officers appears to be that the best and only possible lawful solution would be for Coram Family to sell the collection now on the open market. That cannot be right, even from the standpoint of the fiduciary duty of the governors. It would not automatically raise more money than the disposal procedure contemplated by the governors. Lawful disposal of the listed courtroom would be difficult in practice and separate disposal of all the courtroom paintings would be impossible, as the paintings of other hospitals on the roundels on the wall are an integral part of the plasterwork. An enforced sale could result in reduced prices being secured by the charity; to sell the collection now could lose money.

That is not my main reason for objecting to the sale. I believe that it is right and proper to keep this unique and valuable collection of British art together and on display at 40 Brunswick square. If the advisers to the Law Officers say that that is unlawful, they must answer the fundamental question, "Since when has it become unlawful?" Was it unlawful for the Foundling hospital to keep Hogarth's paintings when they could have been auctioned when the paint was scarcely dry? Was it unlawful in the 1930s to build, at the charity's expense, 40 Brunswick square to house the collection? If it was not unlawful then, since when did it become unlawful and why?

Surely, it cannot have become unlawful just because Professor Glazebrook took it into his head to write to the Law Officers. Such a doctrine would surely have wider application. Are all charities, other than art charities, which hold valuable paintings and spend money on their preservation and security, held to be acting unlawfully? Does that doctrine apply to schools, colleges, universities and—perish the thought—even the Inns of Court? Surely the Law Officers do not mean to apply the doctrine to every charity, and if it does not apply to every charity, why does it apply to Coram Family? It would be a scandal if Coram Family were forced to spend precious funds on legal advice, jousts with the Law Officers and court actions. It would be an even bigger scandal if Coram Family's valuable and irreplaceable collection of British art were broken up and disposed of. How could this generation of decision makers justify such a thing in this time of unparalleled prosperity? No previous generation, even in times of war and upheaval, recession or slump contemplated forcing the Thomas Coram Foundation to sell its portrait of Captain Coram, which was painted by Hogarth, who presented it to the foundation. We should not consider it now.

I understand and accept that we are discussing a matter of law, not of politics. To break up and to sell the Coram collection would be an act not of political but of legalistic vandalism, and I cannot believe that the Law Officers would seriously contemplate such a thing. At

present, the governors are maintaining the collection inadequately and at the expense of the charity, which benefits neither the collection nor the children whom the charity exists to serve. The governors are seeking a way of benefiting the children, while ensuring that the collection is displayed to best advantage and made more accessible to the public. If the Solicitor-General believes that what is proposed will not achieve those ends within the law, I urge him, having listened to the debate, to meet representatives of Coram Family for the first time, so that all concerned can work together to come up with a scheme that will. It cannot be beyond the wit of the finest lawyers in the land to devise a lawful scheme that benefits the children and retains the family collection. Nothing less will do.

10.3 am

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North-East Bedfordshire): I, too, am glad to take part in the debate. That it is not a party political matter was admirably shown by the excellent speeches, which I endorse, of the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) and of my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight). They put the finger firmly on the problem that we must try to solve today.

It is plain that a crisis has developed in the affairs of this ancient and marvellous charity, and it is important that it be thoroughly considered and resolved in public. It is not a party political matter, but in the wider sense it affects the governing of this country. It involves the Charity Commissioners, about whom I have no criticism, and the Law Officers in their role as protectors of charity advising the sovereign as parens patriae—the parent of the country, one of Her Majesty's roles.

I am glad that the Solicitor-General is to respond to the debate. Having heard such strong feelings expressed about the foundation and having been properly appraised of the breadth of the matter, I hope that he will, in collaboration with the Attorney-General and the Charity Commissioners, steer it towards a satisfactory outcome, which meets the needs of Coram Family, Britain's most ancient and one of the most deeply respected child care charities. The charity has possessed from its earliest days—270 years ago—some of the most important heritage assets of English art and music. I support the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras. I am confident that there is a way ahead that can square the circle, if only the good will and close attention of all those involved can be brought to bear on the matter.

I do not apologise for going over the history of the charity because it sets the scene. The Foundling hospital was set up by royal charter in 1739 after 17 years of tireless and selfless work by Captain Thomas Coram, a retired sea captain and shipbuilder. He must have been one of the most remarkable personalities to arise from humble origins in the 18th century. He almost ranks alongside Wesley. It was the age of Hogarth and Daniel Defoe. Given the poverty of a rapidly growing London in those days, prospects for thousands of illegitimate children were terrible and usually ended in an early death.

For years, the taint of illegitimacy and the alleged fear of encouraging prostitution frustrated Thomas Coram's efforts. Eventually, following the French example of Les Dames de la Charité, Thomas Coram, having failed with the husbands, turned to their wives. They joined him to give the lead and the impetus. By 1739, the original royal charter contained on its lengthy roll at 40 Brunswick square the names of hundreds of supporters from the great and the good of the day. At the end of that list were the names of Thomas Coram himself, and the painter William Hogarth, who was to become one of the most significant painters in British art and the architect of the original Foundling hospital.

Moved by compassion and what Edmund Burke described as enlightened self-interest, Hogarth had the brilliant idea that, when the new Foundling hospital opened on 1 October 1745, British artists should give paintings to decorate the hospital and make it Britain's first public art gallery. Among those who contributed, apart from Hogarth, were the famous sculptor, John Michael Rysbrack, Thomas Gainsborough, Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin West and Richard Wilson. Many of those artists were governors of the hospital. They dined together in the courtroom once a year on St. Luke's day. It was at those dinners that the discussions took place that led to the eventual formation of the Royal Academy of Arts.

Hogarth was childless. He took an active part in the running of the Foundling hospital. Handel, who was also childless, provided the organ for the chapel. He gave an annual fundraising concert that regularly raised £1,000 for the charity. He wrote the Foundling hospital anthem, which was performed every Sunday. The great chapel of the Foundling hospital became one of the most fashionable places to worship on a Sunday. After the service, members of the congregation would visit the hospital, see the pictures and the foundlings, and donate money to the charity. The future of what Thomas Coram called his "darling project" was thereby assured.

I pay tribute to Sarah Richards for providing me with much of the historical background that I have outlined. She is the secretary to my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) who, with the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, is a patron of the charity.

Over the next two and a half centuries, the charity changed and adapted. Originally, it cared for 600 foundlings from infancy until their teens, when they left for the world of work, often in the armed forces or in service. By the beginning of this century, the need for such residential care had diminished and the charity's objectives were altered to provide advice, guidance and help in the care and upbringing of children in their early years. As the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras said, the charity has always moved with the times and is frequently ahead of the times.

In the 1920s, the great old Foundling hospital was pulled down. In its place were built the charity's current premises at 40 Brunswick square and, later, the adjoining premises at 49 Mecklenburgh square, where its principal child care work is today carried out. The Foundling hospital was magnificent but otherwise austere and impractical. When it was pulled down, everything in its central governing rooms, including the courtroom, was carefully removed. The articles that were removed, which included original fixtures, were transferred and built into the new premises at 40

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

Brunswick square, where they remain today. The right hon. Gentleman rightly asked whether that was illegal. I do not believe that it was.

The charity continued to develop. It does magnificent work. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that, in the past few years, the charity and its director, Gillian Pugh, have been one of the main sources of inspiration and guidance in the development of the Government's child care policies, including their surestart programme. That is absolutely as it should be. Those of us in opposition should do as we did when we were in opposition before and get alongside charities in the voluntary sector. We should think ahead as we prepare for our return to government in order to get the right policies for the future, just as Labour Members did when they were in opposition. That is how our country is governed. I pay tribute to any charity that plays such a role, whichever party it is helping. The charity has been visited by a succession of senior and middle-ranking Ministers, from the Prime Minister downwards.

It is one of life's sad ironies that the wonderful collection of paintings, sculptures and other works of art, including Handel's original organ and other such Handeliana left to the charity by the composer, should have now become an object of dispute and disagreement. The dispute needs a fresh eye and good will, energy and imagination must be brought to bear. A lawful and constructive solution must be found. Above all, the problem, the charity and the future of this great collection must not be allowed to sink in a morass of pettifogging legalism that wastes charity funds on legal costs, which is what threatens to happen. It is to that noble end that the charity's 25 governors have been bending their minds and efforts for 10 years. Tragically, they have become bogged down in a legal dispute that I am convinced is capable of sensible solution, but which, without help, threatens to engulf the charity.

I was personally alerted to the problem less than four months ago and I have been doing my best behind the scenes, as has the right hon. Gentleman, to encourage a sensible solution. I salute him and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who made his views extremely plain to the Law Officers as long ago as 10 December 2000.

The charity's assets consist of its buildings, works of art and some £14 million-worth of financial investments. The works of art are insured for £29 million and are considered to have a value in the open market of between approximately £14 million—roughly the same amount as the financial investments—and £20 million. However, they are in serious need of preservation and conservation. The charity has always, rightly, concentrated its funds on child care work rather than heritage matters and it wishes to continue to do so. The expenditure on conservation over the past 100 years has been kept to a minimum of approximately £45,000 per year, which includes the funding of much of the operation of 40 Brunswick square itself. That building is now in deep need of refurbishment and the pictures need significant attention.

The charity's governors include the wife of a senior chancery division judge, as well as a Lord Justice of Appeal, Sir Mathew Thorpe. Having originally taken legal advice from Mr. Edward Nugee QC, a most distinguished charity silk, the charity recognised that it could not expend significant moneys on its heritage as the matter was outside its objects and changing those objects would be inappropriate. The governors therefore devised a thoroughly sensible plan to set up a separate charity that would be known as the Foundling museum. That charity would raise money from the public and from public bodies, including money from the heritage lottery fund and the heritage memorial fund. The works of art would be not alienated but transferred on temporary loan to that charity, which would take responsibility for housing and conserving them.

The key point, which those advising the Law Officers have not adequately taken on board, is that, with the governors, the charity would try to find a benevolent purchaser or purchasers, who would buy the works of art at their full monetary value—thus releasing that monetary value for child care uses—but, as an act of heritage charity, redonate them to the Foundling museum, where they would remain close to the charity to which the artists gave them and, unlike now, would be available for the public to see daily. They would also be available for one of the uses for which the artists originally intended them—as a continuing aid for fundraising for the charity and, if appropriate, for the education of, among others, the children for whom it cares.

I am glad to say that that objective had the constructive support of the Charity Commissioners in exercising their new and enhanced function under the Charities Act 1993, which I piloted through the House when I was Attorney-General. I believe that the Charity Commissioners were right then and continue to be right to try to achieve that end. To cite a passage from section 26 of that Act that is much quoted by counsel advising the Law Officers, it is

"expedient in the interests of charity"

to take that approach.

Unfortunately, as we know, the matter has given rise to controversy, which no doubt started in the utmost good faith but is now getting out of hand. A technical question has arisen because of a dispute over the length of time for which the works of art should be loaned to the new charity—the 25-year loan—and the precise terms involved. It is also the result of the mistaken scepticism of one governor, Dr. Peter Glazebrook, acting master of Jesus college, Cambridge, and was encouraged, in good faith but mistakenly, by an over-narrow approach, which may have been based on inadequate instructions, by those including counsel entrusted by the Law Officers with handling the matter.

I do not want to demonise Dr. Glazebrook. All the governors are trying to do their best according to what they consider right, but he is only one of 25 distinguished people. The charity has taken careful legal advice and I am worried by the excessive weight placed on Dr. Glazebrook's views.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): Is it right that Dr. Glazebrook used to run a children's charity, an adoption service at Cambridge, which experienced

financial difficulties when he was chairman? Exactly the same thing is now happening to the Coram charity, of which he is a governor.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has a deep knowledge of the matter and will, I hope, catch your eye, Dr. Clark. I do not want to speak for too long, but I understand that that is true. It would be a great pity if Coram Family, having picked up what I believe is called Anglia Adoption and helped it out of financial difficulties, should thereby be mistakenly steered into financial difficulties of its own.

Dr. Glazebrook referred the matter to the Attorney-General and the Charity Commissioners have been frightened off. Having been told by the Attorney-General's legal advisers that what they were planning to support was unlawful, they felt unable to remake the order under section 26 of the 1993 Act, which they had previously made, but which had expired with the passing of time, as it was intended to apply only for a limited period. The efforts of the charity to get alongside the Attorney-General and his officials and counsel in meetings formal and informal have so far been frustrated. The right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras rightly emphasised that point. However, I am not sure how far either the Attorney-General or the Solicitor-General has been personally involved in detailed meetings on the matter. I hope that the Solicitor-General will be able to tell us about that. I want to encourage, not to criticise him. I look to him to solve the problem.

In November 2000, the charity and Farrer and Company, its new solicitors, received a 37-page document, described as the third draft of particulars of claim in the name of the Attorney-General as claimant, purporting to claim that the governors' entire plan was unlawful. It is a long, highly tendentious and one-sided document, clearly based on detailed notes and instructions from Dr. Glazebrook—I can think of no other possible source. The delivery of it in draft was no doubt made with good intentions to follow the guidance of Lord Woolf, who is now the Lord Chief Justice, in the reforms of civil proceedings that bear his name. However, I doubt whether that is what Lord Woolf had in mind.

The charity, through its solicitors, has had to prepare a detailed point-by-point response that rightly puts the picture in a different light. It has thereby incurred to date some £100,000 worth of legal costs, with the prospect of far more. Those of us who have expressed our concerns and felt it right to raise the matter in the House are disappointed that the meeting between the Solicitor-General and the Charity Commissioners to discuss the subject constructively has been postponed. We understood that it was to take place soon.

The charity has now received a further opinion from counsel, of which I have been sent a copy. I am sorry to say that those advising the Law Officers still fail to see the matter properly in the round. In a number of key places, the document either mis-states or shows that they fail to understand the governors' true intentions. They do not appreciate the governors' genuine intention to facilitate the sale of those objects in the circumstances that I have described.

The document seems to set out to rubbish the governors' methodology, suggesting erroneously that they might have had it in mind to go ahead without a section 26 order. They certainly did not intend to do that. It ends by suggesting—it does not specifically state this—that the only available course, if maximum return is to be obtained for the charity, is to sell the pictures on the open market, even though the collection will thereby be dispersed. Thus the opportunity will be lost for ever to continue to benefit the charity by encouraging fundraising in the way in which Hogarth and others intended.

What should the charity do? Should it spend more money on legal costs? Unsurprisingly, the governors are frightened of that, faced with the unlimited financial might of Government, by whom key points are simply overlooked.

The key points that I ask the Attorney-General to take into account are as follows. For many years, the governors have sought a solution that would raise the full value of the collection for the child care charity, while keeping it together. They have sought, too, to maintain the close links between Coram Family and the museum, albeit through the Foundling museum, the new charity. The Charity Commissioners—provided that they are not frightened off by the Attorney-General—have assisted the governors in finding a lessee for 40 Brunswick square, which is in desperate need of refurbishment. The lessee is prepared to refurbish that building at a cost of £2.5 million and a saving of £60,000 per annum on the maintenance of the collection. In addition, the national heritage memorial fund has offered an endowment of £3 million to run the museum. The pictures are to be loaned or leased to the museum for 25 years, but there is no intention for them to remain there. The clear intention—it has been expressed time and again to those acting for the Law Officers but it does not appear to have been accepted—is to find a charitable buyer of the pictures at a much earlier date, so that the full value of the collection can be released for child care purposes. Those suggestions, put together, must constitute the ideal solution.

Clearly, there is a risk that a charitable purchaser will not come forward and that the lease might therefore last the full 25 years. However, counsel seems to be simply writing off the attempt as speculative. That is too narrow a view. It is founded on the notion that a charity that owns substantial artistic assets that could be sold to provide funds for its charitable work and the preservation of which is not a direct part of its objectives, is under a direct obligation to sell them. That is a false notion. If it were correct, it would rightly cause an outcry.

Nor would outright sale be free from difficulty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs said, 40 Brunswick square is a listed building. Its fixtures are worth £2.5 million of the charity's heritage assets. They cannot be removed. As a result, the purposes for which the building can be used are severely restricted; for example, to strip it out and convert it to office use is not an option.

The pictures were donated by great artists to benefit the charity and the children in its care by enabling it to raise money. The charity has held the assets for 270 years. Its governors have proposed an imaginative scheme that attempts to implement that noble aim in 21st-century terms. It should be given a chance to work.

[Sir Nicholas Lyell]

The Solicitor-General's suggestion that the charity should not be allowed to proceed without an application to the court freezes the blood, particularly if the attitude towards its sensible scheme continues to be as destructive as is suggested, sadly, by the legal documents to which I have referred. The cost of such protracted legal process could be horrifying. It has been hinted that the Attorney-General might be prepared to enter into an alternative dispute resolution. Even if that were pursued along strictly legal avenues, the costs would be likely to be little less alarming.

The right action would be to put the litigious approach on hold. Even if the full 25 years passed without a sale, little would be lost in terms of the charity's 270-year history. It is worth remembering that the last time that the charity was reconstructed, 56 acres of north London were sold, which, with hindsight, was a mistake. Judgment must be exercised in such matters, and the right people to exercise it are not the Law Officers but the governors, provided they are properly advised and act in accordance with law.

The Solicitor-General seems to be proposing to force the matter into court. That would be wrong. The scheme could, no doubt, be improved. It might be possible to shorten the overall time limit without some of the benefactors falling out. There is always room for compromise on details in such matters, but when an ultimate objective is noble, it is the duty of the protector of charity to facilitate rather than to impede. I look to the Law Officers to bend their energies to do so.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr. Michael Clark (in the Chair): Order. The two hon. Members who are winding up the debate must be given the maximum time as the matter is complex. Only 12 minutes remain and three hon. Members wish to speak. I hope that they will bear it in mind that all hon. Members want to have enough time to get their points across.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I trust that I shall not speak for long, although, when lawyers or politicians say that, they should usually be disbelieved. I shall fit my remarks into the time available.

Dr. Michael Clark (in the Chair): I shall try to call the hon. Gentleman to speak at 10.40 am. If he is brief, the Solicitor-General will have longer to wind up the debate on this complex matter.

10.28 am

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): I wish simply to associate myself with the arguments that have been advanced. That will allow my colleagues more time to participate.

I knew nothing about the matter until, by chance, my wife and I had an opportunity to view the collection last Thursday, as a result of a private invitation. I have not been nobbled by the trustees. I told their chairman that the cause was so good that I wanted to help and that I would attend this debate.

The situation cannot continue as it is. That, at least, is agreed by the Attorney-General and the Law Officers. The matter must be resolved. The dangers of the present situation are that, if prolonged litigation occurs, we will reach the 21st-century version of Jarndyce *v.* Jarndyce and dissipate the assets.

At the same time, there is potential for the collection to be damaged while everything is being sorted out, without means, opportunity or funds that can be drawn down for conservation. None of that would benefit Coram Family, the children's charity that is the trust's main objective. I emphasise that both conservative and heritage activities and child-based activities have legitimate charitable purposes.

I tell the Attorney-General that we must find a solution, either by agreement or adjudication. I could suggest a third route of, if necessary, introducing legislation to facilitate the matter, although that would not be without cost and difficulty. The Attorney-General and Solicitor-General may know that the last time that affairs of the Foundling hospital attracted legislation was 1953, when the matter of birth certificates of foundlings was resolved. If we had to introduce such legislation, we would. Of course, we cannot ask Law Officers to whitewash the law or to remove its interpretation. We do not seek special favours from them.

My hon. Friends have made clear points about the law and, as a non-lawyer, I defer to them. However, I have experience of charity law and we all know that there are difficult cases. Once, as a trustee, I owned an alabaster altar, of which I had to dispose. At the time, I thanked God that I had neither the context nor setting to justify keeping it. It was duly disposed of, although it probably did not meet a good fate.

Such issues are difficult and we beg only for a constructive attitude that seeks to find a solution rather than to frustrate. As the newest boy on the block, that is all that I wish to say, albeit strongly, as the collection deserves a positive solution rather than an eon of legal wrangling.

10.32 am

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I shall not rehearse all the arguments that have been admirably and magisterially deployed by my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), who was formerly Attorney-General, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson). I genuinely call him my right hon. Friend. I amicably share a constituency boundary with him and a patronage of the charity. The latter link derives not only from the changes and chances of personal and parliamentary friendship, but from my recent trusteeship of the Handel House Trust, which is in my constituency. We Handelians stand together.

I declare my interest as a patron of the charity that we are discussing. I also declare an interest as president of the British Antique Dealers Association and the British Art Market Federation. Although that is not necessarily relevant, one must be careful in such politically correct times.

I request that the Solicitor-General address the wider and consequential implications of this matter for museums, educational charities and other trusts, either

in today's response or publicly following the debate. We all know about the controversial issues of inalienability of assets that are bequeathed to the National Trust, which is sometimes placed in the crunch of a separate public affairs crux. Dramas surround museums that choose to rid their cellars of works that are seldom shown, although they cannot be certain whether such works will reacquire relevance.

I am an old boy, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell), of a school that heaped coals upon itself by selling Gainsborough's largest portrait, which was bequeathed to it while I was at the school. By chance, the school's old boys included directors of two national portrait galleries. In Coram's case, artists and musicians gave their genius and the products of that genius to the foundation but what of an Oxbridge college, or similar institution, which has always commissioned outstanding portrait painters to paint its masters or most famous alumni?

I still bear the scars of the row that arose when I was Secretary of State for National Heritage, as the post was called then, and Royal Holloway college sold abroad three great pictures derived from the larger collection of its founder, which still hung in the college, ironically just for the purpose of supporting the college's educational aims. Would that today's case were but a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. We are dealing instead with a potential typhoon, whose happy definition in the Royal Navy's handbook begins with the words:

"The first evidence of an approaching typhoon is a general sense on the part of the captain that all is not well."

The spirit of Captain Thomas Coram would concur with that definition.

10.35 am

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I will endeavour to be as brief as I can because I feel sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight) and the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson) want to hear from the organ, rather than the organ grinder.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on initiating the debate. It has been an interesting and somewhat esoteric debate on charity law and, in particular, on how it affects the future of the old, but still active and valuable charity, the Coram Foundation. As a result of the Attorney-General's intervention, the charity has had to spend around £100,000 in legal costs. That is doubtless good for the lawyers, but whether it is good for the future of the charity is a matter of some dispute. Among the many interesting points made by my hon. Friend, I was struck by the fact, which was emphasised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell), that at no stage has the Attorney-General or any of his representatives met directly with the charity. My hon. Friend was entirely right when he said that they must meet to work out a solution.

The right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras candidly said that he had no knowledge of charity law, but asked that the Attorney-General invest a little common sense into the dispute. I have a confession to make to the right hon. Gentleman. I have no knowledge of charity law either, but I recognise common sense, especially when it wears a beard and grabs me warmly around the throat. The Solicitor-General should pay particular attention to what has been said by the two patrons of the charity present in the Chamber this morning. The right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras, as the constituency MP, knows the work of the charity not only in his constituency, but outside it at first hand, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke) speaks as a former Secretary of State for National Heritage. There is a huge reservoir of knowledge here, both legal and personal, which the Solicitor-General would benefit from listening to. I have no doubt that he will do so.

I also am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Bedfordshire, the former Attorney-General and the longest serving Law Officer, for his speech. He gave us a brief history of the charity. The more one learns of the past and current work of the charity, the more one wonders whether the Attorney-General's intervention will prove useful. He described a situation that ran the risk of sinking into a morass of pettifogging legalism and a massive waste of charity funds on legal costs. Those were all strong and well made points, reinforced by the brief speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell). It was only due to his self-restraint that we did not hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) who has a personal interest in the matter.

I have been shown a letter from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to the Solicitor-General dated 12 December 2000 in which he complains of the emotive language used by the Law Officers' advisers in their approach to the matter. Apparently, he says that selling the collection is not a satisfactory answer to the problem and a practical way forward must be found.

Has the Solicitor-General or the Attorney-General met the Secretary of State to discuss the matter? Have they or their senior representatives met either of the two patrons who are in the Room or any of the governors or their legal advisers—in person; I do not mean exchanging pleadings—to talk through the problem? It cannot be beyond the wit of the Attorney-General and Coram to reach agreement on the facts, the foundation's intentions and how best to exploit—I use that word in the neutral sense—the art collection for the benefit of the foundation's aims. It is time that the Law Officers came out of their entrenched position and condescended to discuss, at first hand and at close quarters, the issues that our interesting debate has revealed.

The implications of the Attorney-General's attitude are that the collection should be sold and dispersed. They go beyond that, however, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster made clear. As my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs said, the problem has wider consequences for the charitable world as a whole, especially those charities that own valuable art collections or other chattels.

Traditionally, the Attorney-General does all he can to save and to preserve great collections. I fear that in this instance—I do not want to descend into discussing the merits of the case—unwittingly or not, he is losing sight of the real purpose of the charity and the best aims and interests of its beneficiaries.

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

The right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras mentioned the remarks of the Lord Chancellor about the need for proportionality in legal disputes. That chimes well with the aims of the Woolf reforms of civil procedure. As I have said, until I am bored of saying it, although some cases will need a sharp injection of adversarial justice, that is not always the case. I am new to the issue, but it is an example of a case in which an adversarial approach is not best calculated to assist the progress of the foundation and its aims.

As a general rule, Law Officers do not publish advice to the Government or to others, but, in this case, at the very least, the Solicitor-General should tell us why he and the Attorney-General hold their present legal opinion. The Law Officers should use the opportunity provided by the debate to act as facilitators of a mutually satisfactory and economically sensible solution, not promoters of another Jarndyce case.

I know from family experience what happens when cases get stuck in chancery; my family had a case that began shortly after the second world war and was completed only when I was called to the Bar in 1976. It killed off two chancery judges and went to the House of Lords twice. As far as I can tell, no one much benefited from it—certainly not I.

Let us move out of the chancery fog described in the opening paragraphs of "Bleak House" to somewhere more beneficial, where the atmosphere of discussion is more conducive to the provision of a sensible solution, and hear from a Law Officer whose legal expertise is greatly respected in academia and in Government. Let us see whether he can persuade us that the attitude of the Law Officers is now more constructive than it has been.

10.44 am

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): There is no question but that the charity does valuable work. It is known in this country and abroad for its innovative work. It might help hon. Members to understand the concerns that I have and that other hon. Members and hon. Friends have properly raised if I begin with two preliminary points.

The first relates to the role of the Attorney-General in charity matters. As the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire (Sir N. Lyell) said, that role, which is carried out on behalf of the Crown, is as a protector of charities—I undertake it on the Attorney-General's behalf. He represents the public interest in ensuring that charities are properly administered. A charitable trust has no beneficiaries in the sense that a private trust does, and the Attorney-General therefore represents the beneficial interest.

It is important to note that that role as protector of charities is carried out independently of the Attorney-General's role as a Minister. It is one of the many cases in which Law Officers do not act as members of the Government, but represent the public interest. The Lord Chief Justice recently emphasised what he regarded as the important constitutional position of the Law Officers. Our position in relation to charity matters, individual criminal cases and other matters falls within that category. It is fundamental to the integrity of that position that we discharge those public interest functions in accordance with the law, irrespective of political advantage, expediency or personal popularity.

The second preliminary point is on the role of the Charity Commission, a role which, as the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire said, is set out in the Charities Act 1993. I do not answer for the actions of the Charity Commissioners and I do not superintend them in the performance of their functions. Indeed, part of the Attorney-General's role can be to review decisions taken by the Charity Commissioners.

Having made those background points, I turn to the history of the Attorney-General's involvement in the matter. In April 2000, Dr. Peter Glazebrook—whom, I should point out to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Mr. Flight), I do not know personally—a member of the court of governors and of the general committee of the Thomas Coram Foundation, wrote to the Attorney-General. Dr. Glazebrook expressed concern about the legality of the proposal that the Coram Foundation should loan to the new charity of the Foundling museum, gratuitously and for a period of 25 years, its picture collection and premises in Brunswick square.

In response to the intervention of the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen), I say that I believe that Dr. Glazebrook acted with absolute propriety in carrying out his function of trustee of the charity. Dr. Glazebrook was concerned that the proposed transaction fell outside the objects of the charity, a defect that he considered could not be remedied by an order under section 26 of the Charities Act 1993.

As the right hon. and learned Member for North-East Bedfordshire said, that section gives the Charity Commissioners the power to authorise dealing with charity property where it is in the interests of the charity to do so, whether or not that would otherwise be within the powers exercisable by the charity trustees. However, section 26(5) of the Act provides that the Charity Commissioners can make no order under that section that would extend or alter the purposes of the charity. As has been said, the Charity Commissioners reached the view that an order under section 26 would be appropriate. The charity entered into heads of agreement that were purportedly approved by the Charity Commissioners in August 1998.

On receipt of Dr. Glazebrook's letter, I considered the matter with standing counsel to the Attorney-General on charity matters and with legal advisers in the Government Legal Service. I reached the conclusion that, on the basis of the material available at that time, the proposal fell outside the objects of Coram and that the Charity Commissioners did not have the power under section 26 to authorise the proposal. On my instructions, the Treasury solicitors department raised my concerns with the solicitors acting for Coram in July 2000.

In my view, the objection to the proposed scheme can be simply put: if the scheme goes ahead, for 25 years, the Coram Foundation will be diverting some £13 million to £18 million of assets—I do not know the exact value—from child care to arts and heritages purposes. I emphasise that those latter purposes are worth while. Right hon. and hon. Members have set out the charity's history and drawn attention to the importance of those

works of art. However, arts and heritage are not the purposes for which those assets should be applied. The objects of Coram are, broadly, the support and maintenance of poor children—objects that stem from the royal charter in 1739, as amended by subsequent legislation, most recently the Foundling Hospital Act 1936.

Acting on behalf of the Attorney-General as protector of charity, it is my duty to ensure that charities act in accordance with their objects. The position in respect of the collection would be different if there were evidence that the individual paintings were held on special trusts, or subject to a requirement that they be retained unsold. I have seen no such evidence. Indeed, Edward Nugee, QC advised the Coram Foundation in 1997 that the pictures were not held on special trusts.

In those circumstances, Coram holds the collection in the same way as any other charity holds any asset. That is what distinguishes the collection from pictures which may be held on special trusts by, for example, colleges and Inns of Court. I therefore see no read-across from Coram to other charities that hold art collections on special trusts. In those cases, the works of art hold a clear functional value for the charity—evident in the educational value for colleges and Inns of Court. It is also possible for charities to keep works of art as an investment. As I said, there is no necessary read-across from other cases to this one, an issue that was raised by the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke).

I should add that the governors of Coram were not unaware of the legal problems when they were developing the proposals. Indeed, in 1997, Lord Phillips of Sudbury, a charity law expert, made it clear that the proposed scheme was outside the charity's purposes. In 1997, a small panel of representatives of the governors interviewed several solicitors with a view to their possible retainer. At interview, Lord Phillips informed the panel that it simply could not do what it proposed by way of setting up the museum and loaning the collection to it. He later reiterated that point forcefully in writing. Let me quote a passage from his letter:

"The fundamental issue is whether or not the way in which the pictures have been dealt with is within the purposes of the Foundation, and whether or not the way in which you intend to deal with them is within the purposes. I have seen and heard nothing to believe that this is the case."

He went on to emphasise that point. I should mention that his firm was not retained to do the work.

I am aware that some of the governors of the foundation regard the art collection as fundamental to its aims. I have seen comments from governors to the effect that, without the collection, Coram would be just another child care charity and would never move out of the second division. Such views tend to suggest that the proposed scheme was not aimed primarily at advancing the objects of Coram, but was calculated to further the ulterior purpose—I use "ulterior purpose" in the legal sense—of advancing heritage or museum objects.

Sir Nicholas Lyell: Before the hon. and learned Gentleman concludes, will he address the fact that the governors made it perfectly clear that their aim in lending the pictures and undertaking proper conservation work was to facilitate a sale, so that money could be raised and used for child care purposes, none the less retaining the link? Why is that not expedient for the interests of the charity?

Mr. Cranston: It might be. I will discuss the way forward at the end of my remarks.

Hon. Members raised the point—it relates in part to the intervention—that we are putting pressure on the charity to sell the collection. That is not the case. In fact, Coram has accepted that it will sell the collection to the museum. It is not as though we are pushing Coram in a direction in which it has not already decided to go. I believe that I, and those acting on my behalf, have acted constructively throughout the discussions. We drew up the draft particulars of claim, setting out our concerns in considerable detail. Those particulars were sent to the Charity Commission and to the solicitors then acting for Coram. I hoped that, by setting out our stall and asking Coram to come back with proposals, we would be able to move the matter forward.

It was our understanding that Farrer and Company, who has now been instructed on behalf of Coram, was to come forward with new proposals after reconsidering the matter from first principles. Indeed, Coram has come forward with further material since the start of the year. In the light of the seriousness of the matter and in view of the strong representations made by right hon. and hon. Members, I decided to seek further advice. I received a joint opinion from Peter Crampin, QC and William Henderson last week. In the spirit of co-operation, I have made that opinion available to Farrer and Company, and I am arranging to place a copy in the Library, in response to the point raised by the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier).

Mr. Dobson: Will my hon. and learned Friend seek an opinion from learned counsel about a lawful way forward that would meet the requirements of the charity?

Mr. Cranston: There are three possible ways to move forward. The first, that the objects of the charity might be changed, was raised by the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell). That would be a long-term project, but it is a possibility.

The second way forward is for the matter to be considered by a court. That is undesirable but, given the stand-off, it might be the only way forward. I have set out my reasoning, but I might be wrong. If I am wrong, costs will be ordered against the Attorney-General. I would not wish to appeal if the court held against me.

The third way forward is for Coram to do more fundamental thinking about what it should do. One possibility—it is only a possibility; it has been raised this morning—is a sale on a deferred payment basis. The original 1997 scheme proposed a sale to the museum over three years. We have said that we could live with a three or perhaps five-year period, so a deferred payment scheme to the museum over that length of time might be acceptable.

I have every sympathy with the concerns that have been expressed during the debate. I do not want to be inflexible or awkward, but I am sure that hon. Members will appreciate that I have specific obligations to the

[Mr. Cranston]

charity that I cannot ignore. To do so would mean compromising the integrity of the role of the Law Officers. If—

Dr. Michael Clark (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, Minister, but we have come to the end of the debate. If you have been unable to say all that you wanted, perhaps you would like to write to the hon. Members present. We now move to the next debate.

Community Radio

11 am

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): I am pleased to be able to raise this important issue in this Chamber today. The Government should be congratulated on the recent White Paper, which allows the profile and importance of community media in general and community radio specifically to be raised in the House. Community media include community radio, television and internet networks.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer) and for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) played a central role in establishing the new all-party community media group. I was honoured to be elected its founding chairman. The group was established to support community radio and other forms of community media. It is working closely with the Community Media Association, which set out many relevant issues in its recently published commedia manifesto and groups together community-based radio, television and internet projects from throughout the United Kingdom.

I shall talk mainly about community radio, its relevance nationally and its importance for my constituency of Eccles in the city of Salford. Unfortunately, we hear all too often in this House about elderly citizens and other members of communities who are afraid to go out of their homes after dark and rarely have an opportunity to talk to one another. I want to highlight the fact that that is especially true in areas of high social deprivation. I shall talk about what community radio is; its relevance to people who live in alienating circumstances; the role that it can play in, for example, area regeneration strategies and the development of local democracy; and, most important, how real people in local communities and interest groups can use it as a tool for social dialogue and much needed fun.

What is community radio? It is community-owned, grass-roots broadcasting. It is not for profit and is derived from the community's needs. It is also about real people from real communities making radio, communicating with one another and gaining all the benefits and skills involved in that interaction. It is clear that existing public service and commercial radio have a community element. I welcome that and believe that it should be maintained. Why, then, do we need community radio?

When I explained the idea behind it to residents of Eccles last weekend, I started by asking them, "What, if anything, does radio say about your place?" The response was gloomy to say the least. They told me that they never heard anything about their constituency, which includes the towns of Eccles, Swinton, Pendlebury, Cadishead and Irlam. On the rare occasion that they hear anything about their city, the news is generally about drugs, crime and stolen cars, which are problems across the UK.

How can community radio help a place to address its self-image and recreate the social glue that was lost in the destruction of some of the most important informal

social networks—the workplace and family? Those are big issues but, in my experience, it is rare that we get an in-depth dialogue in the mainstream media to enable local people to address those and other important issues in a balanced way. Nor has adequate time been given to develop continuing community involvement in the resolution of such serious issues. In addition, there has clearly not been enough emphasis in the media on the positive developments in our communities. Community radio could help put that social glue back in place and facilitate a dialogue on issues that affect people's everyday lives by putting local people on air and addressing local issues, while giving them the opportunity to entertain themselves.

The big commercial radio stations in the large conurbations do not and, in my opinion, cannot adequately address local issues. They might have a news service, but it is mainly sensation-driven and certainly does not cover enough good news. We must applaud the success and quality of our mainstream public and commercial radio stations, but we must also recognise their inherent limitations. We need to give local people the tools to rebalance the local agenda and enable communities to rebuild some self-esteem. Community radio has an important role to play in that process by developing local solidarity and enabling people to realise that their concerns are shared.

Radio Regen is a unique community development charity that uses radio to boost the capacity of disadvantaged communities to help themselves. It works with residents from client areas to give them the skills that they need to establish and run community radio stations. Radio Regen is supported and funded by Manchester city council. The funds come mainly from the European social fund, with additional money from the single regeneration budget and the further education sector. It employs 12 people and has become in its own right a significant small to medium-sized enterprise in the cultural sector. To date, it has helped to develop four fledgling community radio stations in the Manchester area and to train young and not-so-young people to gain a level of confidence in communicating with others that was previously believed to be impossible.

Phil Korbel, a former BBC producer, runs Radio Regen and he says that it is now in the business of helping people to transform themselves. Phil believes that there is no better affordable or accessible interactive medium that enables and encourages personal development. It is clear that community radio has the capacity to be an important medium for such transformation and development. To put it another way, involvement in community radio helps to transform people. If people are transformed, communities are transformed, too. That is why community radio needs a higher profile and level of support.

My city, Salford, has a well-established community strategy, which has anticipated the Local Government Act 2000 requirement for decision making to be carried out at the most local level possible. The city has established nine community committees that administer small, devolved budgets. An integral part of the Salford community strategy is the establishment of an exciting scheme for public access to informing, communicating and enabling technologies, through the city's on-line portal. Salford aims to deliver the Government's targets for electronic government two years earlier than the national timetable.

The community-enabling philosophy has a clear synergy with the work of Radio Regen. As part of Salford city's community strategy, Radio Regen is about to launch a three-year city-wide project funded under Salford's single regeneration budget 5 programme to engage the city's nine community service areas in community radio. A sensitising approach will be adopted; there will be weekend broadcasting in each area to get the ball rolling. Salford will be ready with a pool of skilled people, which will enable a bid for long community radio licences when they become available.

The programme will involve three or four months of workshop activity on the ground in each area. It will not be institutionalised or institution-based. Regen trainers will work with groups who wish to make programmes on the streets, in the back rooms of pubs and even in the front rooms of people's houses. People who with just a laptop computer and a minidisc recorder will be able to make any programme live and on the spot. The choice of subject for any programme—whether it is tiddlywinks, how to combat heroin addiction on an estate or the celebration of the oldest resident's life story—will be a decision for local people.

The city of Salford's youth consultative committee has recognised that the Radio Regen model lends itself to joined-up work between complementary projects. In Salford, the health action zone, led by Edna Robinson, has established an innovative project to train young people to become mentors for their peers. Those in the Salford health action zone are convinced of the contribution that community radio makes to the well-being of a place. That is a health issue; if people feel better about the place in which they live, they will feel better about themselves. That will reflect on their health and impact on their confidence in applying for jobs or accessing services.

Salford health action zone is putting its money into the solution. It has funded some of the development work carried out by Radio Regen, including an enormously successful awareness-raising reception at the House of Commons that was attended by many hon. Members, peers and my hon. Friend the Minister. That reception generated my interest in the establishment of the parliamentary group of which I am the chairman.

In terms of resources, it is vital that the access radio fund in the White Paper does not merely provide seedcorn funding for buying a mixing desk for a station. It must provide sustained funding for the running of a station and its broad activities. The running costs of a station are not great, but there must be sustained resources. Community radio and television should be supported by a substantial community media fund. The fund should draw on new money, and not just money already accessed by community media from current funding sources.

Will the Minister consider allocating the revenue that has accrued to the Treasury from the cash bids and qualifying revenue paid by radio and television licensees? Alternatively, a small proportion of the money that has come to the Treasury from the sale of mobile phone licences could be allocated. Whichever mechanism of funding is used, however, editorial independence must be ensured.

[Mr. Ian Stewart]

The constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East is normally portrayed in the media as having the largest council estate in Europe, the No. 1 ward in the UK deprivation list and, of course, all the resultant social problems. My hon. Friend was keen to participate in this debate, but, unfortunately, he has urgent business elsewhere in the House. I also know that he wanted to stress his strongly held belief that Wythenshawe FM community radio is helping people to change the place in which they live. In turn, that changes the public's perception of Wythenshawe. I am also aware that my hon. Friend has written to the Minister declaring his support for Wythenshawe FM to be considered as one of the pilot stations for long licence.

Wythenshawe FM is supported by local businesses such as Manchester international airport, Willow Park housing trust and the local Co-op. In its proposals for access radio, the Radio Authority has said that it would endorse support from business in the form of sponsorship. However, the authority suggests that community radio should not be allowed to carry advertisements. That is unduly restrictive. Some people in the world of commercial radio are worried about unfair competition, but I can find no evidence that there would be any adverse impact. In fact, in the past 10 years, more than 2,500 short-term restricted service licences have been issued that allow advertising, while commercial radio revenues have been the fastest-growing advertising medium in the United Kingdom. The all-party group will no doubt wish to consider that issue in the future.

What is the demand for community radio on the ground? We know that, when they get the bug, there is demand from the public. A straw poll found 65 per cent. brand recognition for Radio Moston FM, the first commercial radio station established by Radio Regen. Also, regeneration agencies are crying out for effective communication of their initiatives because they find that they are unable successively to communicate what they are doing to the public. "No one tells us," say the residents. The agencies would welcome the opportunity to explain their work on air.

I would like the Minister to name the first pilots and to make available funding from central Government. She must be politically brave and choose a programme that has a diverse mix of target communities, so that we can examine models for a multi-ethnic community, a large council estate, a hill farming community, a former coalfield community and even one for Northern Ireland, should the communities there so wish.

In determining the pilots, transparent benchmarks should be established that might include track record, both in production and project management. The pilots should also be able to demonstrate an active relationship with a broad range of partners and meet all the criteria in the community media charter drawn up by the Community Media Association.

I hope that, in the not too distant future, we will see the establishment of Eccles Energi FM as part of the city of Salford's project. However, my main interest is in how community radio can help to further individuals' confidence and self-esteem and transform local people into local heroes who change their communities for good. My good friend the hon. Member for Manchester, Central has been deeply involved in the work of Radio Regen. I am sure that he will tell us the story of the real local heroes who are a testament to Radio Regen's work and the benefits of community radio.

11.19 am

Sandra Gidley (Romsey): I congratulate the hon. Member for, Eccles (Mr. Stewart) and securing the debate. I am a last-minute substitute, because my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker), who was supposed to be speaking today, is unable to attend.

I wish to put the issue into context. We must examine digital broadcasting in its broadest sense. The majority of people are still using four to five terrestrial television channels and, to many of them, nothing much seems to have changed. However, it has, because one in five households now have access to digital television. In recent years, the number of channels has multiplied massively and while many households still have the option of only four or five channels, a significant number can choose from hundreds of television channels that fit into many different genres, such as films, documentaries, news, music and children's television, to name but a handful. There are also local television channels on many cable networks.

We are facing an enormous challenge. There is also a big opportunity for the BBC and long-standing commercial broadcasters. They will be in on the game and we must find ways in which to protect the little guys, so that they have a chance to become involved. Digital technology will bring three key benefits. First, the spectrum will be freed up, thus making space for extra channels and services. Secondly, digital signals carry a higher quality of picture and sound than analogue signals, which have been around since the 1930s. Thirdly, as digital signal uses the spectrum more efficiently, it enables the number and range of services to be increased significantly. That holds out the possibility of allowing individuals to receive regional programmes that are specific to their region where that is currently not the case. That is a step in the right direction.

The Government are ambitious for digital television. Between 2006 and 2010, they want to switch off the analogue transmitters, which send signals to non-digital television. However, before that can be done, some goals must be met; 99.4 per cent. of households must be able to receive the digital signal and 95 per cent. of households must have signed up to digital, which must be affordable to all. I have been approached by pensioners who are worried about the matter. We broadly support the Government's approach, but we want to ensure that people are not disadvantaged.

Radio is sharing in the revolution. Digital technology offers radio listeners the prospect of the same interference-free reception that digital television viewers are experiencing. The pace of technological change is fast and accelerating. Viewers can now buy machines that suggest programmes to watch based on their favourite television programmes. It would be interesting if that could happen with radio programmes. Research shows that viewers are happy to have programmes suggested to them, although I think that that is a terrible idea.

Television and radio are essential components of modern democracy and a modern civilised society. They are key methods by which we can all be educated,

entertained and informed. The big plus of community-based radio is that the elderly, the housebound, the unemployed and the sick have a vital link to the outside world. It is also said that the best pictures are available on radio. The broadcasting of quality material adds colour to life.

Mr. Ian Stewart: Does the hon. Lady agree that it is important that the all-party group discusses the area to which she refers—particularly from the point of view of whether analogue should be completely removed—in relation to the potential for pay-per-listen on digital radio?

Sandra Gidley: Yes. We need a framework by which we can encourage television and radio to flourish. We want to facilitate new entrants into the marketplace, cultivate independent production and encourage diversity.

I turn now to how the Liberal Democrat party sees the way forward for community radio. The radio regulator must issue local radio licences according to particular criteria. The first of those is the resources available to the broadcaster to invest in programming, and the second is the extent of demand in the local area for the proposed services. A fine balancing act must be achieved. Demand may be small for output that is highly important to a small, isolated group of people, and the criteria used to decide whether to issue a community-based licence must take into account factors such as social deprivation. Small, isolated groups have the greatest need and will benefit the most from community radio.

Given the continuing scarcity of spectrum, criteria must be applied to judge aspiring radio stations against existing radio stations that want to reapply for a licence. Although we must encourage diversity, we need to protect the airwaves from organisations of questionable public benefit.

To take a slightly different tack, I should like to discuss religious broadcasting. Many church groups would like to listen to output that supports and encourages their faith. As someone who does not belong to a church group, I find it shameful that they are discriminated against, especially as those with a porn empire can happily access any licences that they choose. The position of religious broadcasting should be considered, especially in a local context. Churches often work with people who are disadvantaged or who cannot always get out and about, and such people would benefit greatly from access to such organisations.

A case can be made for a small amount to be set aside from a variety of non-tax sources such as the national lottery to establish a fund for radio, which could be used to cover the start-up costs of radio stations or some non-recurrent costs. It was suggested earlier that continuing costs should be included. Setting people on the road is fine, but we must consider the cost of advertising, and advertising funding may not be available. If broadcasting stations were allowed to advertise, they would not need to apply to the public purse to cover continuing costs.

In some cases, a small group of people may be serviced by community-based radio, and the benefits to that small group, which may include handicapped people or members of an ethnic minority, may be far outweighed by the ability to attract advertising. Such groups should be encouraged and considered sympathetically.

In some cases, spectrum is available to small geographical areas. The fund for radio would help to establish a service for such an area. In time, it might also be used to start up internet or cable-based services for more geographically dispersed communities. Liberal Democrats want broadcasting in all forms to flourish and to encourage diversity, while retaining the ethos and practice of public service broadcasting that served us so well in the 20th century.

11.28 am

Mr. Tony Lloyd (Manchester, Central): Although the comments of the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) about community television are important, I shall discuss community radio, simply because we as a society and the Government are considering the issue of such licences on a pilot basis.

I spent a couple of hours at the weekend at a community radio station in my constituency. That gave me the opportunity to communicate with my constituents—not many weeks, perhaps, before a general election. It was tremendously exciting for me as a politician to see the dynamism that my constituents brought to their community, and the way in which their work was received. Nobody knows the listening figures, but the response from phone-ins was encouraging. There is something there, and the service has come into its own.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister, who recently announced on Wythenshawe community radio in Manchester that the Government will go ahead with pilot schemes throughout the country. Part of the debate's purpose is to examine exactly what that means, so that the Minister can place Government thinking on record and show how it will help local communities.

The starting point was some 30 years ago. Sadly, I am old enough to remember pirate stations such as Radio Caroline. Ageing may be unfortunate but it brings experience with it. A driving force behind those pirate radio stations was the utter incompetence of the BBC at that time, and its failure to enthuse the younger generation. The pirate stations represented a serious challenge to the status quo. A consequence was the independent radio revolution. There were lots of arguments at that time, as my colleagues in the Labour party will remember, about whether it was legitimate for independent radio to carry advertising. However, we achieved a fundamental shift in radio broadcasting.

Most of us would have said that those early years were tremendously exciting, as a huge number of radio stations appeared as part of the BBC at local level and in the private independent sector. A sad reality is that, a generation or more on from the days of Radio Caroline, my younger constituents often complain about the irrelevance of radio networks to their needs. They are highly critical of local commercial radio, because it dumbs matters down to a level of blandness and fails to include a lot of potential listeners.

I am not sure that I should tell the following story publicly. However, three or four years ago, I visited a pirate station in Moss Side in my constituency. It was run by a group of young black people who were driven

[Mr. Tony Lloyd]

by the need to broadcast the type of music to which people wanted to listen. They displayed enormous enthusiasm and achieved high listening figures in that immediate region. The problem was that, by using a pirate station, those people blocked out the signals from elsewhere, which used to be given as a reason why we could not create more stations. That is a legitimate and understandable objection. However, even in that unofficial, illegal community experiment, young people were able to show that mainstream stations had failed to include an existing audience.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) told me yesterday that, having secured this debate, he was inundated with letters from independent radio stations. As parliamentarians, we are used to that. When the time came for renewal of licences, broadcasters would suddenly begin to take Members of Parliament seriously, told us how much they valued our contribution and how much they wanted to involve themselves in the community. That lasted until the new licences were issued, when, once again, we heard little from them, and they returned to their straight-laced ways that result in dumbing down.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eccles mentioned that radio stations in Greater Manchester have many achievements to their credit. My criticisms will be slightly fairer than others that have been made; the stations attract large audiences and provide a product. However, they are incapable of addressing issues of highly localised communities. An area such as Greater Manchester, which has a population of 2 million to 3 million people, inevitably has a small level of interest in local events. That forces regional and sub-regional broadcasters to import national news from organisations such as Independent Radio News, rather than covering local news. Such regional broadcasters make a small contribution to local debate. They fulfil a role, but cannot claim that they intend to reflect or have reflected the local communities in the area over which they broadcast. We must examine the basis on which we allow broadcasting to occur.

I was introduced to the present demand for community radio by one of my constituents, an inestimable woman named Marie Chapman, who participated in the Radio Moston experiment. My hon. Friend the Member for Eccles referred to local heroes; she may prefer to be called a local heroine. Marie Chapman would say that having access to training on local radio transformed the way in which she viewed herself. She left school with relatively few qualifications, brought up a family and lived in Miles Platting, which is one of the most difficult areas of Manchester. She did not feel that she had a great deal to offer outside the confines of her family. She was wrong about that, as she has started to discover. Community radio has transformed the way in which she relates to the local community and she has accessed skills that allow her to take a larger role. She is now engaged in a number of other activities as a result of her growing confidence.

If community radio were about an educational programme for only one or two individuals, it would not matter. However, when community radio is done well—as it has in Manchester over recent years—it is at the forefront of giving individuals the opportunity to up-skill, allowing them to encapsulate the mood and attitudes of our local communities.

I shall be slightly parochial and discuss my constituency. It is one of the poorest areas in the country but, because it is an inner-city area, it does not have the community focus that other communities in other parts of the country, such as those in rural areas, can maintain. There is a lack of differentiation in the city. However, while one area easily transforms into another, the problems that one area may experience are vastly different from those of its close and neighbouring districts.

A couple of miles from Manchester city centre, where properties worth £2 million are being sold, is east Manchester, one of the poorest and hardest-hit parts of the city. It was abandoned following the collapse of manufacturing industry in the 1980s and community structures have, to an extent, broken down. Crime, social dislocation, drugs, young people who are not enthused by events in the immediate area and the failure of social structures have hit home with a vengeance. Until recently, that led to the depopulation of the area. The concept of community in that area is being rebuilt because of the money that the Government are spending on the new deal for communities project.

Despite the massive problems in the area, there is still a strong sense of community, especially among the older people. They still remember a time when there were secure jobs and front doors could be left open; such times are unlikely to return in the near future. However, they also want to maintain the east Manchester identity, which is different from the ethos associated with £2 million flat developments in the city centre and from that of adjoining areas such as Newton Heath, a distinctive community isolated by the Clayton Vale river valley.

When community radio started operating in the area, people were able for the first time to talk to each other on a mass basis about their community, which they understand and to which they relate. No local newspapers are circulated in the area, except the *Manchester Evening News* and the *East Manchester Reporter*, neither of which is a large-circulation operation in that part of the city. I have a complaint to make about those newspapers; my fellow Manchester Members of Parliament are often featured in them, but I do not receive equal coverage. I am motivated to mention that not by personal regret, but by resentment, because it suggests that my constituents are by-passed. It is important that the area has a community radio station to reflect what it believes about the issues that affect it.

As I mentioned, at the weekend I spent a couple of hours with the people who run East Manchester FM. They have made an enormous contribution to their community. My good friend Mark is now known as the Beswick assassin because of his appearances on the station, and I advise the Minister not to go near East Manchester FM when Mark is present. Also involved are Dave and Sam and a young man named Ryan. He was recruited from a local youth club to do a short session and became so enthused that he ended up staying for three or four days. His contribution was

enormous because he was also a part of the process of enthusing other young people in the area about what the local community can do for them.

Young musicians turned up to play for the station. Their talent was extraordinary, especially as they came from a community that is usually by-passed; perhaps it is not so surprising that there should be such talent in east Manchester, as the city has been the source of most of the recent innovations in pop music. However, their talent would not usually be recognised or given a platform. The musicians who performed on the radio were the kind of young people who would often be dismissed as ruffians who frequent the street or described in a similarly pejorative way.

Ryan told me that, for him, the alternative to participating in community radio was to hang around on street corners. Community radio has much to offer in terms of binding the wounds and bringing people together, particularly for a generation that has seen little investment in its community in recent years.

I am already enthusiastic about the achievements of community radio in that area. The station is an experiment that has lasted only a week. It cannot claim to have transformed the community, but it is popular, and in areas where the Government are investing in the new deal process, community radio helps to re-solder the spirit of the community and to bolster its reinvention of itself. That could be crucial in certain areas.

I apologise for being parochial, but I believe that what I have been saying so passionately about east Manchester could be said about the communities that are represented by my hon. Friends the Members for Eccles and for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), and about other communities throughout the country. I know urban communities best, but what I have said applies to rural communities, to hill farmers and to Northern Ireland, which my hon. Friend the Member for Eccles mentioned. We must consider how we, as a society, build our structures and maintain our local communities. Community radio is an important part of such considerations.

As I said, I strongly welcome the Minister's statement in Wythenshawe two weeks ago, which gave a signal of her intentions on the matter. It is a different attitude from that of previous Governments, and, until now, of this Government. However, difficult issues are involved. I hope that the Minister will say how the various pilot schemes will be rolled out.

In my city, the four separate community radio experiments have worked well, but we do not know what would happen if the project lasted for more than one week. It is legitimate to want to see what happens when the pilots run for a longer period, and whether local broadcasters can maintain the same enthusiasm. It must not be only a narrow clique of locals who have access to the airwaves and keep everyone else out. What we want, and have had, is a group of people who enthuse their neighbours to join in. Pilot schemes will consider such matters, and I welcome that.

All the areas where there was a community radio experiment will want to be part of the pilot schemes, and I expect the Minister to be inundated with applications. I shall certainly stake a claim for areas in my constituency to take part. Phil Korbel, a professional broadcaster of many years standing, is the guru of Radio Regen in Manchester, the training scheme that resulted in many of the community radio projects coming into operation. Phil Korbel worked in the BBC at different levels and enthused those who worked with him. I agree with his view that pilot schemes, which have mostly been geographical, should have different themes—social themes, for example. My hon. Friend the Member for Eccles referred to several different themes, and I hope that the Minister will give us her view on the subject.

In Manchester, ethnic community themes have been very successful. For many years, Irish community radio has broadcast around the time of St. Patrick's day, and there has been Asian community radio, both of which are important locally. The demand for community radio will be extraordinary and we must consider funding. I am less sanguine than some; in a perfect world, I would prefer community radio to broadcast without advertising, as small companies with marginal economic resources could face editorial pressure and control and all the related problems. We must consider whether Government funding, or funding by regional or local government, should be sought, or whether to look to the private sector for such funding.

My hon. Friend used the term "unfair competition". I do not regard bringing more competition into broadcasting as unfair. The licence to print money that the current broadcasters take for granted is outrageous.

Mr. Ian Stewart: I remind my hon. Friend that my comments were made as a result of the lobbying I received from the commercial radio organisations over the past week or so.

Mr. Lloyd: Thereby hangs a tale. The existing commercial operators have their position to maintain. Why should they have an automatic right to cream off the best of the advertising? If the public want to listen to other stations, the rules of normal competition should apply in broadcasting as elsewhere. My appearances on Key 103 and Galaxy will diminish further until we get community radio, when my stock will rise once again. That is the nature of these matters. I hope that broadcasters will work properly and constructively in the spirit of the development of community radio to ensure that communities are served as they have not been in the past.

My hon. Friend referred to the Salford health action zone. Those of us in Manchester and Trafford regard it as our health action zone, too. For the sake of correctness, even though my father was a Salfordian, we have moved on from very narrow parochialism, except in this matter. My hon. Friend is right about that. People in Greater Manchester do not think of their community as Greater Manchester, or even Salford. They relate to Eccles, Moss Side, Openshaw and Wythenshawe; names that are strange to many hon. Members. I know that you could reel off lists of communities in your constituency, Dr. Clark, where the need to maintain and protect or to rebuild communities is fundamental. Community radio will give us something, the like of which we have not had in recent times. It will be part of the social cement that will rebind our society.

11.52 am

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) on securing this debate, and on enabling us to discuss an important part of the future of radio in this country. We tend to ignore radio when we have more widely focused debates on broadcasting and media issues. I am a strong supporter of radio, and I get the impression that most Members of Parliament more often listen to the radio than watch television. I spent about eight hours in my car yesterday touring parts of Lancashire and I listened to radio the whole time. Although I try to listen to good music, there was so much going on that it was important to be kept up to date with the news. Also, traffic information cut into broadcasts helps one to avoid traffic jams.

The time that we spend listening to the radio is on the increase, as the Radio Authority constantly reminds us. The Broadcasting Act 1990 opened up a number of opportunities for radio, such as the three new national stations, but especially the many local commercial radio stations which provide a good local service. The BBC also has a huge radio audience across its five main national channels, but it is equally important to remember the local radio stations that it operates. Those give us an insight into the opportunities that exist for community radio.

Local listeners value the community announcements and community news that the BBC carries on local radio stations. I am thinking in particular of the two floods that we have had in my constituency in the past couple of years. Last weekend was the second anniversary of the first lot. Radio York's audience virtually doubled because everyone tuned in to find out which roads were closed, what areas were being flooded, where sandbags could be obtained and so forth. It provided a tremendously valuable service to local communities that cannot be catered for on a national or even regional basis. That shows how expanded use of the radio spectrum for community purposes would greatly benefit local people. Public announcements on incidents that have occurred in a locality and news on whether sports fixtures and events are taking place in various village halls, for example, are valuable to local communities. I support the view that there is considerable scope to do more.

Mr. Ian Stewart: I agree with the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's remarks, but his examples are of a one-way flow of news and information. Does he accept that community radio has the potential to be an interactive medium, through which people can talk to each other across the airwaves?

Mr. Greenway: Yes, I do. Many people phone in to local radio stations to express their views, so there is an undoubted opportunity for interaction. With an election in the air, there is no better way for a Member of Parliament to find out what local people think than to listen to a two-hour morning phone-in on Radio York. It is easy to discover that although people are sometimes worried about the price of petrol or problems stemming from foot and mouth disease, their worries often have nothing to do with politics.

It is now much clearer than it was 10 years ago that local spectrum is available, particularly on FM wavelengths. Provided that there are adequate safeguards on interference with other services, there is great potential to allocate spectrum to local purposes. In the longer term—it will be perhaps 10 years down the line before use is universal—many further opportunities may arise through the digital spectrum.

Important questions remain to be addressed before we can proceed with publicly encouraged—and partly publicly funded—expansion of community radio in accordance with the White Paper. The key question is what type of licence is envisaged. There are about 400 restricted service licences in operation for a year and about 90 long-term licences. Based on a suggestion initially made by the Radio Authority, the White Paper suggests that future growth is likely to be in the new category of access radio. However, Parliament will have to ask questions about the most appropriate legislative framework for setting up these new radio stations.

The most crucial question is who will award the licences. The White Paper deals with the format of the new super-regulator, Ofcom, which must include a specialist radio division. The Radio Authority has awarded licences with great competence over the past 10 years. I was a great advocate at the time and it has allowed radio to flourish. I stress to the Minister that Ofcom must have a specialist operator to deal with licences.

How will access radio stations be funded? It has become clear from our debate that several options are being canvassed, but they all appear to draw the conclusion that some form of public funding through an access fund may be required, perhaps with the counter-balancing proviso that not-for-profit organisations should receive the funds. That does not seem to be a particular problem. We may also wish to encourage donations from some stations.

Some hon. Members raised the question of competition with local commercial radio and the extent to which local radio stations might be permitted to take advertising. I listened with care to what the hon. Members for Eccles and for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) said. We have to be careful about the issue of unfair competition. Some commercial radio stations do not make huge amounts of money and are very dependent on local advertising revenue. Many of them have bid and paid for spectrum. There is an argument for some of the funding from that to be used to encourage access radio.

Sponsoring some community radio stations may be a preferable way of encouraging the funding of inter-community radio from the private sector. However, local commercial radio has given local businesses an opportunity for advertising that they would not otherwise have had, even on stations with a regional licence. Some advertising streams may have a much lower cost than that of even the local commercial radio stations; even down to letting people know where they can get a plumber or an electrician. An example of that is our local village magazine. When I was church treasurer, I introduced the practice of inserting into the magazine every month blocks of adverts from local tradesmen and organisations that could not advertise in any other way. They pay for the magazine. Something along those lines might be possible.

Mr. Tony Lloyd: There was a huge explosion of

independent radio companies in the early days, but we have subsequently seen massive concentration. Some small, marginal operators are still faithful to the original charters but many stations are run by national groups that take on a local identity. They cannot complain about unfair competition. Advertising is advertising. The hon. Gentleman is on to something interesting when he talks about local and sub-local advertising, although that creates competition with local newspapers.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. We are exploring an issue to which we have not previously given much thought. I used the comparator of other means of distributing information to local people paid for through an advertising stream. Given that we are talking about relatively small areas—the radio stations in my part of north Yorkshire cover a large area—we are looking at much smaller and more concentrated connections in terms of community or access radio. We are talking about truly sub-local radio stations. Those matters should be addressed in detail. I simply make the point that we need to be imaginative and have vision in our support and encouragement of community radio. That is presumably why the hon. Member for Eccles introduced the debate.

We come to the question of who will run the stations. The hon. Members for Eccles and for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) were careful to point out that largely local people run them. A framework is necessary to ensure caution and impartiality. It will also ensure that the people involved are fit and proper, that proper standards of content apply, that there is no party-political involvement—I have another bee in my bonnet about that—and that the information given is accurate. If we use community radio as a genuine means of giving people information, it must be accurate and up to date. Some monitoring will be required, but I hope that it can be undertaken with a relatively light touch. As a party, we strongly believe in active citizenship and the voluntary sector. Community radio could prove extremely important to groups in those fields.

All those issues are being considered by the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport in its review of the White Paper. We welcome the Radio Authority's submission to the Committee, which has helped us all to prepare our thoughts for this debate. We await the Committee's report with interest.

The hon. Member for Romsey mentioned another aspect of community radio: community religious broadcasting. I well remember the debates that we had on the issue in the Standing Committee that considered the Broadcasting Act 1990. It disqualified groups whose objectives were wholly or mainly of a religious nature from holding a terrestrial national radio licence issued by the Radio Authority. The thinking behind that was not to be discriminatory against religious groups, but much more to focus on the requirement that the three new national licences should offer real diversity and not subscribe to a single format. As a result, contrary to popular belief, the disqualification does not extend to local radio satellite or cable licences in respect of religious bodies.

The debate has, of course, moved on. We certainly believe that freedom of expression without discrimination, regardless of race, sex or faith, should inform our thinking in this area and that it is now probably time to end the legal discrimination against religious broadcasters and allow more equal access to future competitions for various service licences. There is no doubt in my mind that community radio offers opportunities for religious broadcasts, which almost certainly need not be exclusively Christian. Of course, there will have to be safeguards to ensure that fit and proper people are involved and that there is responsible, non-exploitative content. I am sure that Parliament is capable of providing a proper framework, particularly if we approach it with the open-mindedness and co-operative spirit that contributors to this debate have displayed. The conditions to ensure that fit and proper people are involved and to ensure content will need to apply to the development of community radio generally.

There are real opportunities with the White Paper and the legislation that will follow, whoever wins the election. I think that both we and the Government are committed to an early Bill to deregulate the communications industry. The priority of the legislation will be to free up media ownership and ensure that we have a dynamic communications industry. The community radio issue is an important counter-balance. It will encourage local people to become involved with community radio stations and add a different dimension to their quality of life. It will extend choice and diversity in broadcasting, which we have not experienced before, and allow listeners and those who make the programmes to benefit greatly from the opportunities available.

12.8 pm

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) and contratulating him on securing this timely debate and on the establishment of the all-party community media group. As he said, it was established by him, as chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr. Bradley) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bradford, South (Mr. Sutcliffe), for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), for Manchester, Blackley (Mr. Stringer) and for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) and has provided a timely addition to this important debate. Community radio is an idea whose time has come, and the hon. Members who have spoken have shown what an important issue it is.

The hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) talked about the opportunities presented by digital television and, in the longer term, by radio. The hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) referred to religious broadcasting, which was mentioned in the White Paper on communications. We are at present considering responses to the consultation.

At the moment, religious organisations are precluded from national analogue licences but not from local ones. The White Paper makes it clear that the proposed legislation will also remove the anomaly that prevents them owning local digital stations, but the question is whether we will allow them to apply for a national analogue licence. It is a matter that we are considering in the light of responses to the consultation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central, like my hon. Friend the Member for Eccles, described graphically how local community radio can

[Janet Anderson]

help to regenerate communities and to provide training opportunities. He referred to East Manchester FM and the contribution of Mark, Dave, Sam, Ryan and other young people who gained so much from being involved with the station. The concept has a great deal of support.

I shall try to answer the many important questions that have been asked. The White Paper on communications published in December responds to the communications revolution, which gathers pace daily. There is digital media, multi-channel television and internet access; the potential of technology to transform our everyday lives by extending choice, enriching entertainment and enabling learning is a well rehearsed theme. However, as technology develops, we must ensure not only that we use it to promote and to extend understanding on a global scale, but that we harness its potential to strengthen local ties.

The White Paper sets its sights on the local and the virtual communities, and makes it clear that the objectives to strengthen both are complementary. It proposes access radio as a potential component of the broadcasting landscape in the 21st century. As the hon. Member for Ryedale said, that was originally the Radio Authority's proposal. We use the term access radio instead of community radio because radio services that meet the needs of the community are already provided by good independent commercial stations and by BBC local radio. Access radio suggests the broadening of such broadcasting to give local communities the chance to establish their own stations, as contributions to the debate reflect, and they would complement the existing services.

We invited comments on the merits of the proposal to support the development of such stations, and I am pleased to report a positive response. Following an initial analysis, I was delighted to announce on 2 March the Government's agreement to the Radio Authority's proposal to launch pilot schemes to explore how access radio might be established and funded.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central said, I recently visited Wythenshawe FM, at the invitation of my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East, where I saw at first hand the benefits of providing a community with a popular, accessible forum in which views, experiences and advice can be exchanged. Wythenshawe FM operated for eight days at the end of last month through a restricted service licence provided by the Radio Authority. The station is one of a number broadcasting under the banner of Radio Regen, which is run with enormous enthusiasm and great success by Phil Korbel and his team.

Radio Regen's aims are simple: to use radio as a tool to empower and excite local communities by involving local people in the setting up and running of their own community radio stations. Local groups are invited to get involved in producing material for broadcast, and there is a series of major community arts projects in which professional artists work with local people to produce new pieces of creative work. The radio stations are then used as a platform for such work, which could be anything from a group inventing its own slang for the area to a mass radio-controlled percussion event. The opportunities are limitless.

Each community involved in Radio Regen decides exactly which issues are aired, but programmes generally include news of local events and sporting activities, a profile of a particular local personality or group, a look at the history of the area, coverage of a local pub quiz league, or a spotlight on the activities of a local school. There are phone-ins and debates—as the hon. Member for Ryedale said, phone-ins are a good way for Members of Parliament to gauge the views and opinions of their constituents—as well as reports and music, all with a local flavour and presented by both professional DJs and local people.

I was impressed by the level of community involvement that I saw at Wythenshawe, which I am sure is replicated wherever such community radio projects take place. People passing by the box office at the Forum leisure centre could see exactly what was going on and join in. Local schoolchildren arrived during the lunch hour to take the many phone calls from listeners, generally just down the road, who wanted to make a request or say their piece. The team was quite clear that the benefits of the project long outlasted the temporary licence, particularly in terms of self-esteem and skills learned. Such local broadcasting can clearly have a great impact on social inclusion, particularly in speaking to and engaging young people.

As well as promoting social inclusion, access radio stations can demystify the process of broadcasting and promote wider participation in the business of making and producing radio programmes. Marshall McLuhan, that herald of the multimedia age, said that

"Gutenberg made everyone a reader. Xerox makes everybody a publisher."

We want to encourage the same transformation in radio and help more listeners become broadcasters. The opportunity to become a radio presenter might hold particular attractions for young people; the next Zoe Ball or Jamie Theakston might earn their spurs through involvement in an access radio station.

Wythenshawe FM demonstrates that there is a place for access radio stations, and the many benefits of such stations. We are now considering how the concept might best be developed. As I have mentioned, we have already given the green light to the Radio Authority to go ahead with pilots. Those experimental stations will help to inform our thinking but, at the same time, we are carefully considering three difficult issues: the funding mechanisms for access radio; the platforms on which it will operate; and the administration arrangements. Those areas were explored at the Radio Authority's seminar on access radio last month, which provided useful food for thought. I wish to sketch out briefly other issues that need to be addressed.

Funding for the stations could come from public or commercial sources, or a mixture of both. We have heard a number of differing views on that this morning. The Radio Authority suggested in its recent submission to my Department that a radio fund might be established to channel public sources of funding, such as central or local government funds or European funds. Alternatively, access radio stations might be given the ability to compete in the commercial market and carry advertising, or be sponsored, as the hon. Member for Ryedale suggested. Clearly, any demands for increased public expenditure must be scrutinised carefully, and no

commitments can be given at this stage. We must also ensure that the commercial radio sector is not unfairly put at a disadvantage. We will certainly bear the interests of independent stations in mind.

There seems to be a consensus that there should be scope to establish some FM access radio stations in urban areas and perhaps more in peripheral parts of the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend the Member for Eccles made several suggestions and while I cannot today announce where the pilots will be—that is principally a matter for the Radio Authority—I am sure that his point, that they should reflect a wide range of different communities and be spread throughout the country, will be taken into account. Together with the available AM resources, we can make a promising start. In time, I hope that the internet will also offer a suitable platform for access radio.

We need to consider carefully how the current licensing regime may need revisiting, as well as the criteria for the awarding of licences and the distribution of funding. We have begun to explore such matters. There are some thorny points, however, and we must ensure that, if access radio can be built into the new framework, it is introduced sensitively alongside the existing tiers of radio services.

I want hon. Members to be in no doubt about the Government's commitment to press ahead with the matter. I wish to place on the record that my officials in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are meeting officials from the Treasury and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions this week to discuss the Radio Authority's paper on access radio and to consider licensing, funding and administration. The Radio Authority is sending a team to oversee the pilot process at which my Department will be represented. It will meet for the first time later this month. The debate has certainly helped our thinking on the way ahead. I am sure that the Radio Authority will take note of such deliberations. I thank hon. Members for their contributions.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Order. As the Minister has not arrived for the next debate, the sitting will be suspended until 12.30 pm.

12.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

Acute Hospital Services (Rural Areas)

12.30 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I am delighted to have secured this debate, as I know that it is pertinent to many hon. Members throughout the country, especially those whose constituencies contain acute hospitals in remote areas and peninsulas. Given the welcome and continual improvements in clinical standards, specialist medicine and surgery, the purpose of the debate is to examine how small acute hospitals in areas with specific geographic, demographic and resource challenges can maintain and develop services. In view of the fact that this is a half-hour debate, I shall concentrate on West Cornwall hospital in Penzance.

I should declare an interest because my wife is a staff nurse at that hospital. My oldest brother, Mark, aged 45, who has been living with us for a short time, has had a lifetime of illness with Fallot's tetralogy, and has related medical and surgical problems. He was taken into the hospital as an emergency admission on Sunday, and is currently under observation and treatment. When he was admitted, only two medical beds were available at West Cornwall hospital, and none at Treliske, which is the main site for the Royal Cornwall hospitals NHS trust. That is a story in itself.

West Cornwall is one of three acute hospitals in the Royal Cornwall hospitals NHS trust. It has 81 beds, 56 of which are for medicine, for a population of about 150,000 people, depending on where the eastern boundary between the hospital and Treliske is drawn. Of course, that figure is doubled during the summer months. The main site for the trust is at Treliske, just outside Truro, which has 847 acute beds serving a population of more than 300,000 people. The Royal College of Physicians recommends that 400,000 is an ideal population for a fully staffed and equipped district general hospital. Almost all specialties are covered at Treliske, with the exception of certain conditions—for cardiothoracic surgery and neurosurgery, patients are usually referred to regional centres such as Derriford hospital in Plymouth. The third hospital is St. Michael's at Hayle in my constituency, which is largely for planned, elective surgery. There are also 12 cottage hospitals in the trust.

A small acute hospital such as West Cornwall, which has four consultant physicians, three consultant surgeons and limited facilities, faces several challenges. First, the Royal College of Physicians advises that there should be at least two consultants from each of the four main specialties—cardiology, gastroenterology, diabetes and respiratory medicine—and two geriatricians, so as to achieve 24-hour emergency cover. Secondly, there should be adequate anaesthetic cover, which West Cornwall does not have. In those circumstances, senior medical staff should expect to be on call one night in five. Related services such as radiotherapy and accident and emergency should also be in place, which West Cornwall has but only at night time on a nurse-led basis, with specialist anaesthetists, surgical sub-specialists and so on. Some, but not all, of those services are in place.

[Mr. Andrew George]

The third area of concern is the continual pressure since 1997 of what are undoubtedly welcome improvements in clinical governance. The chief executive of the hospital trust is accountable for risk assessment, and pressure is put on hospitals, especially small hospitals such as West Cornwall, on which the continual risk assessment is focused.

Fourthly, financial considerations must be taken into account. Centralising forces require the use of high-cost investigative equipment and treatment to be maximised to give resident on-duty medical staff the facilities that they require. From my conversations with the Royal College of Physicians and others, I am aware of the nationwide concern that the drive towards increasing centralisation of services as clinical standards change and improve will inevitably result in fewer and fewer acute general hospitals, and that those that remain will be highly centralised.

Fifthly, the training requirements of the hospital are provided by senior house officers. Their training posts are maintained, and the deanery has no objection to them. In fact, the hospital would fold without them. However, doctors' hours will come under much closer scrutiny as a result of the new deal and, possibly, the working time directive. Those measures will put some pressure on the system, as will the fact that only a small range of experience is available at a small acute hospital. In a short period, however, doctors see a greater range than they would if they specialised in a larger hospital. There is also a limitation on the training that West Cornwall hospital can provide for cardio-pulmonary resuscitation.

Further challenges affect the review to which I shall refer in a moment. Treliske was on red alert when my brother went in, as it often is. West Cornwall often receives emergency admissions diverted from Treliske, so it is questionable whether Treliske would be able to cope if emergency admissions were suddenly not dealt with by West Cornwall. In the cold light of day, most people recognise that it could not cope, even though West Cornwall is only a small hospital.

Two weeks ago, the Cornwall NHS executive forum, which is the purchaser and provider of services in Cornwall, launched a review of west Cornwall hospital services, which it intends to complete by January 2002. The primary aim is to secure the best possible emergency services for the population of the West of Cornwall primary care group within accepted national standards and costs, and to provide additional services at West Cornwall hospital so as better to serve the needs of the local population.

The key objectives are to carry out a clinical risk assessment, which is happening at the moment, and devise and complete a full option appraisal to identify the full costs and consequences of three options. The first option is to develop and invest in West Cornwall hospital to meet national standards for an unspecified emergency take. The second is to have a selected emergency take, and the third to transfer all emergency admissions to Royal Cornwall hospital at Treliske.

It is timely that I raise this debate now, in view of that review, which has political and resource dimensions. Its considerations have implications, on which I look forward to the Minister's comments.

West Cornwall Healthwatch produced a document that I sent to the Minister's Department entitled "The People's Option on the Future of West Cornwall Hospital". I hope that she has received it by now. The document shows that the issue was keenly contested and debated in west Cornwall, and describes a different approach in north Devon. Barnstaple hospital, which serves a population only slightly larger than that of west Cornwall, has 423 beds rather than the 81 in West Cornwall hospital. Past investment in services at Barnstaple hospital must have been significantly different from that in Treliske.

In the wider community, much concern has been expressed about what has been going on and the likely outcome of the review. Paediatric and obstetric cover at West Cornwall hospital has been removed, and accident and emergency services are nurse-led at night. Although the hospital has a good record, I accept that there is no room for sentimentality when assessing such services—otherwise the grim reaper would have a field day.

Formula funding does not take account of the geographical challenges of areas such as Cornwall. We would hit water if we went to Land's End, the Lizard and the Isles of Scilly—the north, the west and the south of my constituency. Appeals for emergency services cannot be made from any of those places. That is not taken into account in the funding formula: nor is the fact that we have a significantly older population than elsewhere, and our population doubles in the summer because of tourism. Such factors need to be taken into account if we are to have the resources to fund the hospital properly.

As for bed blocking, a consultant told me that an emergency admission to the hospital does not require a financial decision, but such a decision is often needed and difficult to obtain when a patient wants to leave hospital and go into a nursing home bed. Many nursing home proprietors have drawn to my attention significant problems in that regard.

The relationship between West Cornwall hospital and Treliske hospital is not as co-operative or mutually supportive as it could be. Sometimes, medical staff at Treliske are professionally dismissive of the work undertaken at West Cornwall hospital in difficult circumstances. The implication is that some consultants do not want to come to West Cornwall hospital from Treliske because it will take them too far away from their private patients at a neighbouring hospital. Relations are not good. In 1998, the Royal College of Physicians, the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Surgeons in their report entitled "Provision of Acute General Hospital Services" said:

> "District General Hospitals situated in areas of the country where it is not practical to amalgamate with others, will need to continue for the foreseeable future. The smaller the acute unit, the greater should be the co-operation with adjacent acute hospital units, both professionally and contractually, in order to provide sustainable high quality specialist care for patients."

In a press release in 1999, the Association of Community Health Councils stated:

> "Patients in rural areas may die because hospitals are too far to reach in an emergency...Many small acute general hospitals are currently under threat because of the strict interpretation of Royal College guidelines which specify the number of acute hospital services required to meet the needs of a certain number of people."

The Government said in the rural White Paper:

"We are committed to the provision of comprehensive, high quality health care for all those who need it, regardless of ability to pay or where they live, and to ensuring greater consistency of access across the country."

In reply to my written question about the assessment of ability of health services to meet national clinical standards in remote areas, the Minister said:

"Advances in healthcare and changes to the practice of medicine, particularly the increasing sub specialisation of doctors, results in changes to the way healthcare is delivered to patients. The Government are keen to see that patients have access to services at as local a level as possible but against this desire must be balanced the need to ensure that patients receive the highest levels of clinical care, wherever that care is provided."—[*Official Report*, 21 November 2000; Vol. 357, c. 160W.]

The Minister said that it is up to local providers to make that balanced choice. That choice will depend on funding. Resources will have an effect on the current review of hospital services in west Cornwall. My questions for the Minister concern her Department's review of the current funding formula for local health authorities. I believe that the formula does not adequately represent areas such as mine, as I said as long ago as November 1997, when I introduced a private Member's Bill. At that stage, I heard no contrary arguments, and I understood that the Department would examine the issue. Bed blocking will have implications for the future configuration of services.

In areas with demographic and geographic challenges, such as west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, what is the minimum level of acute emergency support that a local population should expect? Given the welcome improvements in national clinical standards, what assistance or advice would the Minister offer if the range and level of consultant cover did not match the advice and guidance of the royal colleges? In hospitals such as West Cornwall, where senior house officers cannot do their jobs and meet the requirement of the new deal on working time by August, can training posts be protected?

What discussions has the Minister had with the royal colleges about the challenges faced by isolated hospitals? Does the Minister accept that cardiologists may have to act as general physicians in order to provide full cardiology cover in remote peninsular settings? What should the commissioning bodies do when purchasing acute services if the main acute hospital at Treliske is unable to cope with changes to emergency admissions?

The choice for West Cornwall hospital is clear—either it receives significant investment to improve clinical standards or it withers on the vine. The local community wants the investment model, but we require the advice of the Minister to take the issue forward.

12.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ms Gisela Stuart): I should like to thank the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) for raising this issue and creating an opportunity for this important debate. On a more specific note, I was sorry to hear about his brother's experience. I hope that he is well on the road to recovery.

The hon. Gentleman is right to say that people living in remote rural areas are entitled to the same standard of high-quality care, focused on their needs, as national health service patients anywhere else in the country. For starters, that means more beds, not fewer, and providing treatment as close to where people live as is practical in hospitals that serve local communities and are focused on their needs.

We must also ensure that people in rural areas, as elsewhere, get care that is safe, appropriate and of the highest standard. As the hon. Gentleman acknowledged, there must be a balance between the convenience of local services and the requirement to concentrate expertise for reasons of safety and quality. That can be achieved by delivering care through networks of skilled providers who work together, not in isolation. The strategy must be based on local solutions within the national framework. Different patient needs call for different responses.

To illustrate the difficulty of the balancing act, I offer an example of a patient with heart disease, because the hon. Gentleman mentioned cardiologists. The NHS must be flexible to service the needs of such patients. Specialist services require a critical mass so that staff can gain experience of a variety of related problems. For example, the Royal College of Surgeons recommends that surgeons should perform 50 bypass operations a year, and cardiac surgical units should perform at least 400 bypasses a year. Having many similar patients means that error rates are reduced and junior staff get the guidance that they need. Specialised equipment such as cardiac ultrasound machines are found only in larger centres, because extra training is required to ensure their safe use and to achieve the best results.

There are two extremes: highly specialised diagnosis and treatment, and close-to-home convenience in the primary care setting. Many other interventions fall between the two. The person who suffers cardiac arrest and collapses in the street obviously needs an immediate response. In such a case, effective arrangements for speedy transfer and the availability of trained ambulance staff are what counts. Clinical evidence proves conclusively that early defibrillation and resuscitation save lives, so we have put defibrillators in public places. We must strike a balance between specialist care and immediate response.

That is one reason why the Government give the highest priority to the public receiving a 999 emergency response as quickly as possible. NHS ambulance services are at the forefront of the Government's modernisation programme. In March 2000, the Government invested an extra £21 million in the ambulance services to support delivery of the 75 per cent. category-A eight-minute target.

Mr. George: On thrombolysing myocardial infarctions, does the Minister accept that in stabilising such patients it helps to have at least a basic acute general hospital with emergency admission provision? Even if on-call cardiologists are not available there, at least the hospital can stabilise the patient and transfer him to an acute general hospital elsewhere.

Ms Stuart: At first sight, that might seem logical, but digging a bit deeper, what matters is the drugs that paramedics in ambulances are allowed to administer. Stabilisation can safely occur further away. Although I am not happy that the west country ambulance service

[Ms Stuart]

has not yet reached the 75 per cent. target that the Government have set, I am delighted that it has made considerable improvements in its response times. Its starting figure was just under 40 per cent., and I understand that, as of February, it achieved more than 50 per cent. That is an increase, although we recognise that the service still has some way to go. I am not suggesting that the circumstances are perfect, but we must strike a balance that is right and can be sustained.

The hon. Gentleman expressed anxiety about the future of the West Cornwall hospital, whose services the local primary care group is reviewing. I am aware of the royal college's discussions and report. I understand that the royal college involved the hon. Gentleman and made the report available to him.

The aim of that review is to achieve the best clinical care for patients. Even if difficulties are experienced in trusts working together, we expect local difficulties to be resolved locally, and we have made it clear that it is for local health economies to make the right decisions. I am assured, however, that the group does not intend to close West Cornwall hospital or its casualty service.

The review is examining the provision of more, albeit different, services locally. I understand that the review is being carried out as openly and transparently as possible, with full public involvement.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the minimum level of acute emergency support that a local population can expect. Everyone should expect to receive the best possible treatment in the most appropriate clinical setting. Local health authorities, working in partnership with primary care groups and trusts and other local stakeholders, are responsible for determining how best to use their funds to achieve that.

The hon. Gentleman asked about health authority allocation. Allocation is based on relative needs, and the matter is currently under review. However, an interim measure has been introduced. As a first step, for 2001-02, we have introduced an interim health inequalities adjustment of £130 million. Some rural health authorities qualified for that, including Cornwall, which received £3.585 million.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned bed blocking. His area has not experienced the severe problems experienced in some other areas. The money allocated this winter to deal with the problem in his area was about £125,000. We made it clear that health and social services must pool their funding so that patients are discharged.

The hon. Gentleman suggested that consultant cover in his area was insufficient. That is one reason why the NHS plan set a target for major expansion in the number of consultants. We are investing more in specialist registrars, which is the main feeder grade for consultants. The intention is to invest in new trainees and to target the specialties that are key to delivering the NHS plan and the national service framework targets, which include cardiology and cardiothoracic surgery. We will closely monitor the application of the plan and the placing of new consultants.

The hon. Gentleman was right to be concerned about the implications of certain measures for a reduction in the working hours of junior doctors and the effect on training posts in west Cornwall hospitals. Currently, junior doctors are excluded from the Working Time Regulations 1998, although such regulations apply to all career-grade doctors. However, by August 2003, junior doctors should not contractually be working more than 56 hours a week. We were involved in negotiations about how much time the European Union would give us to implement that directive. It is right to reduce junior doctors' working hours because it is not safe for a person to be on duty for 80-odd hours. The phasing process will create a safe working environment for doctors and patients. The working time directive is due to come into effect in 2004, and discussions will be held with the British Medical Association, the royal colleges and other NHS employees to make the transition possible.

Local health services face many challenges to provide acute medical and surgical cover in isolated hospitals. The NHS plan mentions the possibility of ending single-handed working by consultants by raising staff numbers over the next three years. I emphasise that working in isolation is not good for consultants' professional development, and is often not good for patients. We should not underestimate the opportunities afforded by information technology, which enables the exchange of patient records. Telemedicine allows highly specialised consultation to take place over large areas. That is not a cheap option. Often there may only be a few consultants who can deal with specialist conditions. We are pursuing such technology with great urgency.

We are committed to what used to be called community hospitals or cottage hospitals. They have a right and proper role, and the previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), stopped the closure of many such hospitals. They are vital service providers, and allow local health care to be delivered, extend intermediate care, and give patients a choice between home and hospital. Such services are more important in rural areas and require careful thought. However, they are also important in urban areas, although I accept that solutions reached by local health authorities will be different in each case.

Mr. George: Does the Minister think that it is acceptable for areas with a low population, such as west Cornwall and other peninsulas around the UK, to have a relatively high pro-rata number of consultants available to provide such a level of service?

Ms Stuart: The royal colleges and others suggest that smaller hospitals should reconfigure to provide a selection of services for the community, such as elective surgery, maternity provisions, paediatric cover and major out-patient services. Proper consultant staffing should be decided when the services have been decided. The number of consultants should not determine local service provision. Which services should be provided should be decided first, and then a determination should be made of what constitutes safe cover.

The review indicates that there is local good will and a consensus to find a solution. The royal colleges want to be as supportive as possible in finding a solution. We should not underestimate the importance of networks, such as cancer networks. I know that benefits are being gained in some areas near the hon. Gentleman's

constituency. For example, the Devon and Cornwall cancer network has decided to install at least one linear accelerator in Truro, which will reduce by 100 miles the distance that a patient from Penzance must travel for radiotherapy. Elsewhere, the Royal Devon and Exeter trust and Barnstaple district general hospital have joint appointments for oncologists.

It is important to recognise that there is no single model of service. I take the hon. Gentleman's point about there being isolated areas with limited support, but I hope that I have reassured him that we are doing everything possible to provide a framework for good local health service delivery that will serve his constituents as effectively as it serves people living in more urban areas.

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): I join the Minister in wishing the brother of the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) a speedy recovery, and hope that he is home with him soon.

Retired Miners' Compensation (Scotland)

1 pm

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): I am pleased to have the chance to debate what is an important subject in my constituency and elsewhere in Scotland. My constituency has a great mining tradition and was well known for its pits, including Cardowan, Bedley and Auchengeich. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Minister is visiting Scotland on Friday to meet retired miners, their families and friends, particularly at the Auchengeich miners club.

It is poignant that the Minister will visit Auchengeich, where, in 1959, there was a tragic accident in which 47 men died. My father had worked there and, having died at the comparatively early age of 53 from pneumoconiosis, he was buried two days before the disaster. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be touched by the memorial in front of the miners club.

I know that my constituents are looking forward to the Minister's visit. Like me, they will want to congratulate him on his new job and on the proactive way in which he has conducted himself since the appointment was made. We welcome the energy that he is investing in the serious matter of compensation for retired miners.

We realise that there are two important distinctions to make in the debate. Payments are generally made to those suffering from respiratory problems such as emphysema and bronchitis. However, we must also remember those suffering with vibration white finger, although if my constituency is a reflection of the wider picture, that is less of a problem than the other illnesses. Many of the problems in Scotland are common to the rest of the United Kingdom, and I understand that the Minister will reply to another debate concerning Wales either today or tomorrow, depending on parliamentary progress.

On 23 January 1998, Mr. Justice Turner decided at the High Court that British Coal, formerly the National Coal Board, was negligent and that miners were eligible to claim compensation for industrial injuries. To their great credit, the Labour Government fully accepted the judge's decision without contest, and declared that between £2 billion and £3 billion would be immediately available to compensate miners as early as possible.

That declaration represented a complete change of approach. By contrast with 18 years of non-action, the principle of fair compensation was accepted quickly and honourably. Ministers made it known that the money was available. The only issue was the implementation and administration of that decision to ensure that compensation reaches those who deserve it. That remains a priority, and our urgent task is to ensure that formers miners, who have given their lives to the industry and deserve that compensation, have their entitlement recognised as quickly as possible.

In Scotland, a total of 9,665 people with respiratory diseases have made claims: 5,963 are still alive, and 3,972 are deceased. In fairness, it must be said that some of those claims go back as far as the 1940s. It is worrying that of the 9,665 claimants, only 649 have received full and final payments, which is only a 6 per cent. success rate. More sadly, 656 people have died since making

[Mr. Tom Clarke]

claims. I know that the Minister is impatient about that. Like me, he knows that we are not simply talking about statistics, but about people. I sense his feeling of urgency about getting these matters right, and I welcome that. He is aware from his own constituency of the continuing concerns that people have expressed.

Many very ill people have sought to persuade me, without much difficulty, of their right to obtain that compensation to ameliorate their life style, which obviously left a great deal to be desired. The representations that they have made at my surgeries over the years have been compelling. I have been at meetings of my local branch of retired miners. The Minister's predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), met my local branch in the Auchengeich club early last year. Officials from the Department were also present and were able to make their own assessment of the problems that are still unresolved. I share people's frustration, because the Government's policy on these important matters has not yet been implemented.

I called another meeting in Auchengeich on 9 February. One of the most telling contributions was made by a woman from the nearby village of Auchenloch. Her father, William Robertson, had worked in Lamloch pit for 27 years, all of the time underground. He died the week before the meeting at the age of 73. This was to be her parents' golden wedding year. Three years ago he was considered 100 per cent. disabled as a result of industrial disease, and after that he underwent several medical assessments. Obviously, he did not get any better and Mrs. Robertson and others, myself included, asked whether those additional assessments were necessary. We want to avoid that in future. Mr. Roberston was on oxygen for the last seven or eight years of his life—both day and night for the last three years. The meeting was told that the offer that had been made to Mr. Robertson just before he died had been withdrawn. His daughter explained her mother's fears that she will have to start from scratch and perhaps wait for another three or four years.

I sponsored that meeting jointly with the National Union of Mineworkers Scotland. We heard from the secretary Nicky Wilson. I should like to put on record my thanks for the work of the NUM Scotland, and Mr. Wilson in particular, in bringing these issues to the public's attention, and for their remarkable efforts to ensure that every case is given the attention that it deserves.

I was also grateful to hear the representatives from Healthcall, Richard Castle, Alastair Sutherland and Dick Palmer. I thank them not just for their contribution to the meeting, but for their patience in dealing with individual cases. They stayed long after the meeting had finished to interview different people, and to make it clear to my constituents that they were committed to making progress. I thank them for taking the trouble to come and explain the urgency of what they are trying to do.

Mr. Lawrence Lumsden is a solicitor from Thompsons, which advises the NUM and individual miners in Scotland. The Scottish system of using the services of only one firm of solicitors is different from the procedure used in England and Wales, and I find it helpful. Lawrence Lumsden made a valuable contribution to the meeting. He stressed that DSS benefit recovery was

"a problem which should be addressed as quickly as possible."

He was concerned that even when people had been through the assessments, had had medical examinations and had had their cases confirmed, they lost out on benefits. That has been a traumatic experience for some people, and I hope that due time and reasonable discussion will resolve the problem.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's suggestions on how best to make progress. I offer a few thoughts and ideas, and invite his response. Does he intend to promote wider opportunities and special incentives? Recent initiatives have been taken as part of an urgent recruitment drive for teachers. It is clear from the evidence of Healthcall and others that there are not enough specialists to address these problems.

Would the Minister consider making payments to men whose conditions have been confirmed as the result of working in the pits and who are already receiving industrial injuries benefit? Would that not remove the need for further medical examinations? Would he consider prioritising payments to the oldest claimants, those who are most ill and widows? That would ease the considerable backlog, which we all want to attack.

I recognise that this could be a legal minefield, but perhaps the problem should not be resolved solely through recourse to the law: it should also be based on assessment of human needs and requirements. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister would share that view.

I was encouraged to raise this matter today by my constituents who are genuinely concerned about getting these problems sorted out as soon as possible. There are so many people suffering, and we are genuinely seeking practical solutions to clearly identified problems. People should not be playing politics with these issues. My hon. Friend has experience of Plaid Cymru in Wales, but I would not say the same of Scottish Nationalist party activities. However, we also have the Scottish Socialist party. During the long period in which we were putting forward case after case and fighting for the principle to be accepted—as it eventually was by this Government—I do not recall any participation by the Scottish Socialist party. Because we live in a pluralist society, I welcome its support, but suspect that the Minister and I and others will still be fighting for the cause long after that particular fringe political interest has disappeared.

Labour in government has established the principle of compensation, and I welcome that ungrudgingly. I do not wish to dilute what is an extremely important and welcome decision. I believe that the Government will continue to get it right. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will give us further examples of the Government's practical achievements, such as the new medical centre at Stirling, which I also welcome. I thank the Minister in advance of his speech and his visit. I know of his concern and compassion. He believes, as I do, that in this case, as in so many others, justice delayed is justice denied.

1.15 pm

The Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe (Mr. Peter Hain): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr.

Clarke) for securing the debate and for his kind remarks. It gives me the opportunity to acknowledge his diligence and energy in securing justice for many of the former miners in his constituency. We are all sorry and disturbed about the tragic case of Mr. Robinson. It is part of my job to ensure that such a case does not happen again. If my right hon. Friend wishes to draw to my attention specific aspects of the case, I will happily take them up.

We will look into the other positive and constructive suggestions that my right hon. Friend made, based on his experience. We are trying to recruit, partly by advertising more widely, a large number of additional respiratory consultants because there is a national shortage. I undertake to look at his other proposals, although I am bound by a court judgment, which has been both an opportunity and a frustration. We would not have started from this position. When the Labour Government of the 1970s granted compensation for pneumoconiosis, they were not constrained and straitjacketed, as they are now.

I am also grateful to my right hon. Friend for his invitation to visit his constituency later this week. I look forward to learning at first hand the views of his constituents on this important issue in Auchengeich on Friday, not least because of the close ties of solidarity between former mining communities such as mine in Neath in south Wales and his in Scotland.

I have been in post for some six weeks. I acknowledge fully the work of our Scottish colleague, my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), my predecessor. When I took over from her this mammoth task—we must not forget that it is the biggest personal injury claim ever made in the UK and possibly the world—I committed myself to ensuring that every claimant received his full entitlement as quickly and fairly as possible. Miners are a special case and that is why the issue is a top priority for my Department and for me. I welcome the opportunity to tackle it. Bringing justice to miners and to their widows is my mission and I shall do everything I can in that aim, working with all those who, like my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts, share it. I have met the solicitors representing the claimants, the mining union representatives and the Department's own contractors but, most importantly, I have also travelled throughout the country meeting the claimants themselves. They gave me the message that things have started to improve, but that much more needs to be done. I agree.

I stress again that we would not have started from this position, but we are committed to the legal process that we inherited from the previous Government and to a scheme bound by complex legal proceedings. I have spent the past six weeks questioning and re-examining previous decisions and proposals and I was delighted when on 2 March my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced that we were extending fast-track and interim offers to more than 6,000 claimants. That means that £30 million of compensation will be offered quickly to widows and to claimants likely to develop asthma; indeed, more than £2.5 million was offered to the asthma group yesterday. That is in addition to the 33,000 payments that have already been made, the cost of which has been more than £125 million. More than £360 million has been paid in compensation for vibration white finger, which is significantly more than the recent coal subsidy and the regeneration money provided by the previous Conservative Government in response to the 1992 pit closures.

The two major schemes are already receiving £1 million a day, but that is not all. I am continuing to explore how to extend interim payments still further.

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston (Mr. Clarke) on securing this excellent debate and on ably expressing the views of people in his constituency, in my constituency and throughout the country.

I welcome the Minister's recent announcement and the news that he will visit Fife on Friday. Will he be able to assure his and my constituents, and those of my right hon. Friend, that the majority of cases will have been fully and finally settled in a year's time?

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): That was verging on a speech, but I will allow it on this occasion.

Mr. Hain: The Government and my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire) are pursuing the same course of justice. I acknowledge her close pursuit of it. We are making massive progress and we will be accelerating rapidly over the coming months, so that tens of thousands of cases will have been settled by this time next year and the claimants will have received the justice that they deserve.

In the past two weeks, the Government and the miners' solicitors have agreed how compensation for loss of pension will be handled. We have made £400 million available for compensation for loss of pensions. That is the last piece of the jigsaw. Over the next few months, full and final offers of compensation will be made in tens of thousands of cases. That will answer, at least in part, the significant concern expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge and Chryston about the importance of final settlements and claimants who are still in the system.

On 24 September 1999, the Government and the solicitors acting for miners in England and Wales finalised and signed the handling agreement, which set out the procedures for settling respiratory disease claims. Prior to the signing, the Government commenced discussions with Scottish solicitors representing the 9,700 Scottish claimants to adapt the agreement to take into consideration the differences between English and Welsh law and Scottish law.

The Scottish agreement was signed in June last year. There are about 5,700 live claimants in Scotland. Healthcall, which is carrying out the spirometry programme for my Department, has contacted almost all of them and more than 4,500 of them have already undergone tests.

In October 1999, Healthcall was awarded the contract to deliver the full medical assessment process, which is, for many claimants, the next stage after the screening spirometry. Since full medical assessments commenced in Scotland in February last year, more than 1,500 claimants have been assessed at centres in Ayr, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Lochore and Stirling, and a further 150 appointments have been booked. In addition, 1,470 Scottish estate claims have been

[Mr. Hain]

assessed, or referred to respiratory consultants. So far, 30 per cent. of Scottish claimants have been assessed. They will soon be returned to the claims handlers for compensation to be calculated and settled, so that the cheques can be rolled out.

It is vital to get the compensation offers right, so that a thorough quality check is built into the system. However, as the process has speeded up and more medicals have been completed, that check has started to slow the system down. That bottleneck was identified as a priority by a regular review of progress and the contractor has now engaged extra resources. That will result in twice as many claims being processed to clear up the backlog, which amounts to 1,000 a week for the next 12 weeks. It means that more victims and their families will receive their money sooner.

Once the backlog has been dealt with, the Government should be in a position to process an average of about 600 medical assessment procedures per week, but I want to aim higher. Subject to the availability of lung specialists, with all the other resources that we have put in place, we will be able to handle up to 1,000 cases each week. As previously promised, wherever I find problems in the process, I will work with all those involved to implement speedy solutions.

I give just one example. Because of the special nature of claims in Scotland, IRISC, the Department's claims handling agents, opened an Edinburgh-based office, which has allowed Scottish solicitors to have more direct contact with the settlement process. In addition, the Scottish sub-group of the monitoring group, established by my predecessor to assess progress on the claims, meets monthly. Miners' interests are represented by the Scottish National Union of Mineworkers, solicitors and my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Mr. Clarke), to whom I pay tribute for his work.

From the spirometry results, we have so far identified more than 1,200 potential offers of full and final payments in Scotland. Of those, 650 have been accepted and paid, totalling more than £2.8 million. We have continued to make interim payments to ex-Scottish miners and their families wherever possible, which in Scotland have totalled more than £6.8 million. A total of £9.6 million has so far been paid in Scotland for lung disease alone. Compensation can, of course, never be released quickly enough when people are suffering, as so many miners are. We also need to bear in mind the fact that, with fresh claims coming in all the time, there could be well over 150,000 claims to settle. About 1,000 a week are still being received. We shall continue to seek every means that we can of reducing further delays. That will require the co-operation of all parties. For my part, I shall ensure that the elderly and most injured are seen first, which had not been happening. We are also prioritising widows who are claiming on behalf of their late husbands.

Progress on vibration white finger continues to be good. To date, we have settled almost 21,500 claims, 2,000 of which were in Scotland, and made a further 25,350 interim payments, 1,680 of which were in Scotland. In total, we have paid more than £235 million in compensation for vibration white finger, of which £15 million has been paid in Scotland. I am delighted that claimants will see further progress in the next few months, which they have a right to expect.

It has been a long and difficult road to get this far after years of obstruction and an abject failure to honour the justice of the miners' case for compensation by the previous Conservative Government. We can now see the light of justice burning at the end of the tunnel. Claimants have so far shown exceptional patience, far beyond what could reasonably have been expected of them. I pledge the Government's commitment to deliver for them. We have the machinery in place to do the work that would have taken the courts more than 15 years to clear, and significant sums of money are starting to flow.

As I said, a particular anxiety of mine is that younger, fitter men have been seen ahead of older, sicker men, because both the solicitors and the contractors, Healthcall, were simply booking people in on a first come, first served basis. Frankly, that is unacceptable. I have now insisted that Healthcall and the solicitors reprioritise those still in the system with appointments over the coming months. Even if that means younger, fitter miners having their appointments put back a little—which is less of a problem in Scotland than in areas such as south Wales and the north-east—I am sure that they will understand that the cases of older, sicker miners need to be dealt with first. Tragically, some have died, because of their illness in part, before they received justice and compensation will now go to their widows.

I, too, have visited many retired miners in their homes and seen the tragic circumstances in which they live. They are frequently trapped on the ground floor, unable to climb the stairs and almost unable to make the short journey from living room to bathroom without having to pause to catch their breath and to recover from a walk that the rest of us would not even notice. For them, it is a journey of miles. I pay tribute to those miners. We shall deliver justice. I also pay tribute to their wives, who care for them in the most difficult circumstances. This is about justice and dignity. It is about redeeming the debt that we owe to miners—and to their families—who sacrificed their most precious asset, their health, to work underground, so that we can live in comfort.

Respite Care

1.30 pm

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): A little while ago, a constituent of mine, Mrs. Muriel Briggs, came to see me at a constituency surgery. Prior to that meeting, she had written to me to set out her specific concern. She wrote:

"My youngest daughter, Rachel, 31 years, has learning disabilities through Down's syndrome and has respite care ... I am extremely grateful for this break of a total of five nights spread over four- weekly periods, and for which we pay the required sum.

It was not until 17 May 2000 that I received the enclosed notice showing that after a total of 28 days' respite had been reached there must be a break of 29 days without any respite care. I did not know about this and have had many, many months' concern and correspondence about Rachel's DLA benefits."

A recurring point in the various representations that I have had is that the 28-day limit causes much concern to many carers and results in a great deal of correspondence about disability living allowance benefits. Mrs. Briggs went on to ask:

"How can a disabled person who needs respite care in their own right as well as for their carer suddenly not need it for 29 days? To me it is a wrong rule of law by the DSS and I would hope you could possibly bring this to the notice of those in responsible positions to change the system. It would also appear to me that if an assessment has been made and agreement reached that such a person needs care, then that should be available without discrimination at any time, without losing benefits."

The notice that Mrs. Briggs drew to my attention was from Oxfordshire county council social services, headed:

"Disability living allowance care component (DLA)/attendance allowance (AA)".

The notice states:

"Respite care stays affect the entitlement of DLA/AA. Claimants are responsible for informing the Benefits Agency of any changes in their circumstances and can be subject to large overpayment bills if the Benefits Agency have not been informed.

After 28 days in respite care, the claimants' entitlement to DLA/AA ceases while in care.

A note should be kept of all days spent in respite care, the day of admission does not count and is treated as a day at home. The day of discharge, however, does count as a respite day. Once a total of 28 days has been reached then there must be a break of 29 days without any care admissions before DLA/AA can be reinstated for the next 28 day period."

I genuinely did not understand that. It seemed extraordinary that Rachel should receive respite care on average once a week for 28 weeks and then suddenly not be entitled to any respite care at all for an arbitrary period of 29 days. I wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, the hon. Member for City of York (Mr. Bayley):

"My constituent's daughter has a total of five nights respite care spread over a four weekly period, for which they pay a sum required by Oxfordshire County Council. It works out at approximately a day a week—invaluable for aged parents looking after a young woman with learning difficulties.

I enclose a copy of a notice sent to my constituents by Oxfordshire County Council which says that once a person has received 28 days of respite care (and as far as I can see that is 28 spread out over whatever period) there then has to be a period of 29 days without any respite care whatsoever, i.e. every so often my constituent, somewhat arbitrarily, has to go for a whole month without the benefit of any respite care at all. What is the point of this?

If a person is assessed as being in need of respite care, surely it is in their and their carers' interest that that respite care is provided instantly. What is the possible point, other than simple cost saving, of arbitrarily withdrawing respite care from time to time?"

On 26 February, the Minister replied:

"It may help to explain that DLA continues for 28 days after a person has been admitted to residential care, whether permanently or temporarily. For the purpose of calculating that period of 28 days, separate periods in care are linked and treated as a continuous spell if a person is readmitted within 28 days of discharge. This means that people who spend longer than 28 days away from the care home will be able to receive benefit for 28 days the next time they are admitted. However, people who spend fewer than 28 days away from the care home will either receive no benefit on re-admission or only the difference between 28 days and the time they previously spent in residential care. So people can only receive benefit for 28 days in total unless the relevant periods of residential care are separated by longer than 28 days."

Having studied that paragraph several times, I think that I understand what the Minister is trying to say, but I have the benefit of a lifetime as a barrister spent trying to construe documents and regulations. I suspect that the Minister's explanation is rather difficult for claimants to understand.

For those of us who do not involve ourselves daily in the minutiae of social security regulations, they can seem like a secret garden. In order better to understand the matter, I approached Oxfordshire Welfare Rights, an extremely good organisation which is based in Oxford and is partially funded by, among others, the county council. It sent me its benefit bulletin, which states:

"Going into Respite Care (RC) can seriously effect the benefits of both the carer and person needing care. People needing regular periods of RC need to plan carefully to avoid the loss of Disability Living Allowance—care component (DLA[cc]), or Attendance Allowance (AA), Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) and the disability premium payable with means tested benefits.

AA or DLA [cc] cease to be paid once a person has been continuously in *'special accommodation'* for 28 days."

I shall say something about the definition of "special accommodation" in a moment. The bulletin continues:

"Special Accommodation includes NHS Hospitals, Private and Local Authority Residential Care and Nursing Homes etc. Two periods in *special accommodation* separated by less than 28 days are linked together and count towards the 28 day 'cut-off' period."

Oxfordshire Welfare Rights also sent me a briefing, which states:

"Different spells in hospital or 'similar institution' will be linked together and treated as one continuous period if the person has been re-admitted after less than 28 days...Without a 28 day break the person is treated as if they are spending a continuous period in hospital, even if they spent the majority of the period at home. The need to have 28 days at home can have particular consequences where the person is required to enter hospital at regular intervals for treatment or requires regular respite care...

An illustration of the practical effect of the linking rule is on the organisation of respite care packages by Social Services. A typical package might involve the disabled person being in hospital or residential care for 1 week in every 4. Under the linking rule, after 4 periods of respite care, the person will be treated as having been in hospital for 28 days as the periods at home are less than 28 days...

The need to organise a change in an established pattern of respite care is difficult for the disabled person, their carer and the care provider to arrange. It is difficult for the disabled person and their carers to understand these rules and to make careful record of the dates involved. It is also difficult for care providers to arrange such breaks when they are catering for the needs of a large number of regular users.

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Oxfordshire Welfare Rights are regularly consulted by social services, Oxon Carer's Centre and other agencies about the effect of the 28 day linking rule. We have represented claimants at appeal hearings in cases where they have been overpaid benefit. The cause of the overpayment can be because: they have not understood the effect of the linking rule and have not informed the Benefits Agency of all periods in hospital: the Benefits Agency have given wrong advice on the effect on all benefits they are receiving: or the agency providing care has provided inaccurate information in reply to a Benefits Agency inquiry. The underlying cause has been the complexity of the rules."

Oxfordshire Welfare Rights recommends that the 28-day linking rule should be abolished for all benefits.

I have begun to understand that regulations have not kept up with changes in practice. In some cases the regulations go back to 1975, which was before the introduction of care in the community. Furthermore, the regulations tend to repeat themselves. For example, the Social Security (Hospital In-Patients) Regulations 1975 were drafted before care in the community, when people went either to hospital or—to use the phrase in the legislation—"a similar institution" for long periods. If someone goes into hospital for a long period, it is fair and proper that after 28 days they cannot continue to draw benefits that they may previously have received. However, the legislation was drafted before it was anticipated that people would increasingly live in the community and enter respite care for short periods of time.

I pray in aid the discussion in the 1975 regulations of "prescribed accommodation" where people reside as patients or inmates. Clearly, the legislation was drafted when people spent a long time in hospitals, sanatoriums or other institutions. It was not drafted for a time when care packages increasingly meet the needs of both carers and those for whom they care in a commendably flexible and appropriate way.

I ask the Minister not to explain again how the rules work because I now understand that. Having heard representations not only from Oxfordshire Welfare Rights, but the Disability Alliance and the Carers National Association, which I shall mention in a moment, I hope that he will feel it is worth examining the 1975 regulations to see whether they can be brought up to date to take account of modern practice, which includes care in the community.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): I have great sympathy with the hon. Gentleman's constituent. He acknowledged that someone who spends a long period in hospital at public expense should not simultaneously receive a welfare benefit that provides him or her with money that can be used to purchase care. I agree with him that in the case of a short stay in hospital of perhaps a week it would be unrealistic to cut off a benefit. Surely he agrees that there must be a dividing line between long stay arrangements—

Mr. Mike Hancock (in the Chair): Order. You are stretching into your contribution, Minister. If you are making an intervention you must draw it to a close.

Mr. Bayley: I am grateful for your advice, Mr. Hancock. I am trying to debate the issue and search for a solution with the hon. Gentleman. Where would he draw the line if not at the present point?

Mr. Baldry: The line is not currently drawn between long and short periods of time. My constituent sometimes goes into respite care for a single night to give her mother some respite—it is respite care for both of them. However, after respite care for 28 nights—the number is arbitrary—over 28 weeks, my constituent is not entitled to any more.

Mr. Bayley: I want to correct one point which the hon. Gentleman has made several times. The regulations do not, in any way, prevent respite care after 28 days. They withdraw the benefit that is provided to a person to purchase care for those days on which respite care is taken. The issue is whether benefit should be withdrawn, not whether someone should receive respite care.

Mr. Baldry: Whether the issue is the denial of respite care or the benefit with which to purchase respite care is a quibble. The effect on most people will be the same.

The Disability Alliance recommends that the simplest solution is not to count days in hospital or respite care cumulatively, but to count only lengthy periods taken at one time. Regulations could be drafted to make that distinction, so that someone who goes into hospital for a month or more would lose benefit after the first 28 days, but someone who regularly goes into hospital for respite care for a few days at a time would not lose benefit. I hope that the Minister will explain the logic of denying my constituent disability living allowance benefit with which to purchase respite care. She is not a young woman who spends long periods in hospital or any other institution.

I am not being quirky about the matter, as there is broad consensus that something must be done about the regulations. The Disability Alliance stated that

"the greatest hardship is caused where the disabled person's pattern of hospital admission"—

I believe that the alliance also means respite care admission—

"consists of a few days every month. This is enough for them to start to lose benefit but rarely does it result in reduced costs. Many of the additional disability related costs remain. For example, someone still has to be paid to wash the windows, clean the house and cut the grass. Special equipment cannot be sent back for a few days every month, nor can specially made clothing or shoes, extra insurance on equipment still has to be paid, the cost of home adaptations is no less.

For the carer little changes, other than a drop in household income. They still have to clean and do laundry for the disabled person, and time spent caring becomes time spent hospital visiting.

The administrative cost of stopping and starting two benefits is high. Even more so for a disabled person who is also on income support and/or housing benefit and/or council tax benefit since all of these are affected by receipt of DLA and are also reduced after a period in hospital.

The definition of 'special accommodation' is extremely complex as it is dependent on how the accommodation is funded rather than what is provided. This means that mistakes are made by the Benefits Agency and benefit is stopped when it should not be. It also makes it very difficult for disabled people and their carers to work out what the effect on their benefit entitlement is likely to be."

Finally, the Carers National Association made an almost identical point and stated:

"The 28 day linking rule can leave carers in poverty and extremely confused about the benefits system. Carers and professionals find the different rules very hard to understand. It is not uncommon for carers to be pursued for overpayment of

Invalid Care Allowance ... because they have failed to notify the ICA Unit of changes to their situation. Many carers are unaware that the few regular days spent by the person they look after in respite care, could mean the person's disability benefits and the carer's ICA could be affected."

The association concluded:

"The possible solution would be to make the qualification for ICA reliant on providing 35 hours care to someone entitled to DLA or AA rather than someone actually paid one of these two disability benefits."

It continued:

"Consideration could also be given to removing the disparity between the treatment of breaks due to hospitalisation and breaks caused by admission into temporary residential care/nursing care. CA would like to see the extra 8 week break afforded carers where there is a hospitalisation extended to situations where the break is due to a temporary admission to care."

It is clear from everything that has been said that the existing regulations do not meet existing needs under care in the community. They cause much distress, and throw up anomalies and difficulties. Lines have to be drawn, but surely it is possible to consult on improving the regulations. Will the Minister consider consulting organisations such as the Disability Alliance and the Carers National Association about whether it is possible to bring the regulations up to date to meet the needs of carers and others, but in a way that does not fall foul of the needs of the Treasury to ensure that benefits are not abused or that people are not receiving double benefit? I do not believe that those who go into respite care receive double benefit. Such an anomaly needs to be examined.

1.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Hugh Bayley): I congratulate the hon. Member for Banbury (Mr. Baldry) on securing a debate on this important issue. He has put his case clearly, and the Government will examine it. I hope that he and those to whom he has been speaking will also consider why such arrangements are in place. The hon. Gentleman said that the simple solution would be to pay disability living allowance to people who have periods of respite care of less than 28 days. That would be the simplest solution, but it would also be costly, which is why it did not commend itself to his party when it was in power and why it does not commend itself to the Labour party.

As a Government, we are keen to improve support both through the amount of respite care that is provided and through financial support to carers. We want to enable those who care for someone with a serious disability to receive the respite care that they and that person need. We must make choices about what that money can best be spent on to give the greatest possible support to the disabled person and to the carer. Respite care, as the hon. Gentleman said, is essential for many carers and disabled people. It provides a much needed break for carers who are often elderly and unwell themselves. It can be a lifeline in an emergency when a carer suddenly needs to be away from home and from the person for whom they care. It also provides a valuable change of scenery for disabled people.

Carers as a group tend to experience higher levels of stress than others. Short-term breaks can have a significant impact by reducing stress and helping carers to continue to care. In that way, respite care can help disabled people to stay in their own homes or, in the case of disabled younger people, to remain in their parents' home for longer. People generally want to live in their own homes if they can. For some, going into long-term residential care can significantly impair their quality of life, and can lower their self-confidence. It can lead to a decline in activity and to a loss of independence. The Government are keen to promote independence by encouraging the provision of high-quality domiciliary and other community-based services, including respite care services and support for carers.

Disabled people and carers are all different, so their needs for respite care will be different. When we draw up regulations governing social security benefits, we have to do so on the same basis for everyone. We therefore face a conflict, which we have tried to resolve by a mix of regulations. As the hon. Gentleman knows, when a disabled person goes into a care home for a short period of respite care, which has been arranged by a local authority, we continue to pay the care component of the disability living allowance for 28 days. For that period, we disregard the fact that the cost of care is being subsidised by the local authority, even though the person or his or her family may pay a fee for the respite care break. We disregard the local authority contribution because people have on-going care costs at home, which need to be met. It can also be disrupting for benefit to cease for what may be a short period.

However, resources for benefits are not unlimited. It has long been a principle that when someone receives care in accommodation that is supported wholly or partly from public funds, he should not generally receive benefits in respect of care needs at the same time. That is the reason for the rules that have applied since the introduction of the national insurance scheme more than 50 years ago.

The great majority of people who go into respite care have that care arranged for them by their local authority, as in the case that provoked the hon. Gentleman's interest in the issue. It is therefore right that people going into settings other than hospitals—such as residential care homes—should have the same rule applied to them. We are aware, of course, that when people are being cared for in a family setting, as in the case that the hon. Member drew to my attention, the operation of the linking rule is difficult. As a result, we modified the rule last year to reduce the period for which people are disqualified from receiving benefit. Since last year, neither the day of admission to care nor the day of discharge from care—or hospital—counts as days in care in relation to loss of benefit. That assists 50,000 people a year.

The Government's commitment to improve services for carers was set out in our national carers strategy, which was launched by the Prime Minister in February 1999. Breaks for carers were seen as a key part of that strategy. We provided an additional £140 million for respite care breaks over a three-year period starting in 1999. Since then additional funding has been provided to cover the years up to 2004. The carers special grant will fund three times as many breaks for carers in 2001 as it did in 1999-2000. The money available will rise to £100 million a year by 2003-04. That initiative will enable up to 75,000 more carers to receive a break.

[Mr. Hugh Bayley]

As part of the national carers strategy, we agreed to review the financial support provided to carers through the benefits system, which is the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman. Towards the end of last year, we announced a package of improvements to disability and carer benefits worth £750 million over the next three years. In addition to the package for carers, we will extend the higher rate mobility component of DLA to severely disabled children aged three and four from April. That will provide extra help of £38.65 a week. This year, we will also increase the disabled child premium in income-related benefits to £30 a week, which is £7.40 a week more than normal uprating. The disability income guarantee will be introduced in April, which will help 130,000 of the poorest and most severely disabled people aged under 60, and ensure an income of at least £142 a week for a single person and £186.80 for a couple. The measure will also benefit 30,000 families with severely disabled children.

For carers, the carer premium in income-related benefits will be increased by £10 a week more than the normal uprating from April. We are targeting resources on low-income households in which long-term care is being provided. At the same time, we will raise the earnings limit in invalid care allowance from £50 a week to the lower earnings limit for national insurance contributions of £72 a week. Those benefits have been widely welcomed by many organisations. Diane Whitworth, the chief executive of the Carers National Association, said:

"I am writing with great pleasure, to welcome the announcement last week which will boost carers' benefits...this is the first major series of changes to the benefit for 15 years. The measures provide a sensible balance".

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 14 March 2001

[MRS. SYLVIA HEAL *in the Chair*]

Rail Services (London and the South-West)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—[*Mr. Kevin Hughes.*]

9.30 am

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): I am sure that I do not need to tell you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that the past few months have been miserable ones for rail travellers in the south-west. The post-Hatfield investigation of gauge corner cracking and the worst floods on record have conspired to make railway disruption in the south-west the worst in the country.

Thanks to the engineering genius of Brunel, we in the south-west enjoy one of the best railway services in the country. In 1904, ours were the first trains to exceed 100 mph. Since the introduction of the InterCity 125 trains in the 1970s, it has been possible to travel between my Exeter constituency and London in two hours. The Minister will know that a travelling time of two hours to or from London is an important factor in business and investment.

Since Hatfield, we have been lucky to complete journeys between London and Exeter in three hours, and between London and Plymouth in four. Hardly a week has gone by without some stretch of the line between Paddington and Penzance being closed by Railtrack and passengers being shunted off the trains and on to buses. The main line between Exeter and Taunton is closed yet again this week, and next week it will be closed once more. On Monday, the important branch line between Exeter and north Devon was reopened for the first time since the floods in October. It was open for four hours. Deadlines were given after Hatfield, assuring us when the work would be finished: the first end date was December, followed by January, then Easter; it is now clear that the service will not be back to normal until well after that.

I recently attended a public meeting in Axminster, which is in the constituency of the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery)—not exactly a bastion of socialism. The member of the audience who called for the re-nationalisation of the railways received the best applause of the evening. I do not want to go into that argument here, as it has been well rehearsed elsewhere. I mention it merely to illustrate the depth of frustration and anger among ordinary west country people at the quality of service that they have been offered by the railways in recent months.

I have in the past accepted the argument that it would be a waste of taxpayers' money further to line the pockets of the privatised railways by buying them back, especially as that money could be used for investment. However, to quote a former Conservative Minister, I believe that Railtrack is drinking in the last chance saloon. I hope that the Minister agrees.

That is the sorry background to the debate. My reason for requesting it now is a recent decision made by First Great Western, which provides the inter-city service between London and the south-west, that will make matters even worse. Great Western, as most of us call the company, agreed some time ago to introduce a new half-hourly high-speed service between Cardiff and London. At some time in the past few months—we do not know when—the company became concerned that the new rolling stock that had been ordered for that service would not be delivered in time for the service to start in May, as scheduled. Rather than delay the introduction of the new Cardiff service, Great Western decided to take some of the high-speed trains that serve the south-west and use them on the Cardiff to London route. We in the south-west will have to put up with the old 1960s locomotives.

Coming on top of what we have suffered in the past few months, that decision is staggering. Great Western says that it was encouraged to make that change by the Strategic Rail Authority, because a failure to introduce the new Cardiff service on time would have been a breach of contract, which would have resulted in the company being fined. However, the introduction of the old 1960s trains in the south-west will mean a failure to meet maximum journey times, therefore a breach of contract will occur and, one assumes, fines will be levied.

The company and the Strategic Rail Authority say that only a small number of services will be affected, but that is simply not true. All services, including those still provided by the high-speed trains, will be slower to accommodate the slower 1960s locomotives in the timetable. Great Western's decision has been such a public relations disaster for the company in the south-west that the only possible reason for its being made is that the fine that would be levied for failing to introduce the new Cardiff service on time is by far the greater one. In effect, the travelling public in the south-west are being asked to make a further sacrifice to help Great Western out of a problem elsewhere.

What are we being offered in return? Free tea and coffee as we trundle along on the old, slow trains. Seriously, that is how Great Western representatives said that the company intended to compensate south-west passengers when they attended a meeting of the region's Labour Members of Parliament here at Westminster last month. As my excellent local paper, the *Express and Echo*, put it in a front-page editorial this week:

> "The cost to individuals and businesses in terms of their time alone far exceeds the value of elevenses."

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will agree that that offer simply added insult to injury.

Throughout this sorry saga, it has been extremely difficult to get straight answers to straight questions from either Great Western or the SRA. I am still waiting for replies to letters written a month ago. However, Great Western wrote to me last week, kindly inviting me to inspect the old 1960s rolling stock at Milton Keynes. The visit, which is scheduled to take all day, includes a buffet lunch. I have nothing against Milton Keynes, and I am sure that the food on offer would be delicious, but if Great Western honestly thinks that Members of Parliament have the time to go on a day trip to Milton Keynes to look at 40-year-old rolling stock, that says

[Mr. Ben Bradshaw]

something about the company's grasp on reality. I am 40, so I remember the 1960s trains extremely well from my childhood.

My fellow west country Members of Parliament and I want simple answers to simple questions. How much would Great Western have been fined for delaying the introduction of the new Cardiff service? How much will it be fined for breaching its maximum journey times in the south-west? Does the SRA not recognise that all our trains—not just those that will exceed their maximum journey time—will be slower? What efforts have been made by Great Western to recover its losses from the company that has failed to deliver the new rolling stock on time? If such a provision was not written into the contract, why not? How much money is being allocated to compensate passengers in the south-west, who are again being asked to bear the brunt of other people's mistakes? To what extent has the SRA been standing up for passengers? So far it seems to be more concerned about making life easy for the train operating company than for its passengers.

When Great Western representatives met Labour Members of Parliament, we asked about the wider issue of post-Hatfield compensation. Hon. Members will be aware that Virgin Trains, which also runs trains in the south-west, has been offering half fares in recognition of the disruption that passengers have suffered since Hatfield. I have already mentioned Great Western's bad joke about free tea and coffee for passengers on the old trains; well, the company told us that it intended, as part of a wider post-Hatfield package, to offer ticket reductions to some off-peak leisure travellers. That is totally inadequate; it is not the leisure traveller but the regular traveller who is not a season ticket holder who has suffered most since Hatfield, yet such travellers stand to get absolutely nothing from Great Western's proposed compensation package.

Just in case hon. Members feel that they have not heard enough, in the past few days I have been told that First Great Western is planning to cut the number of services on which it offers restaurant facilities. I have written to the company for clarification. In addition, I learned from a recent article in *Rail* magazine that First Great Western is seeking a two-year extension of its current franchise from the SRA. Unless the company undertakes a rapid rethink of the way it treats the people of south-west England, that will be unacceptable.

There are many reasons to feel hopeful about the medium and long-term future of rail services in the south-west. Railtrack and the rail companies have exciting investment plans for the region. We can expect faster services between Exeter and London to be introduced in a few years' time. Beyond Exeter, down to Penzance, even more time will be gained, owing to the new generation of tilting trains that can handle the bends of Devon and Cornwall much better. There is a prospect of more branch lines and stations being opened, and we can expect long overdue investment as well as improvements to the Exeter-Waterloo line. A railway renaissance in the south-west is in prospect. We need that desperately if our economic prospects are to continue to improve.

None the less, the current situation is dire. The appalling rail services of the past few months, coupled with the devastating impact of foot and mouth, are beating the stuffing out of the region. Tourism—our most important industry—has already been affected by the state of the trains, and it now stands on the brink because of foot and mouth. In the past few years, Devon and Cornwall have had much to boast about economically, including record investment and employment. However, if we are to sustain that record, we can ill afford the impact on our transport infrastructure of the chaos of the past few months. On behalf of all the people of the south-west, I suggest that it is time for the Minister to get together with his right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and do what he does best—bang some heads together.

It would be an understatement if I were to say that the managements of First Great Western, Railtrack and the SRA have not exactly covered themselves in glory in the past few months. By way of an aside, may I ask whether it is really acceptable that it is impossible to get anyone at those organisations to answer the telephone after 5.30 pm? All three have shown scant regard—nay, contempt—for the people whom they are supposed to serve: the travelling public. Their recent performance does not give me confidence that they can bring about the railway revival that the country and the Government want, but I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister can persuade me otherwise.

9.42 am

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I am sure that all hon. Members present congratulate the hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) on being imaginative and fortunate enough to secure a one-and-a-half-hour debate this morning. I should really call the hon. Gentleman my hon. Friend, because I have known him since he was 12. His family have a home in my constituency not far from where I used to live. I pay tribute to his growth and development and to his ability, now that he has reached the age of 40, to make such a splendid speech. I knew when I saw him at the age of 12 that he had a great future ahead of him.

All those who work and live in the west country and those of us with constituencies there are sadly aware that the hon. Gentleman's speech was spot on. It is extremely unfortunate that his description of the situation is so accurate. It is not only rail that has been devastated. The Automobile Association has said:

> "The South West...remains remote and isolated. Expenditure per kilometre of local roads is the lowest of any region of England."

I am glad of the debate because it enables me to voice my concern about the transport network and transport infrastructure into the west country. I am not interested in blaming the Government, but in making them aware of the problems. I ask the Minister to look to the future and to find solutions. The debate provides an opportunity, not to ascribe blame, but to lay down markers as to ways in which we might resolve the problems.

The need for new railway lines is a major issue. I am a great train buff who wonders at Brunel's imagination in building a magnificent and scenic rail route between Exeter and Plymouth. The feat of engineering involved

in driving that railway along the cliffs above the sea is amazing. In the past few years, Dawlish has suffered the effects of global warming: the encroaching sea constantly buffets the embankment there, damaging the track and necessitating regular closure. Railtrack has spent hundreds of thousands of pounds to shore up the gaps, but we know what will happen—King Canute did not succeed either. The sea will win when it wants to: not only will it destroy the track at Dawlish, but it will cut off the whole of the west country from main line traffic.

The Dawlish line is now the only one into Newton Abbot, Totnes, Plymouth and all stations to Penzance. Before the Beeching cuts, there was track between Exeter and Okehampton which continued to Plymouth. The Government must consider the introduction of new track before the sea washes away the existing structure. The area suffers damage from causes other than the sea; a few months ago an 80-tonne rock fell on the track at Teignmouth, which again caused the closure of the rail link near Dawlish. That incident was attributed to the change in rainfall patterns.

While I do not blame the Minister, I urge him to press Railtrack and all those involved in transport to plan a new route into Devon and Cornwall. I suggested—not without meeting the criticism that is typical in this country, especially from Liberal Democrats—the building of a new track alongside the A38 between Plymouth and Exeter. The two-hour mark is important between the capital and principal cities, but the two-and-a-half-hour mark is equally important. It should be possible to get from Plymouth to London in two and a half hours if new track were built through Haldon Hill, along the A38, straight into Plymouth. I am not wedded to that exact route, but I am wedded to the opening up of the west country. I want a commercial growth corridor to develop between Bristol and Plymouth that is as important as the existing London to Bristol corridor.

An increasing number of companies will not contemplate relocating in the west country because of the transport infrastructure. One company in my constituency is building an extension in Texas, because the work force and the transportation there are better than it can hope to find if it builds a factory in Totnes. A first-rate public transport infrastructure for the region is long overdue.

The Government might be concerned, as I am, about the multimodal study that was set up some two years ago to examine transport needs in the south-west. Rumour has it that there has not yet been a report, and that when it comes its proposed solution to our transport problems will be tolls on roads, no more rail, no more new roads and the focus of the west country to concentrate on Bristol rather than Plymouth and Exeter. I hope that the Minister will tell us that I am hopelessly wrong and that the multimodal study, whatever it is—it sounds like something from science fiction—will provide a more imaginative solution.

I have given the general background to the west country's appalling infrastructure problem in terms of road and rail. The future of rail is tenuous, and I shall give some vivid examples to support the hon. Member for Exeter. I am a great train user. I used to be a great plane user, having spent a long time in the aviation industry as lawyer, passenger and adviser to several airlines. I was persuaded by First Great Western to change my habits and no longer fly from Plymouth to London. My decision to go by train was also influenced by British Airways, which packed in the Heathrow link and flew to Gatwick instead without stopping at Exeter any more.

The beauty of the night train is that one can board a train at Paddington and stay in the compartment at Plymouth until 7.30. It disturbs one's sleep patterns to be called out at about 5 am in one's pyjamas and told that the coach will no longer come off at Plymouth and that one will have to travel on to Penzance or get off immediately. Several passengers, including me, found ourselves standing on the platform with our suitcases in our pyjamas and shoes on bare feet as the sleeper went straight down to Penzance. That became a regular feature of sleeper travel until I drew it to the attention of the excellent managing director of First Great Western, of whom I cannot speak highly enough. The trouble is that his railway has some problems, which I am sure that he is tackling.

Having stopped the Plymouth sleeper, there is now no hot water due to a problem controlling it. When people pressed the button, they either scalded themselves or the water came out cold. As the company does not want passengers burned, there is now only cold water. It reminds me of my school days, but at 6 am I would prefer not to be reminded of them. In addition, there is no heating. The company has decided that it is bad for passengers. Not surprisingly, I am now sometimes the only person in that sleeper coach. I understand why.

The former managing director of West Country Television keeps me advised of his transport movements. Since his company was taken over by Carlton he can afford to go by train, so he was travelling up from Plymouth on the 8.20 am train last Monday. He rang me at 14.20hrs, having reached only Reading after a six-hour journey. I make that journey regularly and I can confirm that it now takes longer to travel from London to Plymouth than it did in the 1930s.

We should go back to the 1930s—get rid of Railtrack and First Great Western and have some steam engines back. For steam engine buffs such as me, there are two lines in my constituency, one between Buckfastleigh and Totnes and the other linking Kingswear, Churston, Paignton and Torquay. Why not go back to the age of steam? It cannot be worse than our experience under First Great Western. The rolling stock is 25 years old. As the hon. Member for Exeter said, instead of its being repaired, we shall be given a tour of the coaches at Wolverton and shown how wonderful they are. I have always wanted to go to Wolverton. I am told that it is near Milton Keynes.

Travelling first class to Plymouth by train is more expensive than flying Apex to Gibraltar. It costs more to travel first class to Plymouth than to travel to any European city on an excursion return ticket with a major airline. A first-class ticket to Plymouth costs £176—and the price seems to go up by the day. When one buys a ticket at Paddington station, one expects to travel by train; if one wants to go by bus, one buys a ticket at Victoria coach station for about a quarter of the price of a rail ticket. However, every time I buy a rail ticket, I find myself travelling by bus. I sometimes wonder whether buying a bus ticket would result in one ending up travelling by rail.

[Mr. Anthony Steen]

First Great Western says that one of the problems of investing in new rolling stock is that its franchise is not long enough and that a 20-year franchise is needed to make such an investment pay. I hope that the Minister will consider that point seriously, whichever company takes on the franchise. I wish to declare an interest: I am a shareholder in First Great Western—but it has been a very bad investment.

I am sure that the Minister has got the message from me and from the hon. Member for Exeter, although the hon. Gentleman's message is slightly different from mine. I am a great supporter of the railways, of the managing director of First Great Western and of the west country. We must ensure that we have the right infrastructure and that Railtrack and First Great Western deliver a proper 21st-century service to the people of the west country.

9.56 am

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) on achieving this important debate. Transport is necessary to all Members of Parliament, to allow us to travel between Westminster and our constituencies, but it is especially important to those of us who live in the further-flung constituencies.

As we often have to be in two or three places at once, it would useful to have a TARDIS, and I wonder whether the Minister would consider investing in some research and development along those lines. The hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) said that the multimodal transport study sounded rather like science fiction. Perhaps that is what we need. We certainly need to look to the future for transport in the south-west, and I was pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman mention some of the long-term strategic solutions.

The matters raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter are pressing. He referred to the frustration and anger felt by his constituents, but those emotions are felt more deeply the further west one goes. When the outrageous suggestion was made that we in the south-west should use old rolling stock and that south Wales should have the benefit of our already fairly old rolling stock, the reaction of my constituents in Plymouth was one of extreme anger.

My fine local evening newspaper, the *Evening Herald*, reported that Kimberly Watts-Fitzsimmons, a 19-year-old student from Plymouth who had been planning to catch a train to Southampton, had decided not to make the journey because of reports of delays and disruption. She told the reporter that she would not have felt certain of reaching the end of her journey. She said:

"Replacing the trains with older models is so typical down here. It is as if Devon and Cornwall are not important."

That attitude is reflected in the outrageous suggestion made by First Great Western at the presentation to which my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter referred that a free cup of tea would fit the bill.

The Minister knows that transport is at the top of the agenda of the business community in the south-west. I shall use my few minutes to refer to a representation made by a business man who uses the Plymouth to Paddington line several times a week to take him to his business in London. He was kind enough to send me a copy of the letter he sent to the managing director of First Great Western, in which he says:

"We in Plymouth have survived the problems during the three months ending December"—

which affected the whole country—

"but these are now compounded by matters which I am sure are under the control of First Great Western."

He wrote the letter on 12 February, but when I rang him just before this debate, he informed me that he had not yet received a reply. That speaks volumes about the company's attitude to a very good customer who probably spends considerably more than £10,000 a year on rail fares. That customer continues:

"We do understand, and appreciate, the disruption caused by the flooding and the apparently defective tracks."

Many people were willing to put up with that disruption for quite a long time. I saw the effects of it when I visited the national rail inquiry service, where several hundred people in my constituency were valiantly trying to give out information so that both business people and others could make sense of the journeys that they had to make.

However, the business man goes on to say:

"What is making us extremely angry is the fact that even when travelling by bus from Plymouth to Tiverton Parkway we are required to pay a First Class Fare for this part of the journey both to and from Tiverton Parkway and are then presented with rolling stock on which there are little or no buffet facilities and minimal staff on duty."

He describes how in February he made

"a profoundly unfortunate decision in travelling First Class from Plymouth to Paddington on Wednesday morning leaving Plymouth at 0730 hours. It is obvious from the 'special timetable' that the service between Plymouth and Exeter is now treated as a 'local' service since it stops not only at Newton Abbot and Totnes but also at Teignmouth and Dawlish. On leaving Exeter the train was supposed to stop at Tiverton Parkway, Taunton, Bristol, Swindon, Reading and Paddington. In fact, we also stopped at Bath, Chippenham, Didcot Parkway, Maidenhead and Slough"—

all familiar to those of us who use the line—

"each time spending precious minutes, although the train was already running 20 minutes late, sitting in stations for no apparent reason other than I assume, to generate additional revenue. The most annoying aspect of this journey was the total lack of stores for the buffet since apparently they had not been ordered the previous day."

So much for the offer of tea and coffee, which is ironic. He concludes his description of the journey thus:

"Instead of arriving at Paddington at 1209 we ultimately arrived at approximately 12.50!"

That man goes on to refer to the company's plans to transfer all the high-speed trains from the Penzance line, but I shall not go into detail, because other hon. Members have already done so. He says that the lack of information provided to regular customers such as him is "intolerable and dishonest". He has spoken to several other first-class and standard-class passengers and says that regular commuters now refer to the company as "the late Great Western".

The train is essential to that man's everyday business. He was looking forward to an early reply and explanation from the company, but has not yet received one. Instead, he has had a reply from the rail passenger committee, which says that it will be interesting to see First Great Western's response to his comments on

first-class bus travel. I will also be interested to see it, because the company urgently needs to address that matter. The committee refers to changes and possible improvements in the refreshment facilities. Free cups of tea and coffee all round may be appropriate, but will certainly not be sufficient.

Mr. Steen: The hon. Lady is right to talk about catering facilities. A little leaflet was sent to me, saying that there will be a travelling chef on the service, but I get the impression that he will be travelling on his own because there will be no restaurant or buffet facilities.

Mrs. Gilroy: Perhaps the free cups of tea and coffee will give him some company for a short period, but he will have to do much more than that to have a viable business with customers.

I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the attention that he has given to my representations on behalf of constituents, particularly in connection with the deployment of high-speed trains, with which he will, no doubt, deal in his reply. I shall not go into the details of the rail passenger committee's comments, but I draw to his attention its reservation about whether the deployment of the old type 47 trains will give us an adequate service. In its letter to the business man whom I have quoted, the committee writes that its

"greatest fear is that an inadequate number of additional trainsets has been leased, with the result that even the reduced, slower, service will not in practice be maintained: there is literally no other main line rolling stock to be obtained, as it simply does not exist; all the more modern stock is fully utilised somewhere on the network. Given that 15 coach trains were once operated to Plymouth, pulled by 2 locos, there seems to be no excuse for overcrowding, but, if an inadequate amount of additional, albeit elderly, stock has been leased your fears may well be realised"—

that is, the fears of the business man that the company will not provide the type of service that it claims is possible, even with the elderly rolling stock.

I understand from the response of the rail passenger committee to the business man that Mr. Christopher Irwin, the chairman of the committee, has it in mind to conduct a public mid-franchise review of First Great Western later this year, and he urges the man to make his views known at that time. I in turn urge my hon. Friend the Minister to ensure that that mid-term review takes place, perhaps sooner rather than later. In connection with the fears of the rail passenger committee about whether the plans will in the interim give us a proper service in the south-west, I also urge my hon. Friend to impress upon the company that cups of tea are not good enough and that it must consider giving far more significant compensation, particularly in respect of the replacement bus service that is such a frequent occurrence, especially for passengers from the Plymouth area.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. I am pleased to say that, following a decision made in the House last night, four of us who chair business in Westminster Hall can now be called Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mrs. Gilroy: I apologise for that oversight. It gives me great pleasure to be able to refer to you as Mr. Deputy Speaker, Mr. Winterton.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced this morning that unemployment has fallen to less than 1 million for the first time since the 1970s. A few people may be looking with anxiety to the future of their jobs—and so they should, if they work in some of the companies that are providing such poor service to our constituents. I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend's response to the points that have been made this morning.

10.9 am

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I am delighted to take part in the debate, although I shall speak briefly because I do not want to intrude on the private grief of the south-west. We in Gloucestershire have our own difficulties, to which my hon. Friend the Minister has responded on a previous occasion, but I want to update the story and ask him to take the matter forward.

The issue of the railways is currently a difficult one for anyone who takes an interest in it, as we have been through a difficult year. I am pleased to say that my local service is almost back to normality, but we have, in effect, lost a year, as some of the proposals announced for last April have yet to take effect. We have had some pleasing news from First Great Western and from Virgin Trains, which wants to run a train through to Birmingham from Swindon—my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) is sitting next to me. We look forward to that service starting soon. However, we have lost a year, which is disappointing. Passenger numbers seem to be back up, but we have clearly not made progress.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will make a state of the nation announcement about the services that have been promised. That would be pertinent, given that the refranchising process has begun. By chance, I had a quick word with Mike Taplin of Gloucestershire county council last week. He is worried about the speed at which refranchising is taking place and, in particular, about the role of the Strategic Rail Authority. As a result of hearing his concerns, I tabled some questions asking for clarification about what is happening, with particular reference to the Wessex franchise, which has caused some concern. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw), who introduced the debate—I congratulate him on doing so—nodding at that. Those of us who are not central to the Wessex deliberations but are affected by them none the less want to know whether there is serious bidding and whether we will get an improvement in the service rather than the deterioration that some of us fear.

My main reason for rising is to repeat my concerns about a serious lacuna in transport provision in the south-west. The hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) has already referred to the south-west multimodal study of services between London and the south-west. I think that it is now lovingly referred to as SWARMS. I dread *Hansard* asking me what SWARMS stands for, as I am not sure who is swarming over our public transport system. Some of us are concerned about the way in which the railways figure in that study.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) spoke about the need for targets. I think that there is a black hole in Gloucestershire, down which the county disappears for the purposes of the

[Mr. David Drew]

multimodal study. To some extent, I am prepared to accept that in respect of roads, as I have strong views about whether we should build roads, but I would welcome comments from my hon. Friend the Minister about the strategy for the rail system, perhaps with reference to the august body that I mentioned.

I make no apology for mentioning once again the need to redouble the tracks between Kemble and Swindon on the Cheltenham-Swindon line, as doing so is key to the development of business opportunities. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton said that her local business people are keen on the development of the railways in the south-west, particularly in Gloucestershire. The Confederation of British Industry has identified the need to improve the line between Cheltenham and Swindon as the most important factor in holding back business development in the area, and general customers agree, so I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to re-examine the proposals. I know that, at long last, discussions are taking place behind the scenes, and I have managed to work with Mike Obst of Gloucestershire county council to push redoubling up the transport planning and political agenda.

People have been frustrated and disappointed in their attempts to get trains running and to improve services. I have tried to meet Railtrack, the SRA and the train operating companies, with mixed success. It is most disappointing to find that they do not even talk to one another—or, if they do, they come back with slightly different messages, which is unacceptable. Will my hon. Friend the Minister kickstart proper discussions to ensure that we have a 21st-century rail service that can actually move people around? Such discussions would enable those in my parochial backyard to see that our rail service could be useful and something of which we are genuinely proud.

10.16 am

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I congratulate the hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) on securing today's debate. I should declare an interest as a small shareholder in the South Devon and Torbay Steam Railway Society, which gives me a dividend of roughly £2 a year, on which I pay about 40p in tax.

There are three railway lines or routes into the far south-west, which I will split into the London to Exeter and the Exeter thereon parts. First, there is the front-door route, which is the old Brunel route from Paddington via Westbury to Exeter. Secondly, there is the side-door Paddington to Exeter via Bristol line, which train operators have been using recently to project that they are adding more services, whereas in fact they are merely increasing journey times to London from the south-west, which makes them less useful, and adding more London to Bristol services. Thirdly, there is the back-door line—the old Southern Railway route from Waterloo to Exeter—on which some operators go beyond Exeter. There is a daily service from Paignton and from Penzance to Waterloo. The service from Exeter to the rest of the county includes several branch lines—the Barnstaple, Exmouth and Torbay branch lines—and the rest of the main line to Plymouth.

There is a wonderful opportunity for competition in a privatised railway service because of the alternative routes in and out of the region. The problem is that the infrastructure on all routes is old and decrepit and that necessary investment is taking place on only the side-door route, which is the route that we do not want because it is the least direct and has potentially the longest journey time. A number of old routes have fallen into disrepair: the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) mentioned the old route via Okehampton; there was another route past Exeter—an alternative to Newton Abbot—that went through the Teign valley and linked Christow, Ashburton and Buckfastleigh, but that is long gone, mostly built over and impossible to bring back. New routes that would speed up journey times have also been suggested. One is to take the line between Exeter and Newton Abbot through Haldon Hill to bypass the seaside route, which would be an extraordinarily expensive feat of engineering, but probably no more so in modern terms than Brunel's seaboard route.

The hon. Member for Totnes suggested bypassing that route all the way to Plymouth, but that would also bypass Totnes and the great railway town of Newton Abbot. In talks with Railtrack representatives on Monday about the possibility of such a plan, they said that it could be done. A feasibility study would be needed, the permission of all the landowners along the route would have to be sought and the councils involved would have to be consulted; then, assuming that a funding package could be assembled, such a scheme might be possible in three decades. It is a long-term proposal, which my constituents would oppose as we already lie on a branch line some distance from the main route. The hon. Gentleman's proposal would put us even further away from that route than we are now.

However, Railtrack assured me that the work being done on the coastal route between Exeter and Newton Abbot is both substantial and successful and should see the line safely through at least the next two decades. The foundations are being underpinned to prevent further slippage of the ballast upon which the rails rest, which can be breached in strong storm conditions. Thus, there is a future for that stretch of railway, which is considered by many in the west country to be our shop window—the starter for journeys into the west country that whets people's appetite for the rolling hills and the beauty further down the track. The important thing is to reduce journey times, to increase reliability and to ensure that there is a good, modern link with the capital.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): My hon. Friend will recall our discussion with Railtrack in which it was made clear that the long-term prospects of major rerouting in three decades—the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) may be prepared to wait for 30 years but most of us are not—ran the risk of diverting attention from action that is necessary now and of insufficient sums being spent on upgrading the route and tackling the various engineering difficulties throughout Cornwall. My hon. Friend, inadvertently, did not mention the route beyond Plymouth, which is extremely important. No doubt he will come to it in a moment.

Mr. Sanders: I certainly was going to mention it. My hon. Friend knows that to get anywhere else by rail, people in Cornwall must go through the beautiful county of Devon, so whatever happens there is crucial to the future of rail services the other side of the Tamar.

The Government and the companies must consider the three options and decide which route to invest in. For example, there is more likely to be a future for the Paddington-Bristol line than for the Westbury line, which links only to Taunton. The Paddington-Bristol line goes on to Wales, or north to Gloucestershire and other destinations, or south into Somerset. There is more potential business in that line and a greater return on investment is likely.

The Waterloo line is the most overlooked. Large parts of the line between Yeovil junction and Exeter are single track because one part of the track was ripped up in a cost-cutting exercise about 20 years ago. If it was double-tracked, it would speed up journey times. If services could be introduced on a double-tracked line on the Waterloo route and the train became an express service after it had passed through Devon and Cornwall, journey times would be significantly reduced to the point where competition would be possible with the fastest times on the Paddington route. That sort of competition in the railway services linking Devon with the rest of the country would lead to an increase in passenger numbers and inward investment, and Adjournment debates such as this one would become unnecessary.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's response. As he knows from my correspondence about the need for a Kingskerswell bypass and improved road building on the A303-A30, which is still short of dual carriageway into the capital, the west country is poorly served by road as well as rail. The railway line north of Exeter has vulnerable points at Cowley bridge: when the water rises too high and the bridge is closed to traffic, all rail services to most of Devon and all of Cornwall, except for the Waterloo link, are cut off. That line, too, is vulnerable where it is single tracked, because there are no passing points when a train breaks down. That route must be examined—

Mr. Steen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Sanders: I was getting to the end, so it will have to be a quickie.

Mr. Steen: It will just be a quickie. I merely wanted to express my support for the hon. Gentleman's approach. I would willingly forgo my campaign for a new line between Exeter and Plymouth if existing services were improved. His views on Waterloo and Exeter are interesting and important: I agree entirely that competition is lacking.

Mr. Sanders: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. The water here is always more pleasant than south-west water—and certainly a good deal cheaper. I shall end on that note.

10.26 am

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): It is a pleasure to see you in your place chairing our proceedings today, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) on initiating our important debate. We have heard a sorry catalogue of woe that has had a tremendous impact on the south-west which as a region has not been well treated by Governments of all political persuasions. Our local authority grants are less than other regions' and our road network attracts less investment.

The clear point emerging from this morning's debate is the economic impact of disruption to the rail network. From London, it is possible to reach Manchester and Leeds much quicker than parts of the south-west.

Mr. Steen: And Madrid.

Mr. Syms: Indeed.

The economic prospects of the south-west are somewhat disparate. I represent one of the richer areas of the region, in south-east Dorset, and Wiltshire, too, is fairly well off, but as one moves westwards, especially as one passes into Cornwall, the problems of unemployment and deprivation become more apparent. Cornwall's picturesque scenery makes it is easy to forget how many problems need to be tackled in the county. Great attention is given to inner-city areas, but Cornwall has been deprived of the attention that it deserves given its economic prospects.

Lying at the end of the railway line adds to Cornwall's difficulty. The disruption that has been continuing for some months must have had an adverse impact on inward investment and on people with businesses in the south-west travelling to other areas to drum up business. It is a serious problem and I hope that the Minister will assure us today that things will get better.

The rail network has witnessed a tremendous 26 per cent. increase in passenger numbers in the past five years—due in part to privatisation and in part to rising GDP—which has put tremendous pressure on the network. Much of it is ageing after decades of under-investment, so it struggles to cope with the increase. Recent tragic accidents have led to a loss of confidence among both passengers and rail industry management. I will not describe it as over-reaction, but part of the fallout of the Hatfield crash is that the many repairs and speed reductions have made it extremely difficult for the network to provide anything like a normal service in any particular region. More recent difficulties, including the collision the other day and what looks like a genuine accident near Selby, have not helped the general situation. It is vital that the Government, the Strategic Rail Authority, the train operating companies and Railtrack do what they can to improve public confidence in a means of travel that remains comparatively safe. Rail is an industry of the future, not of the past. As I listened to the contributions today I reflected on the fact that if Isambard Kingdom Brunel were head of Railtrack, confidence would be higher and we would have made a great deal more progress.

There have been many good contributions today. When my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) started to reminisce about the childhood of the hon. Member for Exeter, I thought we might be treated to some stories, but we did not get that far. The hon. Member for Exeter set the general scene very well and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes described how it affects both him and other south-west Members of Parliament and their constituents. He talked about the difficulties of sleeper services, heating, water and ticket costs, and made a good point about buying tickets to travel on the train and finding himself on the bus and vice versa. It has been a good debate.

[Mr. Syms]

The SRA made an announcement yesterday about its future plans. It unveiled a £60 billion overhaul of the railways, although it warned that it did not think that Railtrack had the financial and management capability to carry out much of what it regarded as the future. There has been press speculation about disagreements between Sir Alastair Morton and the Department, so the Minister might take this opportunity to express confidence in the Government's appointee. Hon. Members would be interested to hear any comments about that announcement and the impact that it may have.

The multimodal study has also been mentioned. This has been a wonderful Government for consultants. People have looked at problems, but they have not always come forward with solutions, even after four years of Labour Government. We shall look to the Minister for an indication of when the study will report and what solutions it might offer to the difficult traffic problems in the south-west. We need clear answers on those matters from the Minister.

There is no doubt that the disruption, particularly the problems with First Great Western, has greatly upset people in the south-west. Many hon. Members have full mailbags on the subject. In view of the assurances that had been given, I have asked Ministers at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions whether Easter will be the date for getting the rail network back to normal. Is that still the date or has it slipped again? A number of hon. Members pointed out that we were originally told December, then January and now Easter.

It is particularly important that we get the rail network back by Easter, because it is an important time of the year for the many people working in the tourist industry. Foot and mouth in rural areas is having a dreadful effect on the tourist industry. Until the rail network gets back to normal, those areas that are not affected by foot and mouth but that rely on tourism, such as Torquay and other places in the south-west, will be in difficulty. The Government must give assurances that the network will return to normal, that passengers can be confident that they will arrive at their destination at about the right time, and that the situation will improve, not worsen.

10.35 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) on securing the debate on rail services between London and the south-west. I also congratulate him on the forcefulness and eloquence of his speech.

The debate has been unexpectedly wide-ranging and there have been many valuable contributions, several of which reflected the considerable concern that is felt in the south-west about transport. I am unable to respond to them in detail, as I must focus on the key issue of the redeployment of rolling stock on First Great Western services, but I will study the record of the debate in the *Official Report* and write, where possible, to hon. Members to respond to their questions.

First, I must firmly rebut any suggestions that the Government have neglected the transport concerns of the south-west. In December 2000, we announced our local transport settlement, which awarded a doubling of investment to local transport in Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset. That included major schemes such as the north corridor for the benefit of Plymouth, the western bypass for Barnstaple—

Mrs. Gilroy: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: I will give way after I have concluded the roll of honour.

Taunton benefits from the north-west package scheme and Cornwall from the Camelford bypass. All those schemes have been warmly welcomed. I had the pleasure of visiting Plymouth and Taunton as part of the roll out of the announcements. Last week, I was in Cornwall to share in the county's celebration of its becoming the first county to receive a centre of transport excellence award. I also announced a £500,000 investment in bus projects in the county.

Mrs. Gilroy: I thank my hon. Friend for the investment in the northern corridor. During his recent visit to the south-west, he had a memorable experience of our air transport. I hope that he will continue to examine that important aspect of travel, as it is of particular importance to business travellers. It is crucial for business investment in Plymouth that our airport is extended.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The debate is about rail services rather than air services, but I am sure that the Minister will be able to slip in a response.

Mr. Hill: It was our recognition of the importance of those airport facilities that led to the announcement on the Plymouth north corridor transport scheme, and I am grateful for my hon. Friend's welcome for that news.

I was aware of the concern of my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter about the late delivery of new class 180 rolling stock, which has necessitated the transfer of rolling stock to the Cardiff route. I have corresponded with him on the issue, as has the SRA. The House is aware that the Government are unhappy with the performance of rolling stock manufacturers. Last year, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister asked Sir Alastair Morton, the chairman of the SRA, to set up a pan-industry working group to identify and tackle the problems being encountered in bringing new stock into service. Although some progress has been made, the problems on Great Western show that there is much more to do.

I assure hon. Members that Ministers will continue to put pressure on rolling stock manufacturers and make it clear that their performance in delivering new stock is unacceptable. Manufacturers must ensure that they provide new stock on time and that it is reliable from the outset. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister will soon meet rolling stock manufacturers and other key players in the rolling stock acceptance process to ensure that efforts to improve delivery times and reliability are redoubled.

Mr. Steen: What is the problem in the manufacture of rolling stock? Is there a technical problem? Is there no

money in the business? Are there no companies in this country that make it? I do not understand what the problem is.

Mr. Hill: In fact, few companies in the United Kingdom make rolling stock. Much of it is delivered by companies based in Belgium, Canada and Switzerland, and one problem is that the companies are unused to delivering new rolling stock to the British rail system. Notwithstanding the difficulties that we have experienced with the railway system in recent years, the problem is actually a positive reflection of the system's expansion, because new demands are being placed on rolling stock manufacturers.

There are also technical considerations. In carrying out trials, long lengths of track are required so that adequate speeds can be built up to test stock, but such track does not exist in this country—it is available in Switzerland, but not in the United Kingdom. We are working on the possibility of securing provision that would aid proper testing in advance of the delivery of rolling stock. The subject is an interesting one, and I dare say that the hon. Gentleman and I could discuss it at length, but I must return to the key issues that concern my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter.

As my hon. Friend knows, the transfer of rolling stock has been brought about by the delay in delivery of the class 180 rolling stock. As a result, First Great Western has been forced to implement contingency plans to enable it to meet franchise commitments. First Great Western has a franchise commitment to provide a half-hourly service from London to Cardiff via Bristol from May; currently, the service is hourly for most of the day. To meet the commitment, First Great Western will, as a stopgap, transfer to the Cardiff route some of its high-speed trains that are currently in use on services to the south-west. Locomotive-hauled carriages with class 47 locomotives will, in turn, be introduced as a stopgap on some services to the south-west.

Although it is clearly not ideal, the SRA has agreed to the transfer of rolling stock because it was thought to be the most appropriate way to enable First Great Western to meet its franchise commitments and minimise disruption to passengers. High-speed trains running at 125 mph are required on the Cardiff route to meet the commitment to a half-hourly service, which would not be possible using locomotive-hauled stock that has a maximum speed of only 95 mph. The two high-speed train sets that will be transferred will be used to provide eight services on the London to Cardiff route—four in each direction. First Great Western is able to provide the full timetable only by transferring stock.

Mr. Sanders: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hill: With respect, I will not. Should the relatively limited time available allow, I shall return to the hon. Gentleman, because I want to talk about Waterloo.

The effect on services to the west of England will be relatively minor. At present, there are 16 services to Plymouth in the timetable, seven of which continue to Penzance; in the opposite direction, 14 services are provided, of which seven start at Penzance. Mathematicians in the Chamber will appreciate that that is a total of 30 services, most of which are operated by high-speed trains. Only two are operated by locomotive-hauled stock, and a further four services will be provided by locomotive-hauled stock from May; therefore, only six services out of the 30 in both directions will be locomotive-hauled. The stock is not a great deal older than the high-speed trains, and will be refurbished before it is introduced. As a result, the degree of comfort offered will be equal to if not better than on the high-speed trains currently in use. I also understand that First Great Western has invited representatives from several rail interest organisations to its depot at Wolverton to view the stock before and after refurbishment—indeed, the invitation has been extended to local Members of Parliament, and I dare say that the visit could be made without benefit of a buffet lunch.

Three out of the four services that will become locomotive-hauled from May will exceed the maximum journey time specified in the passenger service requirement: one will exceed it by 10 minutes, one by 12 minutes and one by 27 minutes, the last making three additional stops on the way to London, at Pewsey, Castle Cary and Newbury. The Strategic Rail Authority has granted First Great Western temporary derogations from the maximum journey times for those three services for the duration of the summer 2001 timetable.

The Strategic Rail Authority considers that First Great Western has made efforts to honour its franchise commitment to provide the half-hourly service to Cardiff despite the late delivery of new stock, and that the company has tried to minimise adverse effects on passengers. However, on the advice of the Strategic Rail Authority, First Great Western is considering compensating benefits for passengers in the south-west. I understand that it will release details shortly. I take the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter that the compensation offered should constitute more than an occasional free lunch or a cup of coffee.

The locomotive-hauled stock will be kept on lease for two years. Therefore, even when it has been replaced, First Great Western will have it on the sidelines for use for special events or when other stock is unavailable.

Mr. Sanders: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Bradshaw: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Hill: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) first.

Mr. Sanders: Why are the franchise requirements for the Cardiff service more important than those for the south-west?

Mr. Hill: I understand that key question and I did try to answer it. The answer in a nutshell is that to meet the franchise requirements for the Cardiff service, half-hourly services will be required from May. The services that First Great Western will be providing to the south-west comply with the passenger service requirements written into the contract for the south-west. First Great Western is not prioritising one service rather than another, but trying to comply with both contract requirements in terms of its franchise.

Mr. Bradshaw: I am extremely pleased to hear a suggestion that the offer of compensation may be about

[Mr. Bradshaw]

to be improved. Should not First Great Western compensate passengers for the full difference between the sum that the company would have been fined for breaking the Cardiff contract and the sum that it might be fined for breaking the south-west contract? Clearly, the first fine would have been much greater than the second will be. Furthermore, why do rail companies not write into their contracts with providers a provision that if rolling stock is late, compensation should be received? That compensation could be passed on to passengers, or, if necessary, the providers could be sued.

Mr. Hill: My hon. Friend has made two important suggestions and I shall follow up on both of them. I shall comment further about compensation and use some rather strict words in due course. However, I take my hon. Friend's point.

Mrs. Gilroy: Will my hon. Friend also respond, either now or later, to the point made by the rail passengers committee in relation to whether sufficient rolling stock has been leased to maintain services as predicted?

Mr. Hill: I am not sure that I shall respond to that point in this debate, but I shall follow it up in writing.

I shall now explore the relationship between Ministers and the Strategic Rail Authority. During my brief parliamentary career, I have noticed that Ministers are generally required to intervene in practically every aspect of our society, economy and public policy, despite the desire often expressed by all political parties to roll back the frontiers of the state. However, neither Ministers nor the SRA have direct control over the deployment of rolling stock. Rail services are provided under a franchise agreement, compliance with which is monitored by the SRA, having regard to Ministers' directions and guidance. Franchise agreements typically specify the outputs that should be provided, such as the number and the quality of services, but they do not specify how a train operator must provide such outputs.

If rolling stock is fit for use—if it has the necessary safety acceptance—its deployment is a decision for the train operator. The SRA has the power to intervene only if there is a failure to meet contractual commitments. Such intervention includes the derogations agreed with First Great Western for the three services that exceed the permitted maximum journey times.

Mr. Tyler: Will the Minister confirm that he and the SRA will be prepared to intervene if the outcome of the change of arrangements that he has outlined—giving priority to Cardiff rather than the south-west—turns out to be even more disadvantageous to the south-west and the predicted journey times prove to be overly optimistic?

Mr. Hill: If the service outputs set out in franchise requirements are not met, the SRA has the right to intervene. Ministers will scrutinise the SRA's activities in such cases, especially in the light of the powerful passions that have been evinced in this debate. I congratulate all hon. Members from the south-west on their forceful observations on the matter, which I am certain will have been carefully noted by First Great Western.

I emphasise that the substitution of the high-speed trains is a temporary measure. High-speed trains will be restored to west country services as new trains become available on the Cardiff route. I appreciate that my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter is concerned about the service that is provided to his constituents, but it would be inappropriate to continue to criticise First Great Western on that matter given that, in truth, it is reacting to the failings of Alsthom Transport. I hope that my hon. Friend will draw some comfort from First Great Western's efforts to minimise disruption and inconvenience. I also hope that the debate acts as a timely reminder to Alsthom to deliver the new stock as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend and other hon. Members rightly raised the need for passengers to be adequately compensated for the disruption that they have suffered and, in some cases, continue to suffer. I am sure that my hon. Friend welcomed the industry's announcement of two compensation packages worth £70 million for passengers whose journeys were severely disrupted by speed restrictions and flooding. Passengers who hold season tickets of a month or longer can claim up to four weeks' free travel. Weekly and daily ticket holders will be able to claim compensation under train operators' passenger charters. While disruptions continue I urge the industry to consider all compensation claims sympathetically and to deal with them quickly, but compensation packages alone cannot make up for delays and inconvenience experienced by passengers. Train operators must work hard to rebuild passenger confidence and I urge them to consider other ways to attract passengers back on to the railways.

I look to the future of train services in the south-west. I am pleased that a number of improvements to such services are in the pipeline. First Great Western will introduce 40 new vehicles later in the year, with a further 30 to be introduced next year. I understand that Railtrack and the SRA are assessing various options for improving the Great Western main line, focusing on the relief of bottlenecks on the route, which are a significant cause of delays. That work should bring tangible improvements for passengers in the south-west.

As for the franchise replacement process, the replacement of the current short franchises is essential to the delivery of a better railway. The SRA has already begun a programme of franchise replacements to put in place new contracts that will facilitate the achievement of those goals. Franchise replacement aims to secure a sustained improvement in performance and a step change in customer service through increased levels of investment. The SRA is working to replace the shorter term franchises, but has not ruled out replacing the longer term franchises, of which Great Western is one, should the opportunity arise.

Earlier this month, the SRA announced that seven companies and consortiums had prequalified to submit proposals for the new Wessex franchise, which will comprise services currently provided by Wales and West Passenger Trains in the west country and some of the services provided by South West Trains, including the line from Waterloo to Exeter referred to by the hon. Member for Torbay. The SRA has stated that one of the key objectives of the Wessex franchise is to increase track capacity on that line to enable a more frequent service to be run, thus providing an alternative to the

busy A303 and the Great Western main line. The seven bidders will now submit proposals to the SRA for consideration. The authority is encouraging those parties to consult local partners so that their aspirations can be taken into account in formulating bids.

South West Trains' franchise is also subject to replacement negotiations and the SRA is considering the best and final offers of three parties. It has stated that providing relief for capacity constraints on the approach to Waterloo is a prerequisite for the replacement of the franchise. However, with the transfer of the Exeter-Waterloo service to the Wessex franchise, the franchisee will no longer provide long-distance services to the south-west. I understand that a decision on the preferred bidder is expected shortly.

In conclusion, I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter and other hon. Members are encouraged by the planned improvements to rail services to the south-west. As today's debate has shown, there is still some way to go before we can achieve our vision for the railways set out in our 10-year plan for transport. The legacy of years of neglect cannot be turned around overnight, but through the Transport Act 2000, the establishment of the SRA and the £60 billion that we have earmarked for the railways, a framework has been put in place to turn that vision into reality.

Mr. Steen: With your permission, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as another three minutes remain for the debate, I should like to make a further contribution.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That decision does not lie entirely with me. If the hon. Gentleman wants to address the House for the second time, he may do so only with the permission of the House as a whole. Is the House in accord?

Hon. Members: Aye.

10.58 am

Mr. Steen: I am most grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the House for giving me the opportunity to speak for another two minutes. I do not expect the Minister to reply, but I ask him, in the spirit of support for all who have spoken, whether it would be possible for him to meet the managing director of First Great Western after this debate to discuss the issues that have been raised by hon. Members on behalf of their constituents; he should be interested in the comments of both individual Members and their constituents. Each individual point should be raised because the problem relates not only to rolling stock, but to Railtrack itself. Although the managing director accepts many of the criticisms that I have made and many of the problems that we have highlighted, he has encountered major problems with the way in which Railtrack manages its affairs.

The Minister mentioned the lack of management, and that is one of the problems that we face in Railtrack. We lack engineers, experience and knowledge. I do not suggest that we should import more than rolling stock from Switzerland and Canada, but we must address the shortcomings of Railtrack's management, which is compounding the problems and making matters difficult for First Great Western.

Mrs. Gilroy: Will the hon. Gentleman draw the Minister's attention back to his point about the role of rolling stock supply companies, especially Alsthom? We did not fully cover that in debate.

Mr. Steen: I shall draw the Minister's attention to that important point—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We have run out of time, and money.

International Sporting Events

11 am

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): This is an important subject that relates to the Commonwealth games in Manchester. It is desirable that Britain succeeds in bids to host major international sporting events. Hosting an event inevitably encourages a nation's people to be enthusiastic about sport, and we should all approve of that. It also has huge economic benefits, and increases a country's chances of winning at the event.

If sports bodies can persuasively argue the case for a national bid, it is vital that the Government offer firm leadership. Sadly, while Labour has talked a good game, it has characteristically failed to deliver. It has succeeded only in causing chaos, instead of offering leadership and encouragement. It has alternated between interference and head-in-the-sand indifference.

Nowhere has that attitude been more evident than during our 2006 World cup bid. Labour promised in its April 1997 manifesto:

"We will provide full backing to the bid to host the 2006 football World Cup in England."

The Prime Minister was quoted in campaign literature as saying that he was fully behind that project. However, the first sign that all was not well was the decision to appoint the former Minister for Sport, the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), as a special envoy. That was a puzzling decision, given that he had tabled an early-day motion in support of South Africa's bid to host the tournament. Labour was content to talk up the project for as long as it appeared politically expedient. At the first sign that our prospects were bleak, it wanted nothing more to do with the bid—it left the bid team out to dry.

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): May I assist my hon. Friend? In the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, I questioned the hon. Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks) about his endorsement of South Africa's bid. His response was that what one says in opposition is separate from what one does in government. That is indicative of the Government's attitude.

Mr. Day: Indeed. My hon. Friend could have been referring to many Labour policies, and its promises before the election and lack of delivery afterwards.

Nelson Mandela went to Zurich for the announcement of FIFA's decision, while the Prime Minster stayed at home. The hon. Member for West Ham has unapologetically admitted:

"I knew that if the Prime Minister came out, and we lost the bid it would have been portrayed as 'Blair's humiliation'. I could not guarantee we would win and for that reason I couldn't recommend he travel."

Such important bids require the attention of the country's leaders. Whether the Prime Minister attends should not depend on what publicity might result. That says everything about the Government's attitude and how they operate. Days after the bid was lost, the current Minister for Sport said:

"We never had a chance of winning".

The situation at Wembley has been quite a saga. Thanks to the Government, the World cup bid has given very little help to our chances of hosting future events. The Wembley fiasco has damaged our efforts even further. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) will provide further details, but I will briefly rehearse what has happened.

In July 1999, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said that Wembley, complete with athletics, would be the

"centrepiece of a future Olympic bid".

In November 1999, the Minister for Sport said that she would scrap the design if she could, because it was

"the wrong kind of stadium".

The following month, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport took the capricious, and much criticised, decision to scrap the design that he had praised so warmly. He later explained that the Government believed that they

"could secure our aim—the best long-term deal for football, rugby league and athletics—only by removing athletics from Wembley."

It is strange, then, that Sir Rodney Walker, who took over from Ken Bates as chairman of Wembley National Stadium Ltd. in December 2000, has said that

"architects are examining design solutions for accommodating athletics".

That is a history of contradiction and indecision, and all the chaos and confusion have thrown into grave doubt our hopes of hosting a future Olympic games.

A more immediate concern is the need to deliver on a national pledge to host the 2005 world athletics championships. The Government say that that will happen at Picketts Lock, but there is no design, and transport concerns have not been properly addressed. We face a race against time to get things ready by the necessary date. More crucially, there is a large question mark over the funding of a stadium at Picketts Lock. I will leave it to my hon. Friend to explain that further, but the Government's claims do not tally with what Sport England has said. As happened with the dome, officials might be made scapegoats for a fiasco created in Whitehall.

Can the Minister shed more light on the proposals to base an Olympic bid around a stadium in east London, at Stratford? Do the Government support them? Is it true that a feasibility study would cost £300,000? Is it also the case that the British Olympic Association cannot afford to pay for that and that neither her Department nor UK Sport is willing to pay for it?

Manchester is nearer to home for me, and also for you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Our fantastic success at the Sydney Olympics bodes well for our hosting of the 2002 Commonwealth games. Preparations are progressing well. The games will be based around a £90 million stadium, with a running track, built on an earth infill. The venue will hold 38,000 spectators. After the games, it will be converted for football use and become Manchester City's new home. That will please many of my constituents, a fair proportion of whom support City. An extra tier of seating, which will increase capacity to 48,000, will be built beneath the existing two tiers.

Sport England has made £114 million available for the games. The Manchester Commonwealth 50 pool, which is the swimming pool that will be used in the

games, received £22 million in May 1997. Eastlands SportCity, which incorporates the Commonwealth games stadium and the UK Sports Institute north-west network centre, received £92 million in March 1999. Central Government have pledged to meet the expected £10.5 million cost of the opening and closing ceremonies.

Local people are still worried that there will be a £20 million funding gap, which I understand—although it will help if the Minister explains the situation—will be passed on to the Manchester ratepayer. I presume that that means the people of the city of Manchester rather than Greater Manchester, but I would like her to clarify the point.

A Commonwealth games official stated that

"there is a real concern that there is going to be a £20 million hole and it is going to be very difficult to reduce that. The organisers have not attracted enough well known multinational companies. I am confident that the organisers could raise £30 million, but the problem is going to be where the other £20 million is going to come from."

Local people in my area, and especially those who live within the city of Manchester, are worried. The reluctance of companies to come forward is a result of many of them getting their fingers burned with the dome. The dome disaster has reached up to the north-west and caused a lack of funding from private finance. The promised Commonwealth games will be the biggest multi-sporting event in Britain since the 1948 Olympics, and the whole country is looking forward to it, but we need more than empty rhetoric, because the games will bring massive economic benefits to the Greater Manchester area, but will also bring economic concerns unless it is made clear what is to be done about the potential gap between the available money and the cost.

I would like the Minister to assure me that, although Manchester city council has said that it will underwrite the games, that will not involve the whole of Greater Manchester and especially not my borough in Stockport. A shortfall would be a disaster for council tax and business rate payers in the city of Manchester, but there would be extreme concern were it to be spread to other local authorities beyond the borders of the city. I hope that she will clarify the situation.

You share my interest in transport issues, so you will understand my concerns, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Because the Commonwealth games is coming to Manchester, I hope that the Minister will make representations to her ministerial colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to complete the Manchester airport eastern link road. The central section has been built, but it is not connected to the airport. I know that the eastern section—the Poynton bypass—is of especial interest to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because it will link the central section with the A6. It would also be nice if we could have the Hazel Grove A6 bypass in time for the games. It would be helpful if the Minister made representations on behalf of the numerous constituencies along the route so that the link road is built in time for the games. That is now unlikely, because the Government made the mistake of cancelling it.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee recommended that the Government review the finances of the games, so that the scale of central Government support could finally be decided. The most worrying factor is the uncertainty, at the heart of which is the Government's lack of clarity about what will be their level of real—as opposed to rhetorical—support. The Committee also suggested that the Government should involve themselves more closely in the strategic management of the games. Manchester's ratepayers will not have been reassured, thus far, by the Government's silence on these fundamental issues.

If nothing else, the debate gives the Minister the opportunity to set the record straight, and I look forward to hearing her do so. I hope that she will be able to reassure us about this important issue. I thank hon. Members for listening. Finally, although I am grateful to be able to raise such matters in any forum in the House, they should be debated in the main Chamber of the House of Commons, not in this mock Chamber.

11.16 am

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): I am pleased to see you in the Chair, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It would be strange to have a Wednesday morning without seeing you, as I normally would in the Modernisation Committee.

I came here this morning intending only to listen, but I am afraid that the final comment by the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) has forced me to my feet. It implied that Conservative Members do not accept parliamentary democracy as we do. The House decided that Westminster Hall was a good idea.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): Does not the hon. Gentleman accept that it is precisely because Conservative Members believe in parliamentary democracy that we believe that debates such as this should be dealt with in the traditional way in the main Chamber of the House of Commons? Perhaps 30 or 40 Members would then have been present, not five or six. If—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Nicholas Winterton): Order. The debate is about the staging of international sporting events, not whether there should be sittings in Westminster Hall—although on that subject, I am happy to tell hon. Members that last night the House took a decision, for which I am grateful, officially to reappoint myself and three colleagues as additional Deputy Speakers. That was long overdue.

Mr. Caplin: I fear that I am straying into business of the House matters, which is not allowed. Suffice it to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that with your guidance we now debate four times as many Back-Bench issues as before. That is why we have the time to debate this important matter.

I start where the hon. Member for Cheadle finished—in Manchester. I was fortunate enough to visit Manchester in January with several colleagues and the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins). I do not recall seeing the hon. Member for Cheadle there. Of course, you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are a vice-chairman of the all-party Commonwealth games 2002 group, in which I am happy to be the token southerner.

Mr. Hawkins *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I hope that this is relevant.

Mr. Hawkins: On a sporting matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman may have forgotten that

[Mr. Hawkins]

I am also an officer of the group, as the Member of Parliament whose constituency includes the only southern venue in the Commonwealth games—Bisley, where the shooting events will be held. He and I are the two very much more than token southerners of the group.

Mr. Caplin: I was never much good at geography.

During my visit to Manchester, I was astounded by the way in which preparations for this important sporting event are progressing. The swimming arena was first class, and we should have many more like it. I know that that is the plan of the Amateur Swimming Association. The design of the arena is superb, and it was in full use on the day that I was there. I have asked people in the city of Brighton and Hove to consider the development of the seafront area, which has some old, out-of-date swimming facilities. I hope that that will be possible.

The swimming facility in Manchester is first class and worthy of a visit from anyone. I was hugely impressed when I went to the main stadium arena. It was possible to gain the impression, even though the grass and track had not been laid, of a stadium that would be really something, not just for Manchester but for the whole country. The Commonwealth games are a celebration not just for the north-west but for the entire United Kingdom. The event will be a coming together.

The hon. Member for Cheadle rather talked down the city of Manchester, which was unfortunate. The people and politicians of Manchester have made good progress in developing the stadium and the facilities that they need. A comparison can be made with major sporting events in other countries, and they are way ahead in their preparations.

Mr. Day: I was not running down the city of Manchester. I think that I praised the preparation work so far. The uncertainty comes from the Government, not the city of Manchester. If anything I was standing up for the people of the city of Manchester and Greater Manchester, who may—although I hope not—be presented with a large bill. We need clarity about the Government's attitude.

Mr. Caplin: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I allow my hon. Friend the Minister to deal with those issues. She and my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, who has been leading the Government's task force on the matters in question, are much closer to them.

I accept what the hon. Gentleman said. I found Manchester first class. I had the impression of a city that was ready to stage the Commonwealth games. As soon as I arrived at the airport I encountered marketing and advertising about the games. When I talked to ordinary people, I had the impression that they were ready to host the Commonwealth games in summer 2002, and looking forward to it. I, too, look forward to attending.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Wembley. I was one of those who vigorously lobbied my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State about whether athletics should be included at Wembley stadium. My view is not a secret: I wanted athletics out. I believe that Wembley should be primarily a football stadium, able to hold rugby league and rugby union events as well. That is also the view of the all-party football group, of which I am an officer. We have strong views about it, which we made clear to my right hon. Friend at the appropriate time. I argued in favour of the decision to remove athletics from the plan. I thought that athletics confused the issue and would delay the project.

I have no problems with respect to the team that is now running the project. Wembley National Stadium Ltd. has a good project to pursue. However, Wembley is a football arena, and has been for 80-odd years—since it was built. To include international athletics would be difficult. There is no space for the additional facilities that are needed. As a local example, it was possible in Brighton this year to stage, for the first time in 30 years, the south of England athletics championships. That was possible because the athletics stadium had been improved, so that, ironically, football could be played there, but also because warm-up facilities had been attached. Those are a requirement in international athletics.

I know the stadium area well and it would clearly not be possible to provide the type of facilities that my hon. Friend the Minister saw in Sydney, about which a great deal has been said. I was delighted with the Secretary of State's decision. It was right. The challenge for Rodney Walker and his team is to rebuild Wembley so that it is ready for business as quickly as possible.

I shall work backwards through the points made by the hon. Member for Cheadle. The World cup bid was worthwhile; we will not be regarded as a serious player if we do not say that we want to stage such events. The outcome was interesting: it was decided not by Governments but by FIFA. The hon. Gentleman's accusation that the Labour party did not support the bid was futile. It was clear that we did support the bid. When I arrived in the House in 1997, I understood that the 2006 World cup bid was supported not just by the Labour party but by the Conservative party. Now that the bid has been lost, coats are turning.

Mr. Fraser: I have just come from the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, where the same subject is being discussed. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the comment by Simon Clegg of the BOA that the Government and the Prime Minister should have been involved throughout, and that we might have missed an opportunity to stage the Olympic games in 2012? The inference is that the Prime Minister did not get behind the bid.

Mr. Caplin: I have been playing football, which I find healthier than attending Culture, Media and Sport Committee meetings, so I cannot comment on what Simon Clegg said, although I have met him many times, including in the week before my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made his decision about Wembley. I told him at that time—before what has happened in the past 36 hours—that I could not see how the BOA could produce a proper plan to stage the Olympic games in London. I accept that events have since moved on, but at that stage no progress had been made on Wembley, so the decision was right. There are now new ideas, and I hope that the BOA can make progress, as I would like the Olympic games to be staged in London, if possible.

Like many others, I believe that the Manchester Commonwealth games will be a huge success. I hope that all political parties will maintain their backing and support for the people of Manchester and the north-west for the staging of this important international event, which will be seen in perhaps 50 or 100 countries. As politicians, we should say what we believe. That is what the Labour party has done with regard to sport. We backed the 2006 bid and lost. That is how it goes. We backed 2002 in Manchester. It will be a success. I hope that there will be a future bid for the Olympic games that we can also back.

11.28 am

Mr. Christopher Fraser (Mid-Dorset and North Poole): The hon. Member for Hove (Mr. Caplin) has a passion for football. The Conservative party would like to give him the opportunity to spend all his time playing football in the next few months, so that he can take up some of the issues that he has mentioned this morning. I shall report his views about the Culture, Media and Sport Committee to his colleagues on that Committee, who are discussing this subject. I have heard more talk of sport in the Palace of Westminster this morning—both in that Committee and in this Chamber—than I have heard from the Government since the 1997 election. That is a sad indictment of this Administration.

The debate is timely. In May, Cardiff will host the FA cup, having already hosted a very successful Worthington cup final. Although football has been thrown out of Wembley stadium, we are no closer to knowing what to expect in 2004. The millennium stadium in Cardiff cost £120 million and has already been host to world and major domestic events, yet estimates of the cost of the proposed new Wembley stadium are between £475 million and £660 million—I am sure that the Minister will confirm those figures today. The latter figure would make it the world's most expensive sporting venue. That cost compares badly with the £260 million paid to build the Olympic stadium in Sydney, which I visited with the Select Committee—we were impressed with what was achieved with that sum—and with the Stade de France in Paris, which hosted the most recent World cup final, and the cost of which was also estimated at £260 million.

Not only does Wembley appear incredibly overpriced, but it has changed its concept. The original concept was for a multi-purpose stadium to stage athletic events. The bottom tier of seats would have been retracted and a running track inserted above the pitch. The Secretary of State explained:

"It has hitherto been the desire of this Administration—and, indeed, of the previous Government—that England should have a stadium able to stage a wide range of the world's major sporting events. As the House knows from previous debates and questions, the consistent aim has been to design a new national stadium that can stage the premier events of football, rugby and athletics."

However, there were serious reservations about the feasibility of the design. One of the main causes of contention was that the reduced capacity following the insertion of the athletic track would have been below the 65,000 required by the International Olympic Committee for an Olympic bid.

A report prepared by sports architects DLA Ellerbe Becket raised serious doubts about the stadium design for international athletics events. The Secretary of State explained the report's findings by saying:

"In any likely configuration, the sightlines for large numbers of spectators would be poor, and in some cases could fail Olympic requirements; the seating space for individual spectators would be far from ideal; the roof would cover some lanes of the track and not others; there would be no portal for people and equipment to gain access to the deck; the east-west alignment of the track would be detrimental to athletes; and, for any Olympic games, the deck would have to be constructed and in place for at least a year in advance, which could render the stadium unusable for international standard football for more than two years."

He said:

"My reluctant conclusion from the Ellerbe Becket report is that the stadium as designed—or in any similar configuration—cannot readily provide the central venue for an Olympic games bid for London."

Mr. Hawkins: Does my hon. Friend agree that one concern that we repeatedly expressed—not during the time of the current Minister—was that this Government made the mistake of going for the trendiest, most fashionable architects and ended up with an appalling design that, when it was presented to hon. Members, was clearly seen to have all the failings that it took the Secretary of State so long to appreciate?

Mr. Fraser: One need only look at the dome to realise that one does not design a sweet wrapper without knowing what the sweet inside will be.

The Secretary of State continued:

"Furthermore, it seems unlikely that it could provide an appropriate venue for the world athletics championships, for which we hope to bid in 2005. It will, however, be able to provide the best venue in the world for the 2006 football world cup."—[*Official Report*, 1 December 1999; Vol. 340, c. 305-6.]

Three weeks later, the Secretary of State made a further statement, which is worth repeating, because it is important that we consider what he said. He said:

"Since my Statement to the House of Commons on 1 December, we have made considerable progress in resolving the difficult issues raised by the DLA Ellerbe Becket report ... while WNSL have successfully addressed many of the concerns highlighted by Ellerbe Becket, it is widely accepted that the proposed stadium is not the ideal for athletics. There is general agreement therefore that, subject to the satisfactory conclusion of further detailed discussions among the interested parties, Wembley should be the focus of a world class stadium for football and rugby league and that alternative arrangements should be made for athletics...In the light of the prospective agreement between Sport England, the Football Association and WNSL on a revised Lottery Funding Agreement based on the new Wembley Stadium being focused on football and rugby league, the Football Association has proposed that £20 million of the existing Lottery grant be returned to Sport England."

He explained that

"the return of this money to Sport England together with the sums Sport England had earmarked for financing the conversion of Wembley to athletics mode for covering any loss of revenue while in athletics mode and for the purchase of land and construction of the athletics warm-up facility, will give Sport England scope to consider alternative options for an athletics venue in London."

The situation is complicated, but that was worth putting on the record, because an awful lot has happened. The overriding problem of the complete mess is that a venue is required so that London can host the 2005 world athletic championships, because a successful bid was announced on 3 May 2000. That is fantastic for London, Britain and British athletics, but the nub of the problem is whether a feasible and worthy venue can be provided.

[Mr. Fraser]

In a statement in December, the Secretary of State suggested:

"Since 1 December, Sport England has together with UK Sport, UK Athletics, the British Olympic Association and my Department undertaken further work on the non-Wembley options for staging international athletics events in London. In this context, I particularly welcome the proposal from the Rugby Football Union that Twickenham be used for such events.

Constructive initial discussions have taken place between the DCMS, Sport England, the RFU and the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames. Sport England is taking forward further immediate work to establish the viability of this and other possible sites as the venue for the World Athletics Championships in 2005 and a further announcement will be made once this work has been completed.

This work will be carried out in close co-operation with UK Athletics, and the Government will wish to do everything possible to assist a bid for the 2005 event. Sport England will also assess the extent to which possible venues can be readily upgraded to accommodate Olympic requirements.

The Government remains committed to supporting a viable UK Olympic bid and is continuing its discussions with the British Olympic Association, UK Sport, and Sport England on the possibilities of a London bid for the Olympic Games."

On 25 March last year, UK Athletics chose Lee Valley park in north-east London ahead of three other contenders, including Twickenham, as the preferred site to stage the 2005 championships. In response to a parliamentary question, the Secretary of State said:

"UK Athletics selected Picketts Lock as the site on which to base their bid for the 2005 World Athletics Championships following extensive discussions with Sport England, UK Sport, the Government Office for London, a number of local authorities and with my Department. Since the success of the bid, the Lee Valley Stadium project team comprising the Lee Valley Regional Park Authority and UK Athletics have commissioned consultants to advise on the optimum design for the stadium and on business planning options."

On the same day, the Minister for Sport said:

"UK Athletics are required to give the IAAF a progress report on the staging arrangements, including the development of the venue, by the middle of next year."—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 327W.]

That is this year, so I would like to hear a full progress report this morning.

Questions have also been raised about the suitability of the proposed venue. My hon. Friend the Member for Westbury (Mr. Faber)—alas, he is not present, as he is currently quizzing the Sports Council and others about similar issues in a Select Committee meeting—asked how many of the seats at the proposed Lee Valley stadium would be provided on a temporary basis for the world athletics championships in 2005. The Minister for Sport replied:

"According to the current design concept developed by Drivers Jonas as part of the feasibility study for the Lee Valley Stadium, between 15,000 and 20,000 of the 40,000-45,000 seats available for the World Championships will not be included in the long-term legacy stadium."—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 326W.]

It is unclear how the stadium will attain the 65,000 seats needed under International Olympic Association guidelines for the hosting of future Olympic games. That is one of the main difficulties with the design for Wembley, although I accept that it is not the only one.

My hon. Friend also asked what assessment the British Olympic Association had made of the suitability of the proposed Lee Valley stadium as a venue for track and field athletics and the opening and closing ceremonies of a London Olympic games. The Minister replied:

"I have received no such assessment. The British Olympic Association are involved in discussions about the possible future uses of the stadium and attend meetings of the Lee Valley Stadium Forum."

We know that the BOA has since made an assessment of the feasibility of London hosting the Olympics in 2012 or 2016, but we are not allowed to see it.

My hon. Friend asked whether it was Government policy that the proposed Lee Valley stadium should be capable of being upgraded to act as the venue for track and field athletics and the opening and closing ceremonies of a London Olympic games. The Minister said:

"The main priority for the project partners involved with the development of the new National Athletics Stadium is to provide a world class facility capable of hosting the World Athletics Championships in 2005 which is also capable of ensuring that athletics have a national centre for the future development of the sport. No decisions have been taken which would rule out the possibility of the stadium being used as a venue for a future Olympic Games."—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2000; Vol. 355, c. 326W.]

Mr. Caplin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Fraser: No. You have had your say. Perhaps you can intervene when the Minister sums up.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have not had my say at all, although the hon. Member for Hove (Mr. Caplin) may have had his say. Perhaps the hon. Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) could use parliamentary language correctly.

Mr. Fraser: I am always interested in what you have to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If I had not been so rudely interrupted by the hon. Member for Hove, I could have finished my speech and allowed him, you or any other hon. Member to say what they wanted.

Mr. Day: Had you had an opportunity to have your say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you certainly would not have let it pass without mentioning the Poynton bypass.

Mr. Fraser: Now I will have my say. I am sure that the hon. Member for Hove can speak later if time permits.

We do not know the cost of Wembley stadium or what progress has been made, yet it is set to begin hosting sporting events in 2004. We do not know how much the proposed Lee Valley stadium will cost or when progress will be made towards its development, yet we are assured that it will be ready to host the 2005 world athletics championships. In addition, we do not know whether those plans will aid or hinder a future Olympic bid for London. We do know that the Department and the Government have presided over yet another fiasco. We thought that things could only get better after the dome, but sadly they have not.

Ken Bates, who was at the time chairman of Wembley National Stadium Ltd., accused the Minister of "interfering" in the redevelopment of Wembley football

stadium and of "constantly undermining" him. He also said that her period of office had been characterised by ignorance. I have an awful lot of respect for her in many other spheres, but I should like her to respond to that point made against her by Ken Bates. Appearing before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, on which I serve, he said that it was

"more in sorrow than in anger"

that he contrasted the "mess over Wembley" with the success of the Australian Olympic stadium. He said that there had been

"nothing but criticism and undermining based on nothing but ignorance...The Government should have been on the sidelines cheering us on but instead spent 19 months knocking"

the project. He commented:

"We only know what she thinks when we read the newspapers".

I am afraid that that is nothing new. In fact, it would be interesting to see that in the first line of the Labour party manifesto, because we know what is happening on so many matters only when we read about them in the paper and not when they are discussed in this place.

Several questions need to be answered. How much will the new Wembley stadium cost? What progress has been made towards its development? Will Sport England get its £20 million back, and how did the Government arrive at that figure? Is the Lee Valley stadium a suitable venue for an Olympic bid in 2012 or 2016 and will it be ready in time for the championships in 2005, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) asked? Does the Minister believe that the fiasco over which the Government have presided throughout their term of office has made Britain more or less viable as a venue for international sporting events, including the Olympics?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next speaker, I point out that this is a very important debate and I want the shadow Minister and the Minister for Sport to have adequate time to reply to all the questions. Is the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Allan) present as a Back Bencher or as the spokesman for his party, as the office of the Chairman of Ways and Means gave me notice that the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) was supposed to be present to reply on behalf of the Liberal Democrats?

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): My hon. Friend was not able to be here. I wanted to come because Sheffield has a great interest in international sporting events. I am wrapping up the two functions, as it were.

11.46 am

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath): I congratulate you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on your reappointment.

While I share the strong views expressed by my hon. Friends the Members for Cheadle (Mr. Day) and for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) in their criticisms of the Government, I do not propose to attack the Minister. As she knows, and as has been said, we respect her as an individual. We believe that she was handed a poisoned chalice, and while I do not agree with everything that she says on sport, she has done her best to support athletics and sport in general. I wish to concentrate on serious issues and problems that arose before her time and that she, as a junior Minister, has perhaps not been able to sort out.

Where I make criticisms of the Government, they are targeted on the Minister's predecessor and on the Secretary of State. Opposition Members, and especially those of us who are passionate about sport—as I have always been—often get extremely irritated by his pathetic attempts to paint himself as a sports enthusiast when, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole said, he has presided over a series of fiascos in which his lack of attention to and interest in sport to back up the hype have been only too evident.

There are many positive aspects to sport in this country. I pay particular tribute to the work of Sport England, which, led by Trevor Brooking and Derek Casey, has done a fantastic job in the past few years, not least in delivering the vision originally set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) when he was Prime Minister. As I have said, it would be appropriate if in due course the national lottery became known as the Major lottery. There is no doubt that without my right hon. Friend's decisions, we would not have had the huge injection of capital for sport and the development of sporting facilities.

In considering recent political history, and my right hon. Friend's term of office—indeed, his whole political career—one of the biggest tributes to him will undoubtedly be the fact that he created the lottery. It was not universally popular at the time. Indeed, it was roundly attacked by many Labour Members in opposition: they said that it would never work and would be a fiasco and they doubted that it would provide what we consistently said it would in terms of sporting facilities. Now that they are in government, they of course behave as though it was their idea all along—but those of us who were here in the previous Parliament remember the bitter debates about the concept of the lottery, and the savage criticisms that many Labour Members made of it. I remember in particular the attacks on my right hon. Friend when he said that it would provide huge amounts of new money for sport.

The Government have been ready to claim credit for sporting success—not least that of our Olympians, who produced the best performance by a British Olympic squad for 80 years. Much of their success—and the Olympians acknowledged it—was due to lottery funding, particularly of elite sportsmen and women. Without the drive and determination of my right hon. Friend, and the Ministers and Back Benchers who supported him, there would have been no lottery funding.

Mr. Caplin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hawkins: I will in a moment.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway). He and I were Conservative Back Benchers in the previous Parliament and we regularly spoke in sporting debates to support my right hon. Friend and to back up his vision of lottery support for elite sportsmen and women leading to Olympic and international sporting success.

[Mr. Hawkins]

I now give way to someone whose sporting achievements should be recognised—he has scored some extraordinary goals for the parliamentary football team—even though I passionately disagree with him about politics.

Mr. Caplin: I served on the Committee considering the National Lottery Bill in 1998 when changes to the new opportunities fund were bitterly opposed by the Conservatives.

Mr. Hawkins: The hon. Gentleman is right. I did not serve on that Committee, but my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole did. We felt that the Labour Government were wrong to take money away from sport by the creation of this so-called new opportunities fund, because it completely undermined what Labour Members had said in the previous Parliament—the hon. Member for Hove was not then a Member of Parliament—about the National Lottery etc. Act 1993.

I clearly recall from debates in the House that Labour Members constantly insisted on no substitution, or no use of lottery funding for matters generally funded out of taxpayers' revenue—especially health and education. Labour Member after Labour Member declared that lottery moneys should never be used to supplement health or education spending, which should always be funded through general taxation. What did the Labour Government do when they came to power? They introduced the new opportunities fund, so that resources could be diverted to health and education. They attempted to explain the U-turn by claiming that only specific projects within health and education were affected. Without doubt, however, as a result of the creation of the new opportunities fund, fewer resources were directed to sport. The lottery was hugely more successful—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I hesitate to intervene, but I have advised hon. Members that we should stick to the subject of our important debate—the staging of international sporting events. I want to ensure that those who have not yet spoken—not least, the Minister—have the opportunity to do so. I would appreciate it if the hon. Gentleman would direct his remarks to the specific issue before us.

Mr. Hawkins: I am sorry, but I was tempted too far down that road by the intervention of the hon. Member for Hove.

I have already mentioned Sport England, which emphasised the benefits to the whole country of hosting major international sporting events. I am fortunate that part of the Bisley shooting ranges—the only southern venue for the Commonwealth games in 2002—lies within my constituency. The boundary between my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) crosses the shooting ranges. I have always taken a personal interest in all sports, and I am proud to represent the village of Bisley. I hope that my constituents will benefit hugely from the staging of the Commonwealth games in Britain.

Sport England is right about the substantial economic impact of international sporting events. Infrastructure developments required to stage events remain for the benefit of the public after the event is over, and there are other longer-term gains. The Euro 96 football championship attracted 280,000 visiting supporters who spent more than £120 million in the eight host cities.

The Minister and I agree about the importance of sporting tourism. Sadly threatened by the tragic foot and mouth epidemic, tourism is the fastest growing industry in the UK. When that problem is behind us, sporting tourism will once again become a significant economic generator of income and jobs. The additional expenditure by visitors to Euro 96 was estimated at £195 million, with a further £64 million paid in taxation. The Barcelona Olympics in 1992 also provide a good example of the long-term economic benefits that major events can bring to a country. That event certainly put Barcelona on the tourism map. We all know about the huge economic impact of the 2000 Olympics on Sydney.

There is no doubt that governing bodies use major events to build on existing sports development. One of the sports that I am passionate about is cricket. The efforts of the England and Wales Cricket Board surrounding the 1999 World cup included employment of numerous cricket development officers, £120,000 of funding from Sport England, and promotion of the event as a carnival of cricket. Despite the fact that our test side had not yet undergone its recent welcome rejuvenation and success, the country as a whole benefited. The enthusiasm for cricket, especially among children, was hugely beneficial. World cup matches were taken all around the country, particularly to areas with large ethnic minority populations, and considerable efforts were made to attract younger supporters.

Many of us have talked about the vital importance of covering international sporting events that are held in this country on terrestrial television. I feel strongly that youngsters who participate in sport are far less likely to get into trouble with crime, and drugs in particular, because sport is a healthy activity. To encourage them into sport, youngsters should be able to see sporting events and their heroes on television. Unfortunately, the families of many youngsters in inner-city areas cannot afford satellite television, so it is vital that international sporting events are shown on terrestrial channels. I hope that that will always be possible.

I could say a great deal more about social regeneration and the Commonwealth games in Manchester. I was among the Members of Parliament and of the European Parliament who visited the Manchester Commonwealth games venues. I wish that tournament every success, and not only the shooting events that will be held in my constituency. I agree with what the hon. Member for Hove (Mr. Caplin) said about the superb swimming facilities. Competitive swimming was by far my best sport when I was young. I was fortunate enough to swim at county and area level—I was not quite good enough to get into the national squad—and I have always been passionate about sport. I believe that Britain has a great future in developing its sporting facilities and hosting international sporting events.

My final point is about an article in today's edition of *The Daily Telegraph* by its chief sports writer, Paul Hayward, a journalist whom I respect. I read it on my way into the House this morning. He is savagely critical about the lack of infrastructure, and especially transport. He directed his remarks to the Select Committee hearing this morning and asked how this country can make a credible bid for the 2012 Olympics if we cannot solve our infrastructure problems. I believe that we can host the Olympics. I am not sure whether that will happen in 2012—the competition has not yet been held—but I will support this country whenever it bids for international sporting events. However, I think that the journalist was right to say that we must get our act together. Sometimes we run ourselves down too much, but the article raised serious issues.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Ryedale (Mr. Greenway) will continue his commitment to sport. I believe that the Minister will do her best for sport, even though she represents a Government who have made many mistakes in that respect. I wish that she did not have to cope with the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, who have done a huge amount of damage to the country.

11.58 am

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): I was moved to participate in the debate because of Sheffield's experience. This year is the 10th anniversary of the World student games, staged in 1991. In many ways, Manchester is dealing with similar issues.

I should declare an interest: I am an unremunerated director of Sheffield City Trust, which is the charitable company that was set up to manage the sporting venues after the World student games events were staged. My agenda is not to pick over the bones of what happened in 1991; it is about making things work now, as best we can. That is why I want to draw hon. Members' attention to our experience of a major event in Sheffield 10 years ago.

I am disappointed at the business plan's over-optimism about the sponsorship and cost of the event in Manchester. That is a recurrent theme in international sporting events. As the Select Committee report on Manchester showed, people are left scrabbling around at a late stage trying to plug financial holes. In the case of Sheffield, the hole was not plugged and the people of Sheffield are still paying for events that cost more than the original projections. That is a particular problem when local authorities are leading the events.

One of the most important recommendations of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee is that national Government should take the lead, with local authorities acting as partners, because acting as the lead agent is too great a financial risk for local government. I hope that local citizens in Manchester do not have the same problems in that respect as those in Sheffield.

By contrast, Euro 96 was a good experience for Sheffield because it was a national event. The Danes moved in and, true to their stereotype, managed to drink the city dry, yet there were no problems whatever. The event was a great boost for Sheffield. We should learn the lesson that it is better to accept the full cost of staging international sporting events at the outset, rather than trying to put together a business plan that will fall apart later.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee report stated that Government strategy should set out clearly the rationale for public support for and investment in sport. The rationale is important in international events. We may have to accept that the financial hole created by an event will not be plugged by sponsorship and that it will cost the Exchequer £10 million, £20 million or even £50 million, and justify that cost in other ways, rather than making a plan that is intended to cover the cost, but finding later that the Exchequer ends up paying, either directly or through the local taxpayers.

People should not be able to justify or attack a project on the basis of their own partisan considerations. That happens in all parties: the Labour opposition in Sheffield attacks the Lib Dem administration when it dedicates council funds to support sporting events , just as the Lib Dems did when they were in opposition and Labour was in power in the city. There will probably be similar rows and recriminations on the political scene in Manchester, not when the event is going on, as people tend to pull together then, but when it is over. After the event, no one has the facts to be able to confirm that the event brought in the promised funds, or to say how that money was spent.

The Select Committee report makes a worthwhile recommendation that research into the matter should be a priority. We should have a more objective understanding of the costs and benefits of a sporting event rather than leaving it to partisan political operatives to find the facts that suit their case.

In considering the subsequent benefit from major events we should look at the role of sporting bodies in the United Kingdom. I am something of an outsider in these matters, as sport is not my specialty. I became involved by working with sporting venues and I was shocked at the bidding to hold events at sporting centres. I was told recently about events for which Sheffield was bidding. The city felt that it was being used to bid up the amount that the winning venue would receive. The bidding wars are ridiculous enough at national level; at international events they are appalling. I hope that the Government will use their weight to persuade international bodies to take action to stop "beauty contests" and ridiculous amounts being spent.

There is insufficient clarity or accountability in the processes at national level, too, and with more venues coming on stream all the time, the situation can only get worse. Cities throughout the country will be asked to bid for events. They will feel that they must go cap in hand to bodies that they do not believe are accountable to try to secure events to keep their venues open. Missing out on events can cause financial ruin. I hope that the Minister will say that the Government favour a stronger voice for cities and regions that try to hold events, rather than leaving them alone to go cap in hand.

The UK Sports Institute was intended to assist the strategy of creating centres of sporting excellence and to boost our ability to stage events. Sheffield will play a major part, and we are grateful to the sporting bodies for their investment. However, we are still disappointed that we did not get the headquarters, despite the fact that we felt that our bid would have reduced the overall costs of the institute. The decision to go for London was unimaginative and part of a London-centric perspective, which we as outsiders feel still pervades sport. We heard the argument that people from abroad

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would not want to go outside London. That is depressing, particularly given that we have a major centre of excellence in Sheffield, with two universities doing work in sports medicine, science and nutrition and events research. We have no trouble attracting people from throughout the UK and around the world to Sheffield, yet some sporting bodies do not support and invest in our area as much as they could.

I finish with a plea to the Minister to respond to the helpful report from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee by opening up the process of sports event decision making. Most funding is public, through central or local government grants and lottery money, but I do not believe that the stakeholders—the cities and regions of the UK—have a sufficient voice. We should have a national strategy that holds the debates on bidding for events in a public and accountable forum among the various cities and regions involved. If we had such a debate, we could accept the decisions, but as it is, individual sporting centres feel powerless in the process, which does not appear to be democratic or open. I hope that the Government will realise that, if they want a successful sport strategy, we need a national framework, so that event organisers in Sheffield or Manchester, for example, can take part in the process, rather than simply in the bitter and recriminatory cycle of finding that they have not been as successful as they expected.

12.7 pm

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) on securing the debate. He and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole (Mr. Fraser) have already discussed Wembley and Picketts Lock, and many people are anxious about whether those prestigious projects will be completed as originally intended or in the appropriate time scale. We must not lose sight of the fact that Wembley was meant to be a national, multi-purpose stadium. It will not be such a stadium, which I believe represents a failure of public policy.

As long ago as July 1999, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport said that the new design for Wembley would make it

"the finest arena in the world".

It was to be an arena for athletics, as well as for soccer and rugby, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle reminded us, the centrepiece of an Olympic bid. We have come a long way since then and the Secretary of State might think that he is right to kick athletics out of Wembley. I do not want to go into that argument again except to say that, as recently as December, the Minister said in a Radio 4 interview following the appointment of Sir Rodney Walker that athletics might be reinstated, renewing speculation that that was the Government's preferred option.

We also know that Wembley National Stadium Ltd. has always been willing to stick to the original design of the stadium so that major athletic events could be held there. That will now not happen, which focuses attention on where we will host the 2005 world athletics championships. It is now abundantly clear from what Sir Rodney Walker has said that Wembley cannot possibly host the athletics championships in the nightmare scenario that the proposed Lee Valley national athletics centre at Picketts Lock is not ready. That is what the Minister must face up to. The event must be held at Picketts Lock or it cannot be held in London at all. It is vital that Picketts Lock goes ahead so that it can host those 2005 world athletics championships and to honour the Secretary of State's obligation to the International Amateur Athletics Federation to provide a suitable venue in London.

Before I raise some questions about Picketts Lock, we should pause to think about a few matters relating to Wembley. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Dorset and North Poole rightly drew attention to the comparative costs of Wembley and other new stadiums, including the marvellous Olympics 2000 stadium in Sydney that we all saw on our television screens. It was built for rather less money and it may have been less ambitious. The scale of Wembley has created problems.

The events this week have highlighted just how important the Wembley project will be to provide again a major venue for soccer in London. With Wembley awaiting demolition there is nowhere in London to host the semi-final of the FA cup between Arsenal and Tottenham Hotspur—a match in which the Minister and I share an interest. I am fascinated to know why Chelsea's ground at Stamford Bridge was not thought suitable. Equally, football supporters generally have not been given an adequate explanation why Twickenham, which is one of the finest stadiums in the world, is not considered suitable for football.

Mr. Caplin: Nimbyism.

Mr. Greenway: The hon. Gentleman may be right. I know that this is not the subject of the debate and I crave your indulgence, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I should like to take this opportunity to say that the decision to host the match at Old Trafford at 1.30 on a Sunday afternoon is crass and shows that the interests of football supporters are not being considered. All that matters is the television schedule. I suspect that many fans who might have gone had the game been held in London will not now do so.

Can the Minister clarify the situation with regard to Wembley's commitment to repay £20 million of its £120 million lottery grant? Many outside observers think that that has been done, not least because the Secretary of State has made clear his intention that the £20 million should be used towards the cost of Picketts Lock. Is not the truth that the money has not been repaid? I wrote to him before Christmas and in a reply dated 14 January he said that the agreement that has been renegotiated will not give effect to the repayment of the £20 million until—this is very important and I do not think that it has come out in public as yet—

"the successful completion of Wembley's loan syndication."

Can the Minister confirm that that means that the money has not been repaid and that it is conditional on Wembley being able to raise through loan syndication the money that is necessary for the Wembley redevelopment to go ahead?

We know that the £20 million is crucial to funding the development of the proposed Lee Valley national athletics centre at Picketts Lock. We are told that it will

cost £95 million. I am grateful to the Minister for placing in the Library the minutes of the Lee Valley stadium forum meetings. That has helped us to monitor the progress on the project. The minutes of the 16 January meeting state that Mr. Shaun Dawson, speaking on behalf of the Lee Valley regional park authority, reminded the forum that the feasibility studies completed in November estimated that a new stadium would cost approximately £95 million and that there was a funding gap of £23 million. Does the figure of £23 million refer to the £20 million that is to be paid back, or does the £72 million that is secured include the £20 million? If that is the case, there is still a funding gap of £23 million, and £20 million may still not come back.

I understand that the Secretary of State attempted a few weeks ago to give an assurance to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee that the funding for Picketts Lock was secured, but the briefing note for this debate from Sport England says that the conclusions of the feasibility studies will help the

"panel make an informed decision as and when it receives an application for the proposed Picketts Lock stadium to receive Lottery funding."

That shows that there is no commitment as yet from Sport England to fund the project, although I am sure that it will treat the matter sympathetically.

As the Minister knows, I have tabled questions to her regarding the timetable for Picketts Lock, and I note the progress that she outlined in the Lee Valley stadium forum report. However, many questions remain unanswered. What time is allocated for the design brief, consultation over planning, and completion of the planning application? Will the Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions be required to determine the application? Will a public inquiry be necessary? What proposals are there for transport infrastructure including a new railway station and a road link to the M25, the construction of 3,000 units of residential accommodation and warm-up facilities and the demolition of the existing centre including the indoor bowling facilities, which will not be replaced under present plans?

What proposals are there for the tendering process to secure the contract cost and for the funding gap? We all know that that must be done, but we seek from the Minister a little more candour and a sense of urgency about the mammoth task associated with the project. As Sir Rodney Walker has said, the development of Wembley is at least two years ahead of Picketts Lock. If Wembley will not be ready by autumn 2004, how can anyone be confident that Picketts Lock will be?

I wish to stress, yet again, that the Minister must get a grip of the problem. If the Picketts Lock project fails, the Government of the day could have a major embarrassment on their hands. Who would then trust us to host a major international sporting event in the future? Our reputation is at stake. As the Minister knows, these issues have been repeatedly articulated in the national press. I will be charitable, and not refer to some of the things that have been said. However, regarding the current discussion of an Olympic bid, we are, quite frankly, miles away from being in a position to launch such a bid. We should first make a success of the Manchester 2002 games. I have been there and seen the stadium under construction, and I believe that the games will be successful.

We must also ensure that we honour our obligation to show what we can do in hosting the 2005 international athletics championships. That is the real task facing the Government—not only this Government, but the Government who will replace them after the general election. It is only then, when we have made a success of those two great events, that we should turn our attention to hosting an Olympic bid.

If the 2002 games and the 2005 championships are successful, the rest of the world will want to come to Britain, and will treat with urgency and respect the possibility of the Olympics coming to this country.

12.19 pm

The Minister for Sport (Kate Hoey): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mr. Day) on securing the debate. It is normal to say that such a debate is timely, but on this occasion it is untimely as it clashes with this morning's Culture, Media and Sport Committee meeting on the same subject. That is unfortunate, because I know that many hon. Members would have liked to attend. I look forward to the Select Committee's detailed report. Many questions have been asked today, and I will not be able to answer every one, but I undertake to write if specific questions are not answered.

I emphasise that the Government and the country support the staging of international events and recognise their importance. I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman about that. The events bring a feelgood factor to a country, as seen by the effect of the Sydney Olympics on Australia. They also help the economic state of the country in aspects such as regeneration and improvements to transport infrastructure. I assure him that I will pass on his comments about transport links to my colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.

The staging of international sporting events gives our elite sportsmen and sportswomen the opportunity to appear on the world stage in their home country. That is why the Commonwealth games will be important, and we are determined to make them a success. The games will be important not only for Manchester but for the north-west and the whole country. One of the Select Committee report's suggestions was that a Minister should have overall responsibility for such large events. That is why the Prime Minister gave my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office that responsibility. He has ensured that all factors work together. The games are not only about sport but about bringing together other aspects of the event. That is why a huge amount is being invested in the festival side of the games.

The support that the games have received through Sport England has been mentioned. Everyone is confident that the facilities will be wonderful and that those that are yet to be completed will be completed on time, and will bring great credit to the country. However, other Government support will be given, which shows that everybody must work together towards such an event. The Department of Health, at substantial cost, is appointing an assistant medical director over two years. The Department for Education and Employment is funding a range of education projects linked to the games. The Department for International Development is giving a grant for

[Kate Hoey]

education to the Commonwealth Institute. A range of arts facilities will be provided for the spirit of friendship festival, which will receive £1 million of lottery funding. People say that lottery funding is not Government funding. It is not Exchequer funding, but public funding that comes from people who spend money on the lottery.

The hon. Member for Cheadle was right to point to the funding gap, but that potential gap will remain only if sponsorship money is not received. At present, all those involved in the Commonwealth games are confident that the money will be raised. The games organisers are clear that they are ahead of sponsorship expectancy and further announcements are expected soon. The revenue target of £62 million is ambitious, and it is true that people who wish to win a bid are sometimes overly optimistic—that was the experience of Sheffield. However, the organisers have already attracted £30 million of commercial income, which places them ahead of any previous games at this stage of preparation. People said right up to the last minute that the Sydney Olympics would be a disaster or would fail to raise as much money as they were supposed to, but they were subsequently declared the best games ever.

Manchester city council gave a commitment to underwrite any shortfall. I know that the hon. Gentleman wanted to hear that. His constituents outside the city of Manchester will not be liable. The Government are working closely with the council and hope that no further support will be necessary, because we are determined that the games will be successful. I am optimistic, although I think that a danger sometimes exists in that, as the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Mr. Hawkins) said, we as a nation have a capacity for playing the country down and saying that we cannot do things, rather than having a can-do approach.

The Lee Valley stadium will be built and will provide a terrific centre for the 2005 athletics championships. I point out to those who have referred to Wembley that there is no definite date for Wembley to reopen, so we cannot be confident that that complex will host the 2005 championships. In the next few days, the next stage of the Lee Valley stadium will occur, and the designs will be made public. That project has been criticised by the media, but more people now seem to understand it. It is good to hear that the hon. Gentleman is pleased that we are putting the relevant minutes into the Library. I am keen to have as much transparency and openness as possible and have asked that after every meeting of the Lee Valley project team we give a press briefing. There is nothing to hide, and we should not be afraid of putting the facts to the public.

The Olympic games bid is at an early stage. Hon. Members who have just come from the Select Committee will have heard the statements of the British Olympic Association. I am not privy to what Simon Clegg said this morning, but we put our commitment in the manifesto and clearly stated that we want to support a viable Olympic bid. However, any decision on that will have to come from the BOA first. It will need to say which location is preferable. The association has presented its first assessment to us of what is required for a possible London bid, and last week it met the Mayor of London and presented the bid. DCMS will convene a meeting of all the stakeholders.

We are still at an early stage. A successful and viable Olympic bid will require huge amounts of money. We will have to take a decision as a country on whether we want the Olympics to happen here, taking into account all the national and sporting interests. As Minister for Sport, I am committed to ensuring that the process is as transparent as possible, that we have the debate in public and that there is nothing to hide. People must want to support the bid if huge amounts of money are to be spent on it.

I shall not answer any questions about Mr. Bates or Wembley. However, I shall make some points about Wembley stadium in the Select Committee. At this stage, in the last minute of my speech, it would not be worth while to try to address the many erroneous comments made by the former chairman of Wembley National Stadium Ltd. The project is football-led and under the direction of Sir Rodney Walker and WNSL, although we are working closely with them. The £120 million initially invested was provided primarily for the purchase of the land and there is agreement to return £20 million. Of course, it will not be given back until the parties involved have obtained their loan syndication. If they do not obtain it, there will not be a new Wembley stadium in any case. Sir Rodney Walker has already talked about other alternatives.

We could spend a lot of time speculating about what might happen, but it would not be helpful. I give my best wishes to the hon. Member for Cheadle and everyone in Manchester in their desire to stage the Commonwealth games, which is important for this country.

School Bus Safety

12.30 pm

Mr. Eric Joyce (Falkirk, West): Last month, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, a 15-year-old pupil at St. Mungo's school, Falkirk, in my constituency, died tragically in a road accident. Kathleen had travelled home from school by a contracted school bus, as she did each day, to be dropped close to her family home in the village of Bonnybridge. On this day, however, she stepped from the bus on to the pavement and walked around the front of the stationary vehicle, at the same time as a car passed the vehicle from behind on the offside. Perhaps distracted, Kathleen stepped out in front of the car. It seems that the oncoming car was not moving fast but that the driver had no time to react. Tragically, Kathleen was fatally injured. Her younger brother had been on the bus with her, and her mother arrived at the scene soon after the accident. Naturally, both remain deeply shocked, as do the rest of Kathleen's family.

That story is not remarkable or unusual. Such human and family tragedies happen every day, and often involve a painful period of adjustment for those left behind. Few things in life are surer than the fact that risk will manifest itself from time to time. When a child dies, however, the tragedy seems to be all the greater, because of the sense of injustice at the loss of a young life not properly lived. When tragedies such as Kathleen's death take place, we are obliged to determine whether anything can be done to reduce the chances of their happening again.

My aim today is to draw attention to several issues surrounding accidents such as Kathleen's death. I have no doubt that Her Majesty's Government are well aware of the need to work continuously on child safety, and I know that organisations such as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and Brake are excellent advocates of the same cause. I want to suggest to the Minister one or two measures that might make a modest contribution to child safety on our roads.

This week RoSPA has been holding its annual road safety conference in Glasgow. The focus of the conference has been child casualties on our roads. Some of the statistical trends presented in research conclusions have been shocking but, sadly, often predictable. For example, road crashes are the leading cause of death among children. Furthermore, 20 per cent. of all child road casualties happen on the school journey, with the greatest period of risk being, as one might imagine, between 3 and 4 o'clock in the afternoon, as was the case with Kathleen.

There is also a socio-economic dimension. Recently, David White, Robert Raeside and Derek Barker of Napier university conducted a study of child road injuries in the Lothians, which border on my constituency. The research showed that children from less well-off backgrounds were as much as six times more likely to be injured in a road traffic accident. The research also showed that children from single-parent families and minority ethnic backgrounds in the less well-off areas are subject to the greatest risk. Other related findings were that the decline in children's death rates from injury over time has been less for children from the manual social classes than for children from the non-manual social classes. As a result, mortality differentials between socio-economic groupings have increased. Moreover, injuries to children from socio-economically disadvantaged families tend to be of greater severity. In addition, those children have a higher risk of physical injury in the first place.

The answers to risk reduction across the board depend on several factors, as RoSPA points out. For example, research seems to suggest that as young boys tend to be more physically boisterous than girls, they, in effect, receive a training in spatial awareness that girls do not have to the same degree when they are very young. The apparent effect is that as girls in their early teens start to catch up with boys in terms of boisterousness, they appear to be exposed to a greater risk of road accident injuries. Perhaps schools can tackle that through education and awareness training.

Children now seem to spend less time outdoors than in previous eras, and parents can help to educate them about the dangers of the roads. Statistically, children walking to and from school are at the greatest risk, so parents should be alert to ensure that their children take a safe route for that journey.

The Government can also do many things, and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has initiated the child road safety and Think! road safety campaigns and the road safety strategy. The Minister might want to say more about that.

To return to children travelling to school, children who use public transport should, if possible, be accompanied by escorts, and drivers of contracted school buses should be trained and educated for the task.

The DETR is planning a pilot scheme in conjunction with FirstGroup, a bus operator in the United States of America, to import American yellow school buses of the type that many people have seen on television, in films, or while on holiday in America.

Alexander and Sons has been manufacturing buses in Falkirk in my constituency for many years. It is not a part of FirstGroup; it is a manufacturer rather than an operator. However, it is important that there is a local bus-manufacturing presence, as that gives my constituents an awareness of the industry and the issues that surround it.

It is poignant to note that the Alexander and Sons manufacturing plant is close to St. Mungo's school, where Kathleen Fitzpatrick was a pupil. Her daily journeys took her past the gates of the factory. Local people have noted that sad fact.

American yellow buses have several advantages. They are immediately identifiable by all American drivers, who are expected to take measures that take into account the likelihood that children will decant on to the road. They have additional features, such as flashing lights and extending warning arms that stick out to make it clear to drivers that the school bus is stopping and that children are about to be dropped off. Also, I believe that, in America, drivers are not allowed to pass a stationary yellow bus from which children are

[Mr. Eric Joyce]

alighting, which neutralises the risk of children such as Kathleen being run down as they step out in front of a stationary bus.

It is self-evident that the United Kingdom can learn lessons from such American practices, although I accept that the roads and the culture are different in the United States of America, so the UK must cherry-pick the measures that are appropriate to its environment.

In the USA, 54 per cent. of children travel to school by yellow bus. In the UK, the equivalent figure is 20 per cent. In part, that gap might be explained by the greater average distance that American children travel to school. An increase in the number of children travelling to school by identifiable school buses would yield benefits in terms of not only safety but the environment, as cars depositing children at school account for 20 per cent. of morning rush-hour traffic.

At present, most of the 20 per cent. of UK children who travel to school by bus, travel on coaches that are subcontracted by local authorities. It is not unusual for such buses to be rather old—although undoubtedly legal—in style and specification. I have seen some very elderly examples on the roads. Buses on contract must display in their back windows yellow signs to alert passing drivers that they are on contract to schools and that therefore there are attendant risks with children getting off them. However, the contracts are temporary, so the signs should be displayed and removed when appropriate. Children sometimes take signs from the back of buses, so companies nail or screw signs to the back of the bus; when the bus is used for non-school contracted business, the sign is still displayed. As a result, drivers could become desensitised to the signs.

I hasten to add that the DETR inspects such things to minimise risks, but it is likely—I hope that this does not sound too sceptical—that those practices will continue at the margins because expediency is a fact of life. That is not a problem with yellow buses because they are not used for any other purpose. Drivers who see a yellow bus know that schoolchildren are in it. I accept, however, that in economic terms they are relatively inefficient and are therefore expensive.

I understand that FirstGroup, which buys but does not manufacture buses, believes that its bulk-buying capability would enable it to reduce the price of a normal school bus from £110,000 or £120,000 to £30,000—a remarkable reduction. However, I am sure that the DETR would not allow buses to operate unless it was confident that their specifications conformed to safety requirements. In other words, driving down the cost must not lead to driving down safety standards.

Whether or not yellow buses have a place on our roads, one US practice that is worthy of consideration in respect of reducing the risks for children alighting from them is barring vehicles from passing identifiable—however we decide that they should be identified—and stationary school buses in either direction when children are alighting. We could trial the concept as part of a yellow bus pilot scheme, but whether or not that happens, will the Minister say whether the idea has a future? Indeed, does he have other initiatives in mind that may reduce risks for schoolchildren alighting from school buses or travelling to school by other means?

12.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Keith Hill): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Joyce) on securing this important debate. I add particular congratulations on the eloquence and effectiveness of his speech, because I understand that this is his maiden performance in Westminster Hall. I also thank him for his courtesy in providing notice of the major issues that he wanted to raise.

I assure my hon. Friend that the Government, in the form of the Minister with responsibility for Road Safety, Lord Whitty, will carefully consider his remarks. I was sorry to hear of the accident that he mentioned and should like to offer my sincere condolences to Kathleen Fitzpatrick's family and friends. It may be little comfort in such circumstances—indeed, it will provide none at all to the family—but I believe that such accidents do not occur that often. In truth, I cannot provide reliable statistics because the fact that the child had just alighted from a bus was in a sense irrelevant to what happened. That may sound strange in the light of my hon. Friend's remarks, but when someone gets off a bus they are by definition a pedestrian rather than an ex-bus passenger.

The statistical returns for road accidents compiled by the DETR—the STATS 19 forms that are completed and returned to us by local police forces—ask whether incidents occur when people are alighting or boarding a bus. However, when they clear the doorway they are counted as pedestrians. The accident described by my hon. Friend was a case of someone walking into the road from behind a parked vehicle when her view of approaching traffic may have been partly, if not wholly, obscured. Indeed, that is how such accidents are most likely to be recorded.

My assertion—perhaps it is more a hope—that such accidents are few and far between is based on two factors, and although neither is particularly systematic, each might be regarded as a reasonable indicator. First, in response to recent informal inquiries the Local Authority Road Safety Officers Association said that it was unaware of any significant problem in this regard. Secondly, only two such cases have been brought to Ministers' attention in the past two years. One occurred in 1999 and the other in 2000, and in both cases a child was knocked down by a passing vehicle while trying to cross in front of the bus from which they had just alighted.

I shall not pretend that this is a satisfactory state of affairs as far as the statistics are concerned, and my Department will certainly consider whether it would help to amend the accident report form so that more detailed information can be gathered. A further reason to consider changing the form is the risk of an increase in the number of such accidents, if only because, hopefully, more children will use buses for part of their journey to school instead of travelling by car. One objective of our 10-year plan for transport is to increase the use of buses and other public transport—and, indeed, of walking and cycling—to help reduce the unnecessary car journeys that give rise to much congestion and air pollution. Hon. Members will recognise a potential conflict between such objectives and our targets for reducing road casualties, given that it is a fact that, mile for mile, travelling by car is safer than walking or

cycling. However, I can assure hon. Members that we hope and expect to succeed on both fronts, and are fully conscious of the challenge that that presents.

With the 10-year plan in mind, and as my hon. Friend said, local authorities and bus operators are developing various innovative and dedicated school bus schemes, some of which are based on the American system. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister was pleased to announce in Glasgow on 17 February that agreement has been reached on the piloting in Britain of FirstGroup's US-style yellow school buses. The vehicles will be modified to meet all the requirements in our structure and use regulations, and they will satisfy accessibility regulations except where it is reasonable to grant a special authorisation. To avoid doubt, I should point out that, none the less, no exemption will be granted from the recently reduced maximum first step height for new buses that provide a local or scheduled service. The new maximum is no more than 320 mm, instead of 435 mm. For those who still prefer the old money, that translates into a new maximum of about 12½ in, instead of just over 17 in.

Perhaps more to the point, I can assure hon. Members that, like our native British buses, the new ones will be right-hand drive with doors on the left, so in that regard there will be no new safety worries. One road traffic rule in the United States, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, West referred extensively, is that other vehicles must not overtake school buses when children are alighting or boarding. As he said, American buses are fitted with flashing lights and waving arms to warn approaching drivers at such times. However, FirstGroup says that at the moment it has no plans to fit such signals to the buses that it imports, so they will not figure in the pilot schemes here. Nor is it proposed that the pilot schemes should include a provision on the overtaking of buses, and I shall explain why in a moment.

We shall want to evaluate the FirstGroup pilot schemes in due course to ensure that we learn as much as possible from them. To that end, officials in my Department will draw up proposals shortly. We shall be particularly interested to know what parents and children think of US-style buses, and we shall want to identify the schemes' success in persuading parents to let children whom they take to school by car to travel by bus instead. We shall also involve the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee in our evaluation.

Given that there is a large bus factory, Alexander and Sons, in my hon. Friend's constituency, it might help to point out that other operators and manufacturers are of course free to develop and market alternative school bus schemes using US-style or other types of vehicles, provided they meet the UK regulatory requirements. However, we shall consider applications for special authorisation on merit only until the end of September 2001. Thereafter, we do not expect to give special authorisations for vehicles with the same design, or which offer the same package, as that proposed by FirstGroup until evaluation of the pilot projects has been completed.

I revert to the safety issues involved in getting on and off buses, and not just school buses. As all drivers should know, the highway code has several separate references to the need to take special care when passing buses and bus stops, because of the increased likelihood of people crossing the road nearby. Pedestrians should also take great care, because the size of buses obscures people from the view of passing drivers.

In most senses, the advice is inherent in the green cross code, which most children know well but do not always apply—like their elders and, supposedly, betters. In its most abbreviated form, it is the best advice that anyone can have when crossing the road. It says, "Think, stop, look, listen"—and not necessarily once only—

"and wait until it is safe."

However, reality can be more complex. Obviously, it is necessary to find a safe place to cross. That is the basic message of the hedgehog cartoon film, first shown last October, that will be screened again later this year. The message is also included in "Arrive Alive—a Highway Code for Young Road Users". About buses, it says:

"If you do need to cross the road after getting off a bus, wait for it to move away first".

My hon. Friend has asked us to provide advice to enhance the safety of children travelling on buses. We will repeat the messages about the safe use of roads wherever possible, not only to children using buses, but to those out and about on foot and on their bikes. We will direct the messages not only at children. I am not trying to put responsibility, still less blame, for road accidents exclusively on pedestrians. Drivers, too, must take proper care. They should slow down as they pass buses at bus stops, and be prepared to stop quickly if necessary. Through better training and testing, we are helping drivers to become aware of their responsibilities to all vulnerable road users.

I understand that in the case of the accident in Scotland in 1999 that I mentioned earlier, the driver was convicted of careless driving and fined about £300. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the case, which remains a matter of local controversy, so I will not go into detail. A fatal accident inquiry is to be held. The accident prompted the local Member of the Scottish Parliament, Bruce Crawford MSP, to table an amendment to the Transport (Scotland) Bill during its passage last December. It would have given local authorities the power to designate school bus priority routes where other vehicles would not be allowed to pass a stationary school bus. Although Scottish Ministers were sympathetic to the idea, the amendment, as drafted, did not work in legal terms.

I accept my hon. Friend's point, but we are not convinced that such a measure would be the safest option. It also has practical drawbacks. Some drivers, on seeing a school bus that was about to stop, might take unnecessary risks to get past it before it stopped. Drivers waiting to pull out from a side road might be tempted to come out ahead of an approaching bus, even if in other circumstances they might have considered it safer to let it pass first.

The proposal could also have an adverse effect on local traffic flows, with possible consequences for a wide area, and might be especially difficult to enforce in towns that are already congested. Most important, we fear that, if children were afforded such protection on school trips, they might develop a false sense of security, and take less care when getting off service buses, or when crossing the road at other times.

The Government take road safety seriously. That is clearly evidenced by the publication, last year, of our new road safety strategy. One of its targets is to reduce

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child deaths and serious injuries by 50 per cent. by 2010. I warmly welcome yesterday's announcement by Sarah Boyack of the Scottish Executive of a £11.85 million funding initiative aimed at reducing the number of child road deaths in Scotland.

If we find that accidents involving school buses are a particular problem, we shall consider what more we can do to reduce them. Needless to say, we shall get a copy of the sheriff's determination in the Scottish case as soon as it is published. As ever, Ministers will be ready to listen to any ideas that hon. Members wish to suggest.

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

12.55 pm

Mr. Christopher Chope (Christchurch): I welcome the Minister. I hope that he can respond to my concerns more fully than he did when I raised a constituency matter in the House at 2 o'clock this morning—although, as he said, I had not given him much notice. I gave him more notice on this occasion.

Although the debate was prompted by constituency cases, it will be of much wider national interest. The administration of the home energy efficiency scheme now amounts to no less than a national scandal. Answers to questions that I put to the Minister's Department, which are recorded in columns 530-34W of yesterday's *Hansard*, reveal that more than 58,000 households are waiting for about £44 million of work to be done under the scheme. Since it was extended last June, about £27 million of work has been carried out. At that rate, a £44 million backlog is equivalent to about one year's output. Those delays are substantial and unacceptable, yet the Government are still heavily promoting the scheme with advertising, raising expectations by so doing. They have spent about £3 million this year on advertising and promoting it.

The delays that are being experienced are being blamed on a shortage of heating engineers. However, it is clear from parliamentary answers that too few heating contractors have been engaged to do the work. There are 22 nominated heating contractors in the eastern area of England, and only 37 in the remaining three quarters of the country. Two contractors appear on both lists, one of which is NW Heating Maintenance, a firm to which I shall refer.

The previous Conservative Government established the home energy efficiency scheme under the Social Security Act 1990. While we were in government, well over 2 million people benefited from grants under the scheme and were consequently able to have energy efficiency measures carried out in their homes. Those who benefited were people on benefits, the disabled and the over-60s. Throughout that period, the scheme was overseen by the Department of the Environment and its administration was contracted out to an organisation called EAGA Ltd., a spin-off from National Energy Action. The company, which is now called the EAGA Partnership, is still responsible for the administration of the scheme across three quarters of England, including Dorset—specifically, my constituency of Christchurch. In its 45th report, published in the year 1997-98, the Public Accounts Committee stated:

> "There have been wide variations in the cost of work done by installers, even for work on similar properties in the same area, and it is striking that some installers made almost all their claims exactly at the grant maximum. This may be a consequence of the way in which EAGA have limited the competition between installers."

The PAC concluded:

> "There is now scope for the Department and EAGA to promote more competition between installers so that more can be achieved from the funds available to the scheme."

Against that background, I draw hon. Members' attention to what has been happening in practice. The scheme may have the word "efficiency" in its title, but experience on the ground shows that its delivery and

administration is far from efficient. EAGA has been much better at spin than delivery, taking a leaf out of the Government's book.

The present scheme was launched by the Government with their customary blaze of publicity. More than £100 million was allocated to be spent in England. It was no surprise that many people were attracted to the idea of having up to £2,000 of free central heating provided at the expense of the taxpayer. I have no quarrel with the concept of the scheme: I welcome it. My concern is that, so far, none of my constituents has benefited from it. Nine and a half months after it started, on 1 June 2000, not one central heating installation has been completed under the scheme in my constituency.

On 9 March, EAGA answered my question about how many heating jobs had been completed in Christchurch by saying:

"Within your Christchurch constituency, there are currently thirty nine heating jobs waiting to be allocated to installers and thirty five currently allocated, being carried out."

None had been completed. EAGA based those figures on claims from people living in postcode areas BH6, BH7, BH8, BH9, BH21, BH23, BH24 and SP6. That is an area wider than my constituency. On behalf of the wider Christchurch area, I ask the Government, why do my constituents appear to be discriminated against in this respect, as they are in so many others?

Among those attracted to the scheme in Christchurch were Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths of Burton and Mrs. Donovan of Ferndown. In March 2000, Mrs. Donovan's oil-fired heating broke down five times. She applied to the local council for a grant towards the cost of repair, but was told that the Government were introducing a different scheme to ensure that pensioners and older people would have adequate heating for the winter. In June, she registered for the new scheme. She was visited in August by an EAGA representative who told her that she qualified and would have a new system fitted, and that an engineer would call soon.

Nothing happened. On 2 December, Mrs. Donovan wrote to the EAGA Partnership to complain and she did not even receive a reply. After making other representations in February, in desperation, and having tried every other avenue, she turned to her Member of Parliament. She had been incredibly patient, perhaps too patient: she had waited for the engineer since last August. Her letter to me described her various health problems and said that she

"was very, very cold and had borrowed a warm air blower and a one bar electric fire."

She explained that she spent most of her time in her bedroom to keep warm. She said that she had made several telephone calls to EAGA, only to be told that she was at the "top of the list".

I took up Mrs. Donovan's case by writing to the chief executive of EAGA and received a holding reply. Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Donovan was visited by an engineer who confirmed that she needed a new boiler and said that he would be back soon—she imagined, in a matter of days. More than two weeks later, she telephoned me to say that nothing had happened. I telephoned EAGA and last Friday received a faxed letter to say that Mrs. Donovan would be sent a postal order for £40, which "can be used to purchase a temporary heating measure—such as electric fan heating".

I was assured that her work was scheduled as a priority.

Interestingly, EAGA wrote to hon. Members on 7 November saying that there were clients who might have to wait up to four months before the backlog was cleared. The letter said that EAGA was operating a strict first-come-first-served policy. That has turned out to be palpably untrue. If such a policy had existed, Mrs. Donovan's heating would have been installed months ago.

Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths came to my surgery 10 days ago to discuss their experiences with EAGA. Mr. Griffiths is registered disabled and lives with his wife and four children. He applied to the scheme in July 2000. In August, he was visited and his application accepted. In October, he was told that the correct boiler for his needs was a Glow-worm Micron and that he would be provided with one. In November, he received a letter to say that because of especially high demand, delays were being experienced, but he should continue to be patient. It continued:

"Please do not chase your work by telephoning us as we cannot prioritise your job ahead of other people's work. We will not forget you and I will write to you again on 30th November to keep you aware of our progress."

The letter also assured Mr. Griffiths that all the work was being done on a first-come-first-served basis, that no one was jumping the queue and that additional contractors were being appointed to speed up the work.

On 8 December, Mr. Griffiths received another letter from EAGA's customer services, requesting him to be patient. Eventually, he was visited by a representative of NW Heating Maintenance and on 13 February he received a quotation for supplying and installing a new boiler in the sum of £1,288.56 including value added tax. He was surprised, because he had earlier been told that he would qualify for a grant of £1,000, but was now told that he would have to contribute £677.93 towards the cost of the new boiler.

After meeting Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths, I telephoned EAGA and NW Heating Maintenance. The latter, which is based in Liverpool, proved to be unable to respond to any of my calls, but I found out from EAGA that the £1,000 grant had been reduced because Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths had received cavity wall insulation and window draught proofing at a cost of £326, which had been set off against the £1,000. That came as a surprise to Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths because no cavity wall insulation had been installed. An engineer who called to do the work discovered that the house already had cavity wall insulation. He drilled a hole and found that out, and then fitted one window with some rather inadequate draught proofing. It now turns out that he charged EAGA £245 for the cavity wall insulation and £81 for draught proofing.

It would seem that Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths are the victims of a serious rip-off. The firm concened, Cosytherm Ltd., has been paid by EAGA—by the taxpayers, effectively—for work that it did not do. However, that is not the only rip-off to which Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths have been subjected. Mr. Griffiths has discovered that he could purchase a Glow-worm Micron boiler off the shelf for £413 including VAT. He has obtained a written quotation from a firm in

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Bournemouth that could supply and fit a Glow-worm Micron, remove the old boiler and connect up the system for £879.90 plus VAT. NW Heating Maintenance has quoted £254 more to do the same work, despite supposedly enjoying all the advantages of massive bulk purchasing. Obviously, if Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths accepted the quote from the local firm, which they are not allowed to do under the Government scheme, the additional cost to them would be only £34 instead of £677. That is the difference between whether the work is affordable for them or not.

The Minister can be under no illusions. The unacceptable delays, uncompetitive pricing and general inefficiency of the new heating scheme arrangements are a scandal. However, insult has been added to injury by television advertisements encouraging more people to apply for free central heating, which both Mrs. Donovan and Mr. and Mrs. Griffiths mentioned to me. The advertisements for the scheme, which has been renamed "Warm Front", involve 85 advertising spots in the Meridian television area, at a cost of around £80,000, with the advertisements costing a further £95,000 to produce. I presume that they have been timed to give the impression of a caring Government in the run-up to the general election. It is a pity that they do not make it clear that, at the present rate of progress, people who apply now will not have their heating installed for a year, and that those who applied last summer, like my constituents, have still not had their work done.

Why are the Government carrying out expensive television advertising for a service that is already in crisis, and which cannot be provided? Why is there no effective competition among central heating installers under the scheme, so that the monopoly suppliers can not only delay serving their customers, but overcharge significantly, as my example shows?

Why is the EAGA Partnership the recipient of a soft contract that covers three quarters of England when it is obvious that it cannot deliver? What redress will the Minister seek from EAGA for the way in which it misled Members of Parliament and its customers with circular letters that assured people that it operated a strict first-come-first-served policy? I take that issue seriously. Those constituents waited patiently, believing those words at face value. I am sure that I was not alone among Members of Parliament in believing that the problem was under control, and that we should not worry about the delays because the people who applied first would be served first. We took that circular letter at face value, but it was not true.

Will the Minister now ensure that the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee investigate urgently the contractual arrangements that surround the Government's home energy efficiency scheme? That investigation should include the costs of the latest advertising campaign and the abortive costs of having to pay £40 for every customer whose heating has not been delivered or who has been otherwise adversely affected by the delay. I should also like an inquiry into the rotten deal that customers and taxpayers receive as a result of lack of competition between installers.

Finally, as the scheme is designed to provide the most environmentally friendly and cost-effective heating systems, I hope that the Minister can explain why the quotes are for non-condensing boilers. Under a scheme with more than £100 million of taxpayers' money, surely it would be much more sensible for the boilers provided to be condensing boilers. That would reduce costs for the need group to which the scheme is directed, and it would have environmental benefits, but it does not seem to happen in practice.

I hope that the Minister can allay some of my serious concerns.

1.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Robert Ainsworth): I thank the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) for initiating the debate. It is good to see him again; it is such a short time since we parted company at 2 o'clock this morning.

The Government are determined to tackle fuel poverty, which affects millions of householders. Many of them are the most vulnerable in our society—pensioners, families and disabled householders—and struggle each winter to keep warm. That is why, last month, we published our United Kingdom fuel poverty strategy, which sets out our commitment to end the blight of fuel poverty for vulnerable households by 2010. It will help more than 3 million households.

In England, vulnerable households in the social sector will be helped by our drive to bring all social housing up to a decent standard by 2010. That will ensure that they no longer suffer from fuel poverty. Those living in the private rented sector or who own their own home will be helped through the warm front team and the revised home energy efficiency scheme. The scheme, or HEES, is therefore a key element in our strategy to tackle fuel poverty.

As the hon. Gentleman said, HEES was started in 1991 and provided households with a single insulation measure, often simple draught proofing for windows and doors. A review of the scheme showed that it reduced heating costs of households by, at most, £100 a year. That level of reduction was not sufficient to move households out of fuel poverty, and it did not tackle the difficulties faced by those who lacked a central heating system or whose central heating system had broken down.

We have radically revised the scheme. The new scheme, introduced in June 2000, provides grants of up to £2,000, which is up from the £315 available under the scheme introduced by the Government whom the hon. Gentleman supported. The increased grant allows us to provide complete packages of insulation and heating measures, which can reduce the cost of keeping warm by up to £1,000 a year. For the first time, we are providing efficient central heating systems for low-income householders aged 60 or over. We also believe that although HEES could never offer an emergency-type service, it should offer to repair central heating systems that have broken down.

The HEES package of measures should be sufficient to move the large majority of householders out of fuel poverty. We are providing funding of more than £600 million for the first four years—more than double the

level of the previous scheme—and our aim is to assist about 800,000 householders by 2004. To date, more than 76,000 pensioners and families have benefited from the scheme and enjoy substantially warmer houses as a result. A further 58,000 will have work carried out in the next few months.

HEES is managed in eastern England by Eastern HEES, a not-for-profit subsidiary of the energy supplier TXU. In the rest of the country, it is managed by the EAGA Partnership—an employee-owned company that has managed the scheme since its inception in 1991. The contracts were placed following a full, open competition in accordance with the UK public procurement regulations. The tenders were assessed by a panel that included external commentators. It was a unanimous decision of the panel to award the contracts to EAGA and Eastern HEES, as they offered the lowest prices of technically compliant bids.

The two scheme managers are now responsible for much more than simple administration. They are required to market the scheme, survey homes and recruit subcontractors to carry out the work. As their fees are not linked to the measures installed in each home, elderly and other vulnerable householders can be sure of receiving clear, independent advice on the most appropriate measures for their home. However, the scheme managers are paid according to the volume of work carried out, and so have a powerful incentive to ensure quick delivery. The UK public procurement regulations were also used by the scheme managers to recruit the individual heating and insulation subcontractors. I understand that the scheme manager placed advertisements in the trade press and wrote to all members of the Confederation of Registered Gas Installers—some 40,000 companies—inviting them to tender for work. Contracts were awarded, on the basis of lowest cost, to those companies that met our robust technical, quality and safety requirements.

When we announced the scheme in May 1999, many doubted that gas heating systems and insulation could be fitted within the grant maximums suggested. There is evidence to suggest that the prices paid by HEES are lower than those achieved by either energy suppliers, in respect of insulation, or local authorities, with regard to heating.

Changes to the scheme introduced last June were considerable, so it is not entirely unexpected that there have been problems with its implementation. The hon. Gentleman quotes examples from his constituency. I have also received constituency complaints—as, I am sure, have other hon. Members. The hon. Gentleman should remember that the scheme was substantially new and introduced nationwide last June. For example, during the first three months, there were delays in surveying homes that caused follow-on delays in installation. That problem was resolved.

At present, there are serious difficulties in providing heating improvements due to a national shortage of qualified heating engineers. The scheme managers continue to encourage heating companies to tender for work under the scheme. Existing installers are being encouraged to transfer resources from areas of low to those of high demand. We are also considering how to encourage more smaller installer companies to come forward.

The long-term solution is to increase the number of gas engineers. From last month, in conjunction with Transco, we introduced training programmes to provide an additional 800 engineers to work under the scheme over the next 12 months.

In much of the country, including the south-west, a fast-track system for heating repairs is being introduced. If an engineer has to shut down a boiler and the household has no other source of heating, the fast-track system should normally ensure that the replacement is fitted within five days. If the boiler can be made to work but still requires replacement, the change will be handled more routinely.

Those measures have led to substantial improvements. In much of the country, new gas heating systems and replacement boilers are being installed within three months of survey. The hon. Gentleman extrapolated figures from the start of the scheme and used them to suggest a waiting list of one year. However, that ignores the fact that, because the other scheme was so different, we started from zero. It is totally unrealistic to suggest that people are facing a year's delay when we were going through such a good rate of climb. They are not.

Mr. Chope: Would not the Minister accept that if we are told that it is a first-come-first-served scheme, my comments are fair? Mrs. Donovan applied in June, but she is still waiting.

Mr. Ainsworth: I shall try to deal with individual cases later.

In some areas, including that represented by the hon. Gentleman, serious delays remain in the installation of new heating systems, but we continue to seek improvements. Both scheme managers are keeping those with an interest in the scheme up to date. We realise that many people do not have other heating in addition to the central heating. The scheme managers will shortly be writing to all households that are awaiting heating repairs to offer those without supplementary heating the use of thermostatically controlled electric heaters while they wait for their systems to be repaired. The hon. Gentleman referred to that communication. I must point out, however, that although heating is an important component of HEES, the most popular measure remains the installation of effective home insulation, and insulation continues to be installed as normal and within agreed time scales.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of questions. First, he complained that the advertising was being done for political purposes and asked why we should be advertising when people were suffering delays. I ask him to accept that huge efficiencies can be gained if people come forward in greater numbers, particularly in areas where they have not been doing so. The area covered by Meridian has one of the lowest number of people coming forward, and that has led to inefficiencies.

The hon. Gentleman says that the Government are advertising something for their own ends. In fact, Age Concern criticised the Government for failing to advertise the scheme properly. On 12 January, Andrew Alsop of Age Concern told the BBC that the Government should publicise the scheme properly. It is a good scheme. Help is available and so is the cash.

[Mr. Ainsworth]

However, the Department for Social Security needs to publicise better the help that is available. We were under pressure from organisations such as Age Concern to get the scheme up and running, and we needed to ensure that contractors were coming forward in greater numbers than they were. That will help solve the inefficiencies that are the result of low take-up; if the work is obtained in clusters, prices will fall and efficiency will rise.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned two cases. He tried to suggest that what happened to his constituent, Mrs. Donovan, is proof that the scheme is not being handled on a first-come-first-served basis. There was a delay in dealing with Mrs. Donovan, but EAGA issued the job to an installer that was unable to complete due to a high work load. We should investigate the juxtaposition of the hon. Gentleman's claim that no schemes are being installed in his area with the installer's assertion that its heavy work load was causing the delay to Mrs. Donovan's work. The installer may well have been unable to fulfil the commitment that it had given to EAGA—we should investigate that, and any information that the hon. Gentleman has will be useful. This was not just a case of "first come, first served" not applying; the work was issued to an installer, and the installer caused the delay. The work has now been reissued so that Mrs. Donovan can be treated with the priority that she deserves.

The hon. Gentleman made serious allegations in the case of Mr. Griffiths, in which payments were claimed for the installation of cavity wall insulation. I hope that the hon. Gentleman knows that that case is under investigation by EAGA, so I cannot comment except to say that it will be investigated. We hope to advise him of the outcome, and to learn any lessons that arise from it, so that we can ensure that we properly protect the public purse in such matters. There is no question of discrimination—the hon. Gentleman has rightly raised two matters on behalf of his constituents and will receive a response.

At the moment, scheme managers are carrying out little or no advertising of the warm front team or of HEES in much of the country. They are able to rely on word of mouth to generate sufficient interest to meet the scheme's capacity in these areas. The exceptions are the south-east and parts of the south-west, where local referral networks are not fully effective. To ensure that eligible households do not miss out on help, the scheme manager, EAGA, is using advertisements in the local media.

A pilot series of television advertisements is running on weekday afternoons to reach older people in the area. The cost of the four weeks of television slots is some £80,000, and the advertisements cost about £95,000 to produce. Early indications are that they have generated a good response. More than 1,200 inquiries have been received from eligible households in the first three days alone. It is up to EAGA to determine whether the campaign offers better value for money than other routes. At the same time, EAGA is developing the local referral networks to make them more effective, and so remove the need for further advertising.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are doing all that we can to tackle the delays faced by some householders. Their difficulties should not detract from the achievements of the scheme. More than 76,000 vulnerable households have already benefited and a further 58,000 will have work carried out in the next few months, with the result that they will enjoy substantially warmer homes. We have allocated more than £600 million for the first four years of the scheme, with the aim of helping 800,000 households by 2004.

Suez Canal (Service Medal)

1.29 pm

Mr. Andrew F. Bennett (Denton and Reddish): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise, in a short debate, the Government's failure to recommend or the Queen to award campaign medals to those who served in the Suez canal zone between 1951and 1954. I had hoped that there would be more time for the debate because many other hon. Members are concerned about the issue. I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) is present; no doubt he will hope to speak, and he has my permission and that of the Minister to do so briefly. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch (Mr. Cryer) has also raised questions about the matter.

I place on the record my appreciation of my constituent Mr. Davenport, who has been keeping me up to speed on the issue, and of the late Pip Newton, who led the delegation to press the case with my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, 18 months or so ago, when my hon. Friend was a junior Minister. Mr. Newton worked extremely hard to press the campaign. I also wish to record my appreciation for Mr. Blackburn, Mr. Golder and Mr. Radford for all their work in documenting the case.

This issue matters to many people. They deserve recognition and, even at this late stage, justice can be done. The case for a campaign or service medal is simple. As people get older, children and grandchildren ask, "Dad,"—or "Grandad,"—"what did you do in the Army?" The person starts to talk about his experiences and is then asked, "Well, show us your medal: prove it!" Although that is said jokingly, it clearly rankles with many people who put in a long period of service in the armed forces and who then served in the difficult theatre of the Suez canal zone that that has not been recognised.

The question of medals also arises when old comrades meet, particularly on occasions such as Armistice day parades. When one is talking to someone at such events, the temptation is just to look at their medals or ribbons to see where they served. People who served in the Suez canal zone have nothing to show that they did so. About 18 months ago, I tabled a series of early-day motions listing the people involved in the campaign. I was amazed at the number of people who wrote to complain that their names could not be added because, despite having included three, we had exceeded the word limit for early-day motions.

Many people believe that they should have received recognition for their service in the Suez canal zone. Is such recognition deserved? The best evidence for that can be found in the autobiography of Selwyn Lloyd, who said firmly that one of the reasons for our withdrawal from the region in 1954 was that the conditions in the canal zone were so bad that it was having an effect on service recruitment and retention. I have with me a document prepared at the time to brief Members of Parliament. It states about life in the canal zone:

"Life is extremely monotonous. There are few amenities. Accommodation is very poor, with no prospect of improvement in view of the uncertainties of the future. Some men are doing guard duties every other night; the luckier ones every third night. All vehicles have to travel in pairs; all senior officers have a jeep escort, and, except in a few places, even bathing parties are accompanied by an armed escort."

It later states:

"To sit in a sand-bagged post, illuminated at night by arc lamps, with a village 100 yards away from which shots are fired every night and quite often during the day, without the slightest prospect of being able effectively to return the fire, is quite an ordeal for the old Sweat, let alone for the National Serviceman."

I could continue quoting from that document, which gives a great deal of evidence that serving in the canal zone was at least as difficult as serving in many other parts of the world. At any time, about 80,000 personnel were working there. The figures are disputed, but evidence suggests that more than 300 people lost their lives either from snipers and other violent activity towards them, or from accidents. Many more were injured.

I have acquired various press cuttings on the subject. A headline on 22 November 1951 reads, "Soldiers murdered by Suez mob". Others from the same period include "Suez flare-up: 12 die" and "British Army convoy ambushed". "New Suez road completed by Army" is another, which is followed by

"two British soldiers were stabbed to death and a third was seriously injured on Saturday night."

I could go on.

Since 1945, at least 16 conflicts around the world have led to loss of life. Only those who served in the Suez canal zone, however, have failed to be recognised by the award of a service medal. In terms of the number of people who lost their lives, the Suez canal zone veterans are seventh on that list of 16. The lack of recognition is ridiculous. Service there was extremely difficult. People had to put up with appalling conditions, yet they have never been awarded gallantry medals. They should have gained recognition for their services.

We could spend a long time examining why recognition was not given. Some suggest that it was the politics of the time—that it would have given offence to the Egyptians and made negotiations difficult. Others suggest that it was simply a muddle—that a recommendation was made to the medals committee in 1952, but it was too early to realise how much suffering people had gone through. Whether politics or muddle, the question remains whether it is too late.

I understand the argument that it would have been more appropriate to grant recognition at the time, but if something goes wrong, it is never too late to put it right. Another argument made by Ministers is, "If we concede on this, we shall face claims for more medals in connection with other circumstances." I view that as the worst of all arguments, because cases should be decided on their merits.

It is time for the Government to review the issue afresh. If they do not want to make a recommendation, they should allow the medals committee to examine the issue again. I am certain that the committee would become convinced that it matters to many people. A campaign medal is more justified in this case than for at least 10 or 12 others where campaign medals have been issued.

The question remains whether the medals committee should reconsider so long after the events took place. Since it was established in its present form, there has been no review of the way in which the committee works. The committee must have the opportunity to examine the merits of the case again. It needs to assess

[Mr. Andrew F. Bennett]

whether there is a strong case for acting and what procedure is appropriate for taking action. I am convinced that if the committee were allowed to reconsider, it would decide that it is high time that the campaign medal was awarded.

I shall listen with interest to the Minister. My plea is for him to give the matter more thought and to find a way of letting the medals committee decide whether there is a valid reason—as I am sure that there is—for awarding a medal in this case.

1.39 pm

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) on securing the debate, and thank him for encouraging me to make a short contribution.

We have worked together on the campaign for some time, and my hon. Friend has worked extremely hard on behalf of the veterans. I welcome the Minister, who is part of a Government team that was ready to take a fresh look at military matters when there appears to be a long-standing grievance or injustice.

In this case, there is a grievance and an injustice. The case for recognition for the service and the lives given by our troops in the Suez canal zone between 1951 and 1954 has never been considered by the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals. I have done much research on the subject, especially in the past couple of years, in the Public Record Office and in the Ministry of Defence library. I looked through the Committee's minutes in detail and it became clear to me that the HD committee has a good and consistent record as a committee; it is not, and never has been, a rubber-stamp body. It scrutinises the submissions made to it and rejects or accepts the cases made for medals, such as the general service medal.

The Committee uses no hard and fast criteria; nevertheless, it is clear that in every case it has taken account of similar factors, both before and after the Suez period, all of which are relevant in the claim for the Suez veterans to be entitled to receive the general service medal. However, despite the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Forces wanting the GSM to be awarded to his troops serving in the Suez canal zone, the recommendation never reached the HD committee. The Army Council never even discussed the case formally.

Although I do not underestimate the strength of attachment that the establishment has to the practice of non-retrospection, I make the following plea to the Minister. This year is the 50th anniversary of the deployment of our troops in the Suez canal zone. I urge my hon. Friend and his ministerial colleagues to make this year the one in which we allow the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals finally to give the case a full and fair hearing.

1.42 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. John Spellar): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Mr. Bennett) on securing the debate on a subject that is dear to his heart, and to which he has given considerable time and attention. It is appropriate that he raises the matter in Westminster Hall rather than over a cup of tea at breakfast time in the Members' Tea Room. Since becoming a Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) has also taken a strong interest in the matter and continues to do so.

Service in the Suez canal zone in the early 1950s was an unpleasant and, at times, dangerous experience. The climate was oppressive. Troops were on declared active service. Their accommodation was mostly in tents and the conditions were Spartan. There were killings and woundings, although not as many as some, including my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish, suggest. There are reports that 60 service men were killed and 600 wounded during the three-year period; the reality, although still regrettable, is that 40 deaths and 75 woundings were attributable to terrorist action in that time.

In January 1952, the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Land Forces, General Sir Brian Robertson, wrote to the Military Secretary about the award of operational guaranteed decorations for service in the canal zone. Only an extract from his letter survives, but it seems that he also raised the matter of a campaign medal. In his reply, the Military Secretary said that he would "sound out" the Adjutant-General about that possibility. That would have been only one step in the procedure; the institution of a new medal or clasp was not, and is not, within the power of any single Department. Recommendations require the agreement of the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Medals and Decorations, usually referred to as the HD committee, which in turn submits the request to the Sovereign for approval. No record has been found of the sounding out of the Adjutant-General, but we know that the Army Council decided that operational awards would be inappropriate, and that the War Office did not submit a case for a campaign medal to the HD committee.

General Robertson seems to have accepted that. There is no record that he appealed or asked for reconsideration. An opportunity to reopen the question arose a few years later when a clasp to the general service medal was instituted for the 1956 Suez operation, but no one took advantage of it.

As my hon. Friend said, there has been much speculation about why no case was put to the HD committee. It is often claimed that the Foreign Office blocked the case, and there are two conflicting interpretations as to why that might have happened. One is that the Foreign Office did not want to upset the Egyptians by admitting that we were, in effect, at war. The other is that the award of a medal would have pleased the Egyptians by conferring the status of a military operation on what was, in fact, terrorist activity.

Service deployments are part of a foreign policy that has diplomatic, economic and military aspects. If a case had ever gone to the HD committee, the Foreign Office would, quite properly, have had a say in the discussion. There is no indication in War Office or Foreign Office records that the two Departments had any consultation on the subject, or that the Foreign Office expressed a view, formally or informally.

The possible effect on opposing nationals did not prevent the award of medals for contemporary or near-contemporary security operations in places such as

Palestine and Malaya. Neither argument about the effect on the Egyptians would have carried any weight when the further opportunity to make a case arose in 1956.

It has also been claimed that a case was not put forward because the canal zone was a cause of embarrassment to the War Office. Those who claim that appear to be looking at the situation from their own viewpoint, not that of the Army 50 years ago. Troops were deployed in the canal zone to ensure the safe passage of shipping and to protect a limited British presence that existed by treaty with the Egyptians, even though the Egyptian Parliament had abrogated it. There is nothing embarrassing about that. If the War Office had been embarrassed, the Military Secretary would not have taken steps to ensure that so many of those stationed in the canal zone received awards in the 1952 birthday honours list.

Another allegation is that the War Office was influenced by the strength of public and political opinion against the operations. However, public opinion was divided, and there is no reason to believe that the War Office was swayed either way. The then Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir William Slim, widely acknowledged to have been the finest "soldier's general" since Wellington, is unlikely to have been deterred if he had thought that there was a good case.

It is frequently alleged that the members of the Army Council in 1952 were unaware of the conditions in the canal zone, including the casualty rate to which I referred. The suggestion that the Army's most senior officers were ignorant of the situation in the biggest British forces base in the eastern Mediterranean and middle east is, to say the least, surprising. They were fully aware of the situation, and in September 1952, the Secretary of State spoke at a meeting of the Army Council about a visit that he had made to the area.

Half a century after the events, and without comprehensive documentation, any explanation of why no case was made can only be speculative. However, the most likely reason is that the Army Council did not consider that the scale and scope of the operations in the canal zone were in the same category as those of other contemporary or recent deployments. The second world war was a recent memory, and the Korean war was still in progress.

A few years previously, internal security operations in Palestine, over a roughly similar three-year period, had resulted in more than six times as many deaths and almost 10 times as many woundings as those that would eventually result from terrorism in the canal zone. A comparison with Palestine was made when the question of operational awards for the canal zone was considered. The British forces in Palestine were heavily involved in a large number of military operations of various types, against an enemy that was fully armed with modern weapons and organised on a proper military basis. In the canal zone, apart from one military operation that lasted one day, when British troops assaulted the Egyptian police barracks at Ishmaelia, the role of the forces was to provide static guarding, convoy protection and personal security against a quite different type of opponent.

Some veterans argue that their service compares favourably with present-day deployments for which medals have been awarded. That was part of the case that my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish made in drawing attention to operations that had taken place in the period since the war. We need to be clear that the case must be considered against the standards of the time. Policy on medals changes over the years, and it is for each generation to consider whom it should honour. One view was taken during the first world war, another during the second world war and yet another is taken now. We cannot rewrite history.

Whatever the reason for the initial decision, the fact remains that no case was put to the HD committee either at the time of the deployment or later. There does not seem to have been sufficient agitation for the matter to be reopened until some 20 years after the events, when the late Pip Newton, to whom my hon. Friend referred, instituted a lobbying campaign.

The HD committee has a long-standing policy that it will not consider the institution of awards and medals for service given many years earlier. It will not look back at claims for medals if the operation concerned finished more than five years previously.

Mr. Bennett: Could my hon. Friend tell me when the committee arrived at that decision? Is it not now time for the committee at least to review it?

Mr. Spellar: That decision was taken shortly after the end of the second world war. It might be appropriate to put that point to the committee again, but it believes that there are sound grounds in respect of trying to judge historical decisions against the different criteria of the day. The reasons given by the committee are that, when no contemporary claim was made, it cannot second-guess why those who were in a position to ask for a medal decided not to do so. It also says that claims that were rejected at the time, either by the Ministry of Defence and its predecessors or by the HD committee, were based on contemporary evidence and that those who rejected the claims would have had access to the full facts at the time and would have had valid reasons for rejection.

As I said, that policy has been in force since the end of the second world war, but there had in practice been no retrospective institution of medals since the 19th century. The HD committee has made it clear on a number of occasions that it does not intend to reconsider the policy and nor will it admit that decisions taken in the 19th century should be precedents for the present day.

That is not to say that the Ministry of Defence has a closed mind on the question. In 1999, the then Adjutant-General set in train a review, which examined all the open and closed MOD records that could be found and consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Public Record Office. The then Chief of the General Staff also took an interest in the case. The Adjutant-General concluded that no evidence had been found to

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[Mr. Spellar]

indicate that the Army Council decision taken at the time was unsound or should be re-examined. Colonel Newton was given the opportunity to study the documents that led to that conclusion.

The following year, the next Adjutant-General sought guidance from the Cabinet Secretary, the chairman of the HD committee. The advice given was that the Ministry of Defence was

"right, so long after the event, to treat this matter as having been settled long ago and to continue to refuse claims for retrospective recognition".

Four years later, Colonel Newton raised the matter with a new Adjutant-General who studied the available material and concluded that the earlier decisions should not be re-examined. The following year, the then Chief of the General Staff examined the relevant papers and also endorsed the conclusion that the matter was settled long ago.

Three years ago, as Under-Secretary of State for Defence, I met a delegation headed by my hon. Friend that consisted of eight canal zone veterans, including Colonel Newton. They stated their case and handed me a number of documents. I asked my Department's Army historical branch to carry out a further review of all available documents to see whether any new facts had come to light and whether there were any grounds for reopening the case. The review was very thorough and my conclusion was that there was no new evidence to persuade me that I should make a case to the HD committee asking it to break its long-established policy and overturn the decisions taken at the time.

We remain willing to look at fresh evidence. For a long time it was believed that the correspondence dating from 1952 had been destroyed or lost. Some of it came to light in July 1999 with the discovery of a folder of papers that should have been passed to the Public Record Office 15 years earlier. We were open about that, and copies of the documents were sent to all hon. Members who had received ministerial letters mentioning the 1952 correspondence and to some of the more frequent correspondents among the veterans. I arranged for the papers to be examined by the Army historical branch; again, its conclusion was that they contained nothing to justify an approach to the HD committee.

A year ago, my hon. Friend and a colleague presented my successor as Under-Secretary with papers relating to contemporary political and public opinion about the canal zone; again the papers were examined and yet again the same conclusion was reached.

In summary, there are three basic facts. First, the War Office did not submit a case for a medal at the time of the canal zone deployment or shortly after. Secondly, the HD committee has a long-standing and firm policy of non-retrospection. Thirdly, despite successive reviews, no evidence has come to light that demonstrates that the War Office got it wrong and that the HD committee could be persuaded to breach its policy.

Mr. Healey: Can my hon. Friend explain what new evidence would persuade him to alter his position?

Mr. Spellar: Evidence relating to, for example, the Army Council could persuade me to alter my position. I mentioned earlier that General Robertson did not appeal or argue against the decision. However, we believe from the surrounding evidence that he probably made an initial inquiry. Evidence relating to whether the case was considered properly in terms of procedure might constitute grounds for reconsideration.

Mr. Bennett: There is increasing evidence about how delicate the situation was among Conservative MPs at the time. One faction was keen to get out of the zone as quickly as possible; the other faction was keen to stand and fight. That sensitivity suggests that there may have been a little political persuasion not to award a medal because it would have caused political difficulties for a party that had a small majority at the time.

Mr. Spellar: The fact that engagements were controversial has not prevented medals being awarded. I mentioned the Korean war, which was controversial in British domestic terms. I say to both my hon. Friends, and to the other hon. Members who have taken a considerable interest in the matter, that we are ready to examine further evidence and we understand the strength of feeling about the case. We acknowledge the service that was given by the veterans in the Suez canal zone in that period.

It being Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 15 March 2001

[SIR ALAN HASELHURST *in the Chair*]

Housing Benefit

[*Relevant document: Sixth Report of the Social Security Committee, Session 1999-2000, HC 385.*]

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned—[*Mrs. McGuire.*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I am delighted to have the privilege of opening this short debate—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I should tell the hon. Gentleman that the same dress code rules apply in Westminster Hall as in the Chamber.

Mr. Kirkwood: I beg your pardon, Mr. Deputy Speaker. How embarrassing. Take two.

I am pleased and grateful to have the opportunity to open this important debate. I am delighted that the Liaison Committee was persuaded that this was an important subject that affected hon. Members on both sides of the House because of their casework and their commitment to look after their constituents' interests. There is certainly prima facie evidence that the housing benefits system is failing substantially in its application and its structure and that problems flow from that. The debate is therefore apposite.

I am also pleased to open the debate because the Select Committee that I have the privilege to chair undertook an inquiry into housing benefits in its sixth report last year. We took evidence and produced what I hope will prove an invaluable resource document for hon. Members. We took substantial evidence from most of the pressure groups, interested parties, local government associations and others. Although the report was published in July last year, I hope that it is still relevant and helps to focus some of the main issues that are still at the forefront of the minds of people who study these matters outside the House.

Housing benefit has an increasingly important part to play in the range of income support and financial resources available to low-income households. It is a subject that can fall into the interstices between housing policy on the one hand and benefit policy on the other. That makes it difficult for the Government. It is difficult to know who has the prime responsibility for taking the policy development forward where housing benefit straddles and overlaps the areas of pure housing development and social security plans in the respective Departments.

It is not a subject that it is easy to get right either because 4.5 million households rely on it. We pay a total of £12 billion. That is nearly 12 per cent. of our total social security spend and a significant proportion of public expenditure. Occasional difficulties and hiccups are almost inevitable in a system that deals with such massed numbers of people who are in adverse financial circumstances. However, £12 billion is much better than nothing at all. We must always bear it in mind that, although the housing benefit system may have its problems, it has an important support role for people who are financially distressed.

The Committee was pleased that the Government undertook the March 1999 review of housing policy in a Green Paper. We thought that that was right and we looked forward to seeing the fruits of that Green Paper—consultation. We then took the view that it would have been right for the Committee to have taken on an inquiry. I shall spare her blushes, but the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) was quite—

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): Obsessive.

Mr. Kirkwood: I was looking for another word. The hon. Lady eloquently persuaded us that, once the Government had produced the Green Paper proposals on housing, it was time for the Committee to consider the impact of housing benefit on housing policy in London and elsewhere. Through her experience as a councillor, she knows a great deal about the issues. Her constituency is considerably stressed, because it is situated in a high-rent area, which brings problems of its own. I am particularly in her debt, because I learned a great deal by listening to accounts of the situations that she confronts daily in her constituency work. The Committee is grateful for her involvement, because it was right for us to consider housing benefit.

We became a little frustrated because the Green Paper took a long time to arrive, and we kept being told that it was coming next month or soon.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): Very soon.

Mr. Kirkwood: Indeed. By December 1999, we were so frustrated that we decided to proceed with our own inquiry, even though we did not have the advantage of knowing the Green Paper's conclusions. In retrospect, that was the right thing to do, because it took us until July to produce our report and recommendations. The Green Paper was published some time later. We have now been able to consider what the Government said, and some of the consultation and comments that have flowed from the paper have been helpful.

We were disappointed that we could not proceed more coherently, but we got there in the end. We have made recommendations, which the Government are considering. Their formal response was a little disappointing. It was quite full and well argued, but did not deal as thoroughly as we had hoped with some of the issues that we raised. Perhaps that is always the way with Government responses to Select Committee reports. I know that Governments cannot do everything all the time. I am not a Government Member, but they have achieved a lot on social policy generally and on social security. I broadly support the thrust of welfare-to-work provision. Work for those who can work and security for those who cannot is a perfectly arguable adage. From my perspective, there has certainly been much

[Mr. Kirkwood]

more emphasis, perhaps rightly, on the first half of that adage and getting people who can work into work. A great deal of work has been done on that. Whether or not we agree with all of it, we certainly cannot accuse the Government of doing nothing.

However, there are real concerns about the impact of housing benefit policy when we come to consider security for those who cannot and never will be able to work, such as those with mental illnesses or stressed backgrounds and those from ethnic communities. There is a category of people to whom the Government have not yet adequately turned their attention. There is work still to be done on housing policy, and housing benefit as a part of it, which is a bit of a disappointment.

I do not want to turn this into a party political debate, because I hope that it will be more positive than that, but a Parliament has been lost in respect of significant housing and housing benefit reform. Indeed, evidence from pressure groups is mounting that the problems, far from lessening, have become worse over the past four years. I hope that this debate will allow consideration of some of the main concerns about housing benefit. There are two principal areas of concern that can sensibly be considered, both of which our report embraced. There is the question of administration and complexity. Separate from that is the need for long-term policy reform and a future strategy. I am concerned that we may concentrate exclusively in this debate on some of our constituents' short-term problems at the expense of trying to encourage the Government to share some of their thinking, such as it is, and to focus on what can be done in the longer term, in the next Parliament and beyond. I wish to spend a moment considering that.

I am not a housing expert and would never masquerade as one, but some requirements are stark and staringly obvious if sensible long-term reform is to be achieved. We need to examine the provision of tenure-neutral housing support. The current system is far too fragmented, and that is inevitable given the provenance of the current housing benefit scheme. It came from different systems of the public and private sectors and was designed to do different things. Some of it originated with local authorities, some with social security and the old supplementary benefits payment. One of the long-term goals that we should be aiming for is provision that is blind to the sort of housing that it supports.

We also want provisions that fit seamlessly into the new regimes and take us in the direction of tax credits rather than benefit payments. We cannot and should not ignore that. If we did, we would end up with a housing benefit system that did not fit, which would not be sensible. We must consider the need to establish common rules on such things as capital thresholds, earnings disregards and periods of entitlement. Those are all areas that agencies could more easily administrate. They would be more transparent for claimants if the rules were common to all systems of social security as well as housing.

We need urgent and radical reform. Reading the minds of Ministers, and between the lines of the Green Paper recommendation, the Government seem to be heading for some form of national flat rate. If they are, it will need to be topped up clearly and robustly by locally variable amounts. I am convinced that a system that might be adequate for Roxburgh and Berwickshire simply would not begin to work in Regent's Park and Kensington. One can buy a modest estate in Roxburgh and Berwickshire for the rents in Regent's Park and Kensington. That must be taken into account in the long term if we want radical reform.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Will the hon. Gentleman clarify what he means? Many of us who represent high-rent, high-priced inner urban areas also represent people who are very poor but who live in high-rent properties paid for by housing benefit. I, and I am sure many other hon. Members, would be concerned about any proposal for housing benefit to be cash-restricted, which would effectively mean the export of poor people from areas such as mine.

Mr. Kirkwood: I am obviously not making myself clear. It is precisely to protect against that eventuality that I am arguing for local variations. We need to take account of high-rent areas. If I have learned anything from the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North, it is that rents in parts of London, with which I am not familiar, for obvious reasons, are astronomically—and, to me, unbelievably— high. That must be taken into account in any structural reform.

Mr. Corbyn: So the hon. Gentleman agrees with me?

Mr. Kirkwood: Indeed, and not for the first time.

I am sure that the Minister needs no persuasion that housing benefit is often the biggest remaining obstacle for claimant households trying to get back into work. Such cases may not be a large proportion of the housing benefit claimant case load, but there are significant hurdles in the way of people on housing benefit who want to move. They do not want to prejudice their ability to receive the benefit because it is so difficult to reclaim. I have evidence in my constituency of people who would be prepared to take the risk of going to find work elsewhere, but they will not come to Regent's Park and be faced with horrendous levels of rent if they think that they may lose their housing benefit entitlement. That needs urgently to be addressed if the Government's policy of encouraging more people out of dependency and into work is to be successful. It is regrettable that after four years of the current Parliament we have travelled little further on from where we came in. I hoped that, whoever wins the election, the next Government will view the matter more urgently and will implement a change that is long overdue. Will the Minister give us a flavour of what the Government regard as viable longer-term options?

Angela Eagle: The hon. Gentleman will have read the Green Paper and the response to it. We made it clear that long-term options for housing benefit had to await rent restructuring. For obvious reasons, the Green Paper estimated the period necessary for rent restructuring at seven to 10 years.

Mr. Kirkwood: That is a long time. I did not realise that the Government had publicly made that clear. That is a real problem, because if we have to wait for rent reform, structural reform of housing benefit will not

happen for at least 10 years. I regard that as far too long, and I hope that we can persuade the Government to view the matter with greater urgency. If the evil manifestations of the current system continue for another 10 years, goodness knows how many people will suffer in the meantime.

Angela Eagle: I would not want the hon. Gentleman to gain the impression that we will not do anything to reform housing benefit for seven to 10 years. He asked about the long-term structural changes in the Green Paper, which included moving to a flat-rate style housing benefit system. The Government had considered the possibility, and the Green Paper included consultation on the subject. The outcome of the process is that the Government are not contemplating radical change to housing benefit before the restructuring of rents. It would not work until the rent structure became more coherent than it is now.

Mr. Kirkwood: That cheers me up, but only a little. I accept that big changes should not be rushed—in case people lose and get hurt—and that restructuring rent strategy takes a long time. I will hold the Minister to her commitment that the Government will not do nothing about the problem for 10 years. The Government have mentioned some potentially useful ideas since the Green Paper and our report were published.

I shall now deal with improving the administration of the scheme. I suspect that hon. Members are interested mainly in how their constituents will be affected here and now. The present delay and confusion in the system is certainly causing problems. All the consulted pressure groups—Shelter, the Chartered Institute of Housing and the National Housing Federation, which published a document yesterday—confirm how dire the current position is. They have shown that improvements such as the verification framework, which was rightly introduced to bear down on fraud, have slowed the system and caused even more delays. Even intended improvements can have perverse effects.

Outsourcing is another real difficulty, which is beginning to compound the problems of investigation. It is necessary to investigate some private sector companies' performance. Some hon. Members present have more direct experience than I do. I hope that they will share some of that experience with us.

There are problems with outsourcing. I am not an expert in the fine detail, but it strikes me as odd that the Government threaten public authorities that are struggling to administer a scheme. Big brother central Government say, "If you don't get it right in a fortnight, we will outsource." I am sure that much can be learned from the private sector; clever consultants can help. However, it is wrong to use outsourcing as an active threat—almost as a sanction—against local authorities that do not have adequate resources and are inundated by case loads that are difficult to administer.

The hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North made it clear—it is a problem that I do not have in my constituency—that the level of pay that is offered by the Benefits Agency and the housing authority makes it impossible to win, train and retain staff who are able to deal with complicated situations. Turnover rates are high. People are hired and trained, their civil service background and training give them a high market rating, and they move on. It is wrong and counterproductive for central Government to use that hopeless situation as a big stick with which to beat local authorities.

Some changes are introduced in a capricious manner. The changes that the Department made to its own management information systems were visited on local authorities without notice, out of the blue. Great difficulties were caused because there was no training or IT back-up. Department officials must exercise self-discipline when introducing legislative and regulatory changes. There must be greater stability; in fact, there should be an annual deadline, a point each year after which no further reforms or changes to the benefits system are issued from the Adelphi office to local authorities and others. That would provide some stability for the people who provide the administrative systems for paying benefits.

Finally, additional resources or subsidies are urgently needed if the system is to be rescued from its present state. I do not care whether qualifications or conditions are imposed to link extra resources with administrative improvements. The need is great—I will discuss some details shortly—but the additional resources that have been made available to support the administrative regimes do not come near to matching it. Ministers should be concerned about that.

A problem that is of increasing concern to me—it has more to do with social security than housing—is the number of households in the United Kingdom that are living below income support and jobseeker's allowance levels. The number is much higher than the vast majority of folk realise. Households fall below the meagre safety level of support in two ways as a result of housing benefit. First, institutional restrictions, which are internal to the system itself, are put on the level of payments that can be made for housing costs. People have to take resources from their income support or other income streams, because housing benefit can no longer be depended on to meet their actual housing costs. That problem exists not only in London, but in constituencies as far north as mine. People find it difficult to make up housing costs from other income streams, and the problem is worsening.

Secondly, because the administration is now so poor, payment of the benefits to which people are entitled is delayed. That leads inexorably to rent arrears and, thereafter, eviction. Computers do not have any sense: they spew out eviction letters. An 85-year-old churchwarden had her confidence in life destroyed, not because her housing benefit was cut but because she was threatened with eviction. She was perplexed and it took me a long time to persuade her that her approach was too responsible and old-fashioned, and that the problem could be fixed because it was just part of the system. That is not the worst case and hon. Members will have other examples of stressed households, but it happened in my constituency only last week. Households are being driven systematically below income support and jobseeker's allowance levels in a way that we cannot ignore.

The sixth report of the Social Security Committee on housing benefit raised issues such as entitlement to housing benefit being set for fixed periods. There was

[Mr. Kirkwood]

some encouragement in that respect, as the Government did not say no, although they did not say yes either. We hold out some hope of pensioners having an annual fixed entitlement; their financial circumstances are unlikely to change and there is little point chasing average pensioner households, especially in my constituency, where they are a stable cohort of the population.

We must consider the number of rates and levels of non-dependant deductions. There is a case for them to be reduced, perhaps over a period, as such things are expensive; there are no blank cheques. However, there are frequent occasions on which non-dependant deductions exceed rent levels, which does not make much sense. The matter must be considered urgently.

The rules restricting private rents also need to be considered urgently; the Government's response gave us some comfort and we may return to the matter later in the debate. Single-room rent restrictions need to be reviewed and I am pleased that the Government are broadening some of the types of single-room rents that can be considered. However, it is a marginal change; it does not fill us with confidence that the Government are dealing with the problem, especially when households with under-25s are involved.

The report drew attention to the exceptional hardship provision and how it is used, or not used. More resources could be made available; if there were more flexibility, everyone would be more able to cope with the circumstances that arise. The Government response to the report stated that there had been increases in earnings disregards, but they should be restored and updated regularly, just as they are in other parts of the benefits system.

Fraud and error are not specifically housing benefit issues. However, I am worried that there is so much party political discussion about fraud that it deters people who have a genuine entitlement, especially retired people, from making claims. If an election is visited upon us, every political party, including my own, will say that we must bear down on fraud, and so we must, but we must be disciplined about using language correctly and getting things properly targeted; we must be sure that we are talking about confirmed or suspected fraud, so that there is a sensible relationship to what actually happens. People make assumptions about fraud without having any evidence, and that must be dealt with.

Fraud and error could be much better and more substantially addressed if the system were easier to administer and to understand. Some of the experiments that we saw in Lewisham, for example, used clever, modern technology to cut delays and make administration much easier. The explanation process that is made available to claimants from the beginning is excellent, and staff morale was high when we visited recently. It is a model of what can be achieved with some extra resources and creativity.

I hope that the Minister will speak about what is happening to the verification programme. All the evidence available to me since the report was produced says that, in many cases, the verification procedures are substantially slowing down the application process and, worryingly, contributing to arrears. The inspectors, who do valuable work to assist the authorities in the verification framework project, need to support and to co-operate with the authorities to secure improvement, rather than appearing out of the blue as men from the Ministry to threaten fire and brimstone if local authorities do not quickly improve their operations.

The Government's response to the report was a little disappointing. Since then, they have, through the Green Paper, made it clear that they want to concentrate on raising standards in administration. That is right and proper, and I hope that the Minister will talk about how they want to do that. They also said that they were trying to simplify the system. We support that enthusiastically, although some of the suggestions that we have seen, helpful as they are, do not go far enough by themselves. The Government would have to take radical and far-reaching steps to deal with the problems surrounding tapers, disregards and non-dependant deductions before we were assured that their response was adequate.

The tone of some recent statements from those responsible for housing, rather than benefit, has been more encouraging. If the Minister can help me this afternoon—if not, a letter would be acceptable, and I would ensure that other Members had access to it—I would like assurances on timings and, specifically, on the question of setting housing benefit for fixed periods, which applies to requirements to notify changes as well. We gained the impression that the Government were actively considering positive changes on that, and if the hon. Lady could say anything about that today, it would be welcomed. On simplifying rules, the ministerial mind might be currently applying itself to examining the rules that restrict eligibility of private sector rents, but whether that is in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions or the Department of Social Security, I know not. However, if the Minister could report anything about that, it would also be welcomed.

I have spoken to registered social landlords, and get the impression that the Government are constructively considering involving them in the verification process as a way of speeding it up.

Mr. Corbyn: On the idea of involving registered social landlords, I can see where the hon. Gentleman is coming from. However, the efficiency of services run by registered social landlords varies enormously, and I am concerned that if some housing associations become involved in verification, the situation might be worse than if local authorities did it.

Mr. Kirkwood: I accept the hon. Gentleman's wider experience and more detailed knowledge of the scheme. He has a perfectly valid point, and if landlords are to be involved there must be proper safeguards and standards. Involving third party organisations in people's personal details should not be done casually; we must be clear that people's rights remain protected. Perhaps the scheme would be too hard to implement but, if there is anything in consultation, we would be pleased to hear about it.

During the inquiry, I was impressed by the depth and strength of feeling of claimants, pressure groups, local authority organisations and academics, who consider

that the situation is still unacceptable and who say that, in some instances, it is becoming worse. If that is true, we cannot ignore it. The Government in all their various departmental manifestations need urgently to reflect on what additional consideration can be given to housing benefit. Additional resources are inevitable. I am not talking about sums that would be significant in public expenditure terms. Some money has been put into help teams and that is welcome, but I am not reassured that the Government have yet seriously grasped the extent of the problem.

To achieve short-term improvements and the longer-term fundamental changes to prevent millions of citizens from being consigned to poverty for a long time, it is necessary for the Government urgently and seriously to respond adequately to the representations that have been made from not only outside the House, but colleagues and Select Committees such as ours, which in the sixth report has seriously suggested ways forward. Naturally, the Government must measure the resources conflict that some suggestions may involve, but I hope that the Minister will give us some short-term cheer this afternoon in the expectation that, in 10 years' time, some of us may not be here to cheer her improvements in the long-term fundamental reform of the housing benefit system.

3.6 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): I woke up this morning and thought, "Great, an opportunity to discuss housing benefit." That worried me for two reasons. First, I am becoming weird and, secondly, as the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) said, it reflects the fact that housing benefit has not achieved anything like the attention that it warrants. We must bear in mind its scale and importance—4 million households depend on housing benefit—and that, in some parts of the country, the situation is catastrophic and the delivery of housing benefit has almost collapsed.

The National Housing Federation report was published yesterday. It was also the 18th birthday of housing benefit, but there is no cause for celebration. The federation concluded that housing benefit is paid to some of the most vulnerable people in society. It said that in the summer of 1999 a crisis affecting passport claims hit the headlines, politicians quickly moved into action and, as a result, only 500 people actually missed their holiday. That was bad news for those people, but housing benefit affects many more people than that and can result in more serious problems than missing a holiday. Urgent action is needed now to tackle the crisis that is hitting people's homes. As the hon. Gentleman said, to place emphasis on that point in no way detracts from the fact that, before Christmas, the Government made various welcome announcements in response to the consultation process on the housing Green Paper. No one is accusing the Government of inaction, but clearly a great deal more can be done.

Housing benefit is the backstop that keeps a roof over people's heads. It is disproportionately paid to potentially vulnerable people, such as pensioners, families with children and people who are ill and disabled. We should be proud of the system because arguably there is nothing more important than a secure home. Without that security, all the Government's other objectives of promoting work, education, good health and so on cannot be achieved. The housing benefit system should underpin the brave and bold commitment of the Government to tackle child and pensioner poverty. At present, however, it is not doing that.

The roots of the problem go back a long way—it has not emerged recently—to the conscious decision of previous Governments, after the institution of the current structure of housing benefit, to shift housing subsidies from bricks and mortar to individuals. The problem also stems from a long-term failure to invest in benefit administration sufficient to provide a quality service to claimants on low incomes. Since 1997, the Government have made excellent progress on a number of relevant fronts, especially through the ONE pilots and the development of personal advisers in the new deal. However, the problems that afflict so many areas of the country show how much more must be done.

I can scarcely put a cigarette paper between my opinions on this matter and those of the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire, apart from one point. I understand and accept the need for caution and the importance of not rushing into a set of fundamental reforms of subsidy in a way that would inadvertently lead to hundreds of thousands, or even millions of losers. We cannot do everything at once and fundamental reform is tricky. Some element of rent restructuring is essential, especially to allow housing subsidies to facilitate the better use of the housing stock. Housing benefit fraud is a serious issue, and there is a need for a version of a verification framework and all that goes with it. All those things are taken as given.

In preparing for this debate, I went back to the Beveridge report to see what it said about housing subsidies. It would be fair to say that Beveridge bottled it. The report states that the country should give future Governments

> "twenty years for dealing with the rent problem, that is to say, reducing the anomalous rent level of London and the acute individual inequalities, which persist throughout the country...The extreme variation of rents is evidence of failure to distribute industry and population and of failure to provide housing according to needs. No scale of social insurance benefits free from objection can be framed while the failure continues."

If Governments failed to deal with those problems for 55 years after Beveridge, it is unsurprising that this Labour Government have failed to tackle it in just four years. We need more time. However, the thought of the 59 years since those words were written would cause me considerable anxiety if we were not planning to make any more radical reform for another seven to 10 years. I can easily imagine the matter stretching on to 100 years in that case—although I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will say that that will not happen.

Angela Eagle: Clearly, the introduction of tax credits into the system has implications for housing benefit. A lot of work will have to be done to ensure that the making work pay agenda is not weakened by the anomalous nature of some housing benefit structures. Although, by definition, big flat-rate reform cannot be on the agenda until rents have been restructured, a

[Angela Eagle]

person does not have to be a genius to understand that an extension of the tax credit system would have implications for housing benefit.

Ms Buck: I warmly welcome those comments from the Minister. I will return to the matter, but I accept her point.

I welcome, too, the range of specific initiatives announced before Christmas to deal with some problems that have emerged in the administration and delivery of housing benefit and aspects of the policy agenda. There was a degree of relaxation of single-room rent restriction, the establishment of the expert health team and the first significant increase in financial support for local authorities since 1993. Those policies show that the Government are listening and responding to problems on the ground. They are especially welcome after an initially disappointing response to Select Committee reports in the summer. We have made progress and will make more.

The current situation requires significant and urgent change and I expect a future Labour Government to make the issue an absolute priority. There are three main clusters that must be addressed. First, administration must improve, with a consequent improvement of people's experiences of claiming, which can undermine their experience of the welfare state.

The problems that have emerged in different parts of the country have been devastating for hundreds of thousands of individuals, but I will concentrate on my constituency experiences. I have dealt with hundreds of individuals who have received possession notices. That is a dreadful experience for such individuals, who may be elderly, disabled or bringing up children. Such experiences are a result of the extremely ill-thought-out and mismanaged process of privatising the benefit service to Capita. At one point, I believe that 27,000 items of post built up, with a backlog of cases that has stretched back since last April.

I am pleased that the peak of the crisis in Westminster has passed and that is a tribute to the client team of Westminster city council, which has taken the brunt of dealing with cases on behalf of councillors, advice agencies and me. However, even though the peak has passed, lives are being turned upside down. A constituent named Louisa wrote to me last week, saying:

"Ms Buck, I am writing to you as the worker in the housing benefit department told me that they couldn't do anything more about my case, apart from waiting, and that is something I have been doing since last April, so the lady suggested I see my MP."

It says something when the administrators of housing benefit pass on their cases to a Member of Parliament. The letter continues:

"I applied in April...over the next seven months I gave the same documents in again and again...In December they gave me my cheque...Three weeks later they asked me to renew my claim...I have now been waiting another 8 weeks...I have two small children to feed and clothe and I am on anti-depressants. I can't take any more of this."

One of my local law centres in Paddington, to which I pay tribute for the amount of work it has done, said that

"claimants with outstanding claims for housing and council tax benefit are invariably issued with summonses for arrears, court costs are added to these, all where the substantive problem is the failure to process benefit. It then takes numerous letters and calls to get these costs waived, and this despite numerous assurances from Westminster that costs should never be imposed where there is underlying benefit entitlement."

I share its view that the decision to privatise Westminster's service made no sense at the time and, when examined now, it has been a total waste of public money, with no obvious gain to either the council or benefit recipients.

Another of my constituents, named Stephen, gave up the keys to his flat and we believe that he has been living rough as a result of the extreme anxiety that he experienced when the North British Housing Association delivered him a notice to quit because his benefits could not be resolved. He wrote:

"Almost every day in the last two weeks of my tenancy I phoned the Benefits helpline to inform them that they must finalise my claims. I stressed to them that they had no more time left. There is a high risk that my TB will return as I could not finish my last treatment (when homeless and walking the streets all day). I regard Westminster Council as criminal."

Those letters, which have been picked from the top of my post, are illustrative of the problem.

The case of Stephen, a former rough sleeper who we now understand to be back on the streets, leads me to the second issue that should be delivered by a housing benefit system that is working properly. Housing subsidy must counter poverty and social exclusion, not reinforce it. That is achieved in many parts of the country. I agree that it is a badge of pride to have a housing benefits service that can satisfactorily relieve the pressure of housing costs, when administered properly, as it is in seven tenths of the country or more. In areas of high housing cost, however, it simply does not do that.

According to the North British Housing Association, part of Stephen's problem is that Westminster council told him that his rent was too high and that after payments were made he would still have to make a weekly contribution of £42.70, presumably out of his incapacity benefit or jobseeker's allowance. The neighbourhood officer of the North British Housing Association stated:

"I too am concerned that he has returned to the streets, especially as he is in poor health, but we have no way of contacting him".

If that is not a case of the reinforcement of social exclusion, I do not know what is.

At the heart of the problem is the shortfall between actual rent and housing benefit payments, which is now commonplace across London and in many other high-cost areas in the south-east such as Brighton and Oxford, and even in north Wales, which the Select Committee visited to see the system in operation last summer. I was shocked to discover that a problem that I thought was confined to central London was being replicated in an area of low housing cost and demand.

I have dealt with dozens of cases of shortfall over the years, as a councillor and as a Member of Parliament. I am reminded of the case of a pregnant woman who shared a one-bedroomed flat with a friend in one of the poorest streets in my constituency—I assure hon. Members that there are many such streets in my constituency—and who, after housing benefit or rent restrictions had been imposed, had £12 a week left to live on. I had to engage the social services department to try to introduce a child protection approach to that case.

According to the evidence presented to the Committee last year, 54,000 families with children on income support or jobseeker's allowance had their benefit restricted by an average of £6 a week. We also presented as evidence to the Committee the study done by the London Housing Unit on Brent council. It found that the average shortfall was £17.13 a week, with 15 per cent. of claimants facing a rent gap of £30 a week. That is absolutely unacceptable. It is a consequence of changes made to the housing benefit system under the previous Government, especially those introduced in 1996. However, that does not make me feel any better about it.

The Government have taken some positive steps, such as the relaxation on single-room rent, which is one aspect of the rent restrictions issue. I welcome that, although I share Shelter's view that a strong case remains for total abolition, as the single-room rent provision takes no account of the availability of accommodation matching the single-room rent definition in a particular area. Much will depend on the detailed consultation on the matter, which we are still awaiting. I would be pleased to hear my hon. Friend the Minister comment on that.

The national private landlord and tenant working group, which deserves a great deal of congratulation for its work in finding common ground between landlords and representatives of tenants, confirms the point. It states:

"We find much to commend in the government's proposals to reform Housing Benefit".

It then highlights the priority for more change than has so far been proposed on shortfall, stating:

"Many areas of the country report a growing discrepancy between average market rents and Local Reference Rent...We would like a commitment to a consultation of how Local Reference Rents are valued and by whom, in order to ensure claimants are not excluded from private rented accommodation or caught by large Housing Benefit shortfalls, because the valuations do not truly reflect market rents."

I strongly support that call. I would welcome the Minister's response to that point, either during this debate or subsequently.

Doing nothing about this issue is not an option, partly because so much distress is being caused to a statistically small but none the less significant number of people, but also because of the knock-on consequences of housing benefit restrictions for the whole issue of access to social housing.

I am indebted to the London Housing Unit for drawing attention to the increasing exclusion of low-income households from the private rented sector. The number of private tenants on housing benefit has halved in recent years. That fall is far greater than can be explained by the decline in unemployment.

Half a million fewer low-income households will soon be housed in private rented housing than in 1996. That decline is sharpest in areas such as London. Where are those who are not using housing benefit to access private rented accommodation? From studying applications to local authority housing departments I know that the answer is that those people are calling upon the scarce resource of social rented housing. People coming to the end of an assured shorthold tenancy are one of the biggest groups making a demand on social rented housing, either because they have been struggling for half the period of their assured tenancy to meet the shortfall or because, when their rent is revalued, they find themselves in a category in which housing benefit will not cover the entire rent. Those people are now joining the queue for social rented housing and, ironically, ending up back in temporary or bed-and-breakfast accommodation at fantastic expense to the public purse.

It appears that the undershoot on housing benefit expenditure in recent years is partly due to an underestimate of savings following the 1996 changes in rent restrictions. The Minister should accept that there is room for manoeuvre, because a joined-up analysis of costs would surely find that savings on housing benefit are inevitably being shunted on to other budgets. We need a healthy private rented sector to allow mobility in the labour market and, for the foreseeable future, to provide a valuable supplement to housing association and council property, which is in such short supply. Putting the squeeze on people accessing such accommodation on low incomes is causing all sorts of problems.

No one is saying that all restrictions should be lifted. I understand that the public purse should not subsidise penthouses in Mayfair, and having served on numerous housing benefit review tribunals in Westminster in the early 1990s, I assure hon. Members that that occasionally happened. However, the pendulum has swung too far. Too many people are being caught by restrictions that are damaging to the private rented sector and have consequential effects that must be dealt with.

My third group of points, after administration and poverty, concerns the question of work incentives. Housing benefit is the last piece in the jigsaw of welfare reform. It is especially critical in areas of high housing cost, where the interaction between housing benefit and the working families tax credit—and, potentially, the integrated child credit—are such that it is becoming increasingly difficult for people in areas of high housing cost to get out of unemployment and back to work.

The Government have been sympathetic to the need for change to make it easier for people to enter the workplace after they have been on housing benefits—by passporting claims for example—but more is needed. The Select Committee report endorses a fixed-term entitlement for working claimants of six months, with a safety net for changes of circumstances. I strongly agree with that, and encourage the Minister to be as positive as possible in helping us to deal with that matter.

I would also support an easing of the burden of the higher rate of non-dependant deductions, and, as Shelter is recommending, the introduction of a cap of no more than 50 per cent. of the total rent, partly because that would encourage members of the household other than the tenant to work. It would also relieve stress and strife within households. In my surgery, I have witnessed the tensions that can occur in families when adults call upon children to contribute to the rent. That can contribute to the break up of households, which leads to 19 and 20-year-olds seeking help to secure housing because they are unable to stay at home and because of the complexity of the benefit system.

In future, the Government could act swiftly on the issue of earnings disregard to float a significant number of claimants off benefit. Last summer, I asked questions

[Ms Buck]

that led me to understand that to increase the level by £10 a week for families with children would cost around £70 million. The net cost of returning to the 1988 levels would be £35 million. That is not a huge sum.

Despite excellent initiatives such as the working families tax credit, pockets of concentrated unemployment in areas such as my constituency highlight the fact that it is necessary to provide the extra incentive and to remove the fear that plagues people when they are deciding whether, in effect, to risk their home by entering employment.

The Chartered Institute of Housing has produced excellent work on the matter. I share its view that the reform would not increase the complexity of benefits and would be easy for claimants to understand. It stated:

"Those whose incomes are low enough to qualify for both tax credits and housing benefit are those who benefited least from tax credit reforms."

Although there have been huge improvements over recent years, about 200,000 families still face marginal withdrawal rates in excess of 80 per cent., and I suggest that many of them live in high housing cost areas such as London and the south-east.

The Minister indicated that, in principle, she was sympathetic about the issue of housing credit. The Social Security Committee's report strongly supported it because it would float many people off dependence on housing benefit. They would not, therefore, have to make claims, and that would have the positive knock-on effect of easing the administrative burden on local authorities.

It is important to maintain an individually sensitive top-up in areas of high housing cost because that enables people on lower incomes to remain resident in high-housing-cost areas. It would be bad for local economies if they had to move away.

It is impossible to separate the various strands of administration and delivery of the scheme from policy reform issues. The Select Committee report made several proposals to enhance the policy objectives of tackling poverty, improving work incentives and, in the longer term, helping to facilitate the best use of the housing stock and encouraging mobility between housing sectors.

The last thing that we need is a big bang response. Several fairly inexpensive proposals could be introduced in relation to poverty, work incentives and easing administration of the system.

In the immediate term, close monitoring is necessary. The proposals that the Government brought forward before Christmas must be delivered on so that the threat to people's homes and security that are implicit in the maladministration of benefit in some areas can be lifted. We can then turn our attention to creating a system of which we can be proud. It would be marvellous if the next Labour Government were able to achieve that which Beveridge, 50 years ago, could not.

3.34 pm

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): I welcome the debate. I feel a sense of déjà vu in debates on housing benefit, and I remember the days of Haringey council in the early 1980s, when we earnestly debated whether we wanted to administer housing benefit. Indeed, it was slightly peculiar that the then Government decided that local government should administer housing benefit, which is after all a social security benefit like any other. I suppose that the assumption was that the majority of the recipients of housing benefit would be local authority tenants. Although that may still be true, the world has moved on a great deal since 1981. Many local authorities administer housing benefit moderately well, some do it very well, the majority do it not especially well and some do it downright appallingly.

I am a former member of the Select Committee on Social Security, which investigated housing benefit fraud. Most housing benefit fraud is committed by private landlords who, for example, create fictitious tenants and fictitious tenancies or double-occupy places. Any number of highly imaginative scams take place that result in millions of pounds going to landlords who do not deserve a ha'penny. I have no sympathy for them or for anyone who deliberately defrauds the system. However, another form of fraud is committed when people who are entitled to benefit do not receive it and as a result lose their home. That is the tragic experience that I shall briefly recount.

My borough, Islington, like many other boroughs, administers housing benefit. From the 1980s onwards, the council was run largely through a large number of neighbourhood offices, from which housing benefit was administered. The idea was that all services were local and officials were therefore more locally accountable and in touch.

Some evidence suggests that that system helped cut housing benefit fraud. Local officers tended to know the 20 or 30 streets nearest the office, and if they had an unusually large number of claimants from one address, they would spot that. They realised that it was impossible to have 20 or 30 tenants in a four-bedroomed house and that fraud was perhaps being committed through double accounting. That is not necessarily spotted in a much more centralised system. I do not pretend that the system was overwhelmingly efficient, but it was possible for councillors, advice agencies and people such as me to achieve a result and to contact the appropriate official.

The council turned its back on neighbourhood offices some years later. It centralised the system, and housing benefit efficiency got worse. The housing benefit factory that the council set up proved a bit of a nightmare, and the Conservative Government did not allow the council the capital necessary to invest in new IT equipment to improve the service. The council therefore did what many other local authorities have done, and outsourced the administration of housing benefit—in Islington's case to a company called ITNET. The circumstances worsened considerably, and the council acted according to the current contract culture and appointed a consultant to liaise between the council and the private contractor and to send reports to the council about how bad the service was. The reports were interesting. The circumstances are completely mad. A Government benefit is being paid via a local authority and an outsourced company, ITNET, and reported on by an independent consultant.

I asked for a copy of the contract signed between Islington borough council and ITNET. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) has asked for exactly the same for the company that runs housing benefit in her area, Centra—or rather, Capita; the other runs buses, and the matter gets confused.

I received an interesting variety of responses, including that the contract was commercially confidential, that it was private, that it was not a public document and that I had no right to see it. Councillors are not sure whether they are allowed to see it. After I put a lot of pressure on the council, I was finally told that I could see the document, but that I could read it only under supervision and could not have a copy to take away, as it was commercially sensitive. That is barmy, baloney and nonsense. We are dealing with a public benefit paid to the public under social security rules by a company that is doing it with monumental inefficiency and, because of the terms of the contracts, making huge profits along the way. The result is absolute misery for the people whom I represent.

At the high point of ITNET's inefficiency, there were almost 21,000 unopened envelopes in its office. I invited myself down there and it thoughtfully opened all the envelopes before I got there: it had put them through a letter-opener, which sliced off the top of the envelope, but no papers were taken out. I was assured that it had opened the envelopes. When I said that it looked as though the boxes contained the misery of 21,000 people's lives, I was told that that was a gross exaggeration because many people wrote in several times when they did not receive their housing benefit and so it might be as few as 10,000 people whose lives were made a total misery. It is not right for one person's life to be made a total misery, let alone however many thousand.

I have reached the end of my tether with this company, as have the majority of people in Islington. The misery that it causes is unbelievable. My advice surgery, like those of other hon. Members who represent inner-London constituencies, is full of people who lead stressful lives. They are bringing up children, holding down a job or in some cases two jobs, and all the rest. Some are unemployed. To have problems getting housing benefit is bad enough, but when the council sends out a legal notice for eviction from a council property because its agency is so incompetent that it cannot pay the housing benefit that that tenant is due, one wonders where Franz Kafka went wrong.

The situation is bizarre. The council has an agency the job of which is to pay rent to people. It is simply incapable of transferring £61 a week from department A to department B. The result is that the tenant runs up huge arrears. The case then goes to court. A judge rarely, if ever, grants an order for eviction of local authority tenants, but a county court order may be issued against them, with the result that they cannot obtain a credit card or borrow money. Any check on their character will show them to be of bad character in some way. We end up almost criminalising people because they have the misfortune to deal with a housing benefit company that is so inefficient that it cannot deliver the benefit that people need. That is disgraceful.

Pensioners often come to my surgeries. They are respectable people who have worked all their lives as cleaners, nurses, postmen and all the rest. They have religiously paid their rent throughout their working lives. To them it is a badge of honour that they have never been in rent arrears. They find it deeply hurtful to receive a letter telling them that they are £700 in arrears and asking what they intend to do about it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North pointed out, for people who are tenants of registered social landlords, more commonly known as housing associations, or private tenants, the situation is quite different and in some cases much worse.

Some of the smaller housing associations have a terrible cash flow problem. One of them in my area was £1.5 million in arrears of rent income due to the incompetence of ITNET. The larger registered social landlords can bear that for a while, but they must pay interest on a bank overdraft in order to pay for a benefit that should have been paid to them. For private tenants, the situation is dire. I am not surprised that there has been a reduction in the number of private tenancies that are paid through housing benefit. I have seen a copy of a circular issued by one of the larger letting agencies in my constituency which said that it would no longer let to anyone entitled to housing benefit from the London borough of Islington because it did not believe that it would ever get the money.

Other north London Members of Parliament will bear witness to that process. A steady stream of tenants and landlords come to my advice surgery saying, "For God's sake, please get us some money to ensure that the rent is paid." In some cases, they are very small landlords; someone may let a flat in part of his own house and depend on the rent to pay the mortgage on the rest of the property. If the landlord gets into arrears, matters get worse and worse.

We have seen the benefit fraud inspectorate report. The report of the director of housing to the Islington housing committee dated December 2000 states:

> "A seven-year contract with ITNET was let in October 1998. The contract provides for a possible break at year 5 (October 2003) if the 2002/3 key performance indicator is 6 per cent. or more below the benchmark performance."

The council feels absolutely stuck in a contract with that company, which threatens to sue any local authority that breaches the contract. The company has threatened the London borough of Hackney, which is also a recipient of ITNET services, if that is not a contradiction in terms, with legal action for breach of contract. Any tenant who lost his property or home as a result of the company's actions would have a moral right to sue the company.

The number of outstanding cases has reduced to about 5,000, but there are probably enormous arrears. I compliment the Select Committee on its report, which suggests that the performance of the contractors who handle housing benefit should be examined. We are talking not just about a financial relationship between local authorities and the Government but about an immediate, direct, absolute payment to which people are entitled. I dread to think of the misery that would be caused if income support were outsourced to companies such as ITNET.

Angela Eagle: The Government have no plans to outsource the administration of income support.

Mr. Corbyn: I was not for a moment suggesting that that was the case. I was merely drawing a parallel between the misery caused and the horrendous result of inefficiency in benefit delivery for the people who receive it.

The BFI report stated:

"The Council is also seriously criticised for under-resourcing the work of the fraud investigation and ITNET is criticised for its lack of commitment to overpayment recovery. The report contains a large number of detailed recommendations designed to improve the administration of benefits...A detailed action plan...has been drawn up...the council will advise the DSS of its full commitment to implement that action plan as part of its overall housing benefit recovery strategy."

Again, I invite the Minister seriously to consider the performance of the company, the cost of its inefficiency to the public purse and the social and emotional costs to people who may be thrown out of a private rented flat, with little chance of finding anywhere else to live. That is an absolute scandal; I know that the Minister shares my concerns about the matter and I hope that she will be resolute in her dealings with the housing benefit companies.

I represent an inner-London borough, an area of high housing stress, high housing costs and a massive property boom. Indeed, one sometimes feels that one is living in the midst of people who see everything in terms of liquidating assets: in other words, selling property. The philosophy of everyone, including the council, is to get rid of whatever property they have because it is a way of raising more money.

The inefficiency of housing benefit is compounded by rising rent levels in the private sector, which means that unless people under housing stress are nominated for a local authority or housing association property they have no chance whatever of staying in the borough. A two-bedroomed flat in my constituency, even on a major thoroughfare such as the Holloway road, costs £150,000 to £200,000 and those prices are going up rapidly all the time. Buying a house is impossible even for someone on double or treble average income in London—never mind the country as a whole. If people can get a nomination to a council or housing association property and keep it, that is fine—they will have some security and, one hopes, a reasonable place to live—but the shortage of housing means that many people are living in overcrowded council flats that are often damp and in some cases poorly maintained, with limited possibility of a transfer.

I invite the Minister to reflect on our housing strategy, perhaps not today but as part of a wider consideration. I compliment the Government on the fact that a great deal of money has been invested in housing improvements and repairs. The quality of life for many people on estates has improved dramatically over the past three years as a result of new roofs, new windows, new drainage systems, new central heating systems, anti-crime initiatives and so on. All such improvements are welcome. Estates are more habitable than they were three or four years ago, and I compliment the Government on that. However, if we are to prevent London from becoming a two-class city, in which the rich live in expensive central London and the poor are exported to the most distant suburbs or even further away, we must invest more money in affordable rented housing. I understand where the Government are coming from when they say that they want specialist housing for teachers and police officers, but we also need specialist housing for postmen, hospital cleaners and so on. One cannot restrict such housing to a few groups.

We are spending vast amounts on housing benefit for people in private rented accommodation. I gave an idea of the cost of buying property in my constituency; to rent, one is talking about £200 or £300 a week. Councils often pay £500 a week or more for leased property and, if tenants are on housing benefit, we end up paying that through the public purse. In the longer run, it would be much cheaper to invest in purchasing and building new property for affordable rent than to subsidise private landlords through housing benefit. The Select Committee has looked at that; I understand that rapid and sudden changes could have the perverse effect of reducing the amount of available property. However, we must look at our desperate social housing needs. Unless we do, London's housing problems will be ignored and great numbers of people will be forced out of London. It is a serious issue. I recognise that that is the flip side of the experience of other hon. Members, particularly those representing constituencies in the north-east and north-west, where council accommodation is often under-occupied. We cannot tell the poor of London to move somewhere else: they have families, jobs and commitments. I invite the Government to think about that.

The 1974 Labour Government were concerned about housing and did a lot to expand council housing stock. My hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) and I were members of Haringey council at various times in the 1970s and 1980s; it routinely completed up to 1,000 new dwellings a year. Indeed, my hon. Friend was chair of the housing committee at one point.

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): It was a long time ago.

Mr. Corbyn: It was not that long ago. All things are relative.

We need to look at the level of private sector rents and whether housing benefit could be improved by some form of rent control such as that which the 1974-79 Labour Government introduced. Many people are purchasing properties in London to rent out because the rental income is so enormous. That is forcing up prices in London, which can have a knock-on effect on housing benefit.

I hope that the Minister will understand that we expect her to put pressure on inner-London local authorities that suffer from the inefficiencies of contractors, to ensure that our constituents get a fair deal and have the security of knowing that, if they are entitled to receive benefit, their rent will be paid.

3.55 pm

Mr. Jeff Ennis (Barnsley, East and Mexborough): I am delighted to participate in this important debate and to follow the previous three hon. Members who have spoken. I associate myself with many of the comments made by my hon. Friends the Members for Islington,

North (Mr. Corbyn) and for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) and by the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood).

Housing benefit is a crucial plank of the Government's social policy. Housing and council tax benefit provide support to 4.5 million people throughout the country. As the report outlines, in May 1998, just over 2.6 million of those were council tenants, 840,000 were housing association tenants and 970,000 were the tenants of private landlords. About 64 per cent. of housing benefit claimants were in receipt of other benefits such as income support or jobseeker's allowance. Of the 4.5 million claimants, 1.8 million—41 per cent.—were aged 60 or older, 1.4 million—32 per cent.—were from households with children and 930,000 were lone parents.

Housing benefit undoubtedly helps some of the most deprived parts of the country. We have spent most of our time focusing on London, so it is appropriate for me to outline the profile of my constituency in South Yorkshire. You will be aware, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that it has a GDP per capita level of 62 per cent. of the European average—the lowest in the UK. No wonder South Yorkshire qualifies for objective 1 funding for the first time. One in three households in my constituency have at least one disabled person living in them—a direct consequence and legacy of the former mining and heavy engineering industry in the area.

Of the two local authorities that I represent, Barnsley has approximately 25,000 people on housing or council tax benefit, and Doncaster about 31,000. It certainly provides a lifeline in such vulnerable communities. The system is and should continue to be operated by local government. It needs to be delivered locally and provides a rebate against the local council tax or the charge for housing accommodation.

There are two current problems. First, the process for claiming housing benefit is becoming increasingly complicated. Secondly, are we reimbursing the full cost to local authorities? I recognise the need to drive fraud out of the benefit system—one of the key ways of modernising it—but there should be a balance between robustly reducing the capacity for fraud and avoiding excessively complicated administration. Claimants should not be put off bothering to claim and the administrative overheads should not be prohibitive.

The report recognises that many local authorities are experiencing difficulties in managing the housing benefit system. As hon. Members have said, numerous local authorities have significant backlogs of payments. Obviously, that causes additional hardship for some of the most hard-up people in the country. That is not always because local government cannot manage those services properly. The problems exist whether the services are managed in-house or outsourced. Many of the problems that London is experiencing have to do with outsourcing rather than internal local authority systems. My hon. Friend the Minister needs to take on board that important point. The fact that both local government and the private sector are struggling with the issue must tell us something. There is no doubt that there are examples of good practice by local authorities, on which we need to build. Indeed, paragraph 114 of the report, with which I entirely agree, specifically refers to that.

I shall take an example to give hon. Members an idea of the proportions of the complications. One of my local authorities, Barnsley, recently needed to take on 20 additional staff to deal with the growing backlog. Why do such backlogs exist? One major reason is that there are endless amendments to the process. I recently discussed that subject with the borough treasurer in Barnsley, who showed me a thick file full of changes that have been made to the regulations over the past few years.

The treasurer advised me that there are about 90 major changes to the benefits system each year—a pattern which has persisted over the past three to four years in our attempts to deliver our social policy or to reduce the possibility of fraud. Both are desirable aims, but they put an immense strain on the staff working on the systems, which are all heavily computerised for obvious reasons. Amendments to the computer systems must therefore be made, and the time spent inputting documentation on a claim has increased by 50 per cent. over the past few years. The additional information requirements also need to be considered. Currently, we ask for the national insurance numbers of claimants and partners, proof of identify of claimants and partners, tenancy types, landlord details, information on subsidy matters and rent officer details. Obviously, some of that information needs to be uploaded on to the computer, but I sometimes wonder whether it is all necessary.

Local authorities have been provided with a new standard form, which has taken about 12 months to prepare. Authorities are encouraged to use the form, which has 24 pages and is twice as long as the existing one. In our desire to ensure that we target and deliver the benefits to the most deserving cases, we might be in danger of creating a bureaucratic nightmare that could bring the system to a grinding halt. We must not allow such a situation to arise, and I am sure that the Minister will not allow that.

Local authorities provide social housing, and I firmly believe that there should be a future role for local authorities as direct housing providers. They provide decent, affordable housing for those in our communities who are disadvantaged and quite often vulnerable. In Barnsley, 15,300 local authority tenants are on benefits. The real question is whether the Government are properly funding local authority housing or asking, through the housing revenue subsidy system, the poor to pay for the poor.

The housing revenue subsidy claim system is extremely complicated. I am not an expert, but I will try to deal with its general thrust. In 1980, the previous Government introduced the basis of the system for revenue funding for local authority housing services. I think that the House has accepted that the system of funding for local authority services, the standard spending assessment formula-funded mechanism for local government services in general, is not only unfair but implausible. We are considering doing away with the current system.

The introduction of the housing subsidy system in 1980 led to claims that local authority housing tenants might be asked to bear the cost of rent rebates for council tenants. By and large, that system remains unaltered. The system for the housing revenue account works on the basis of a notional revenue account that

[Mr. Jeff Ennis]

must balance. Within the system, we claim that the cost of rent rebates is funded 100 per cent. but, at the same time, we withdraw from local authorities subsidies that would have been used to maintain and repair houses. That clawback is carried out on the basis that the notional housing revenue accounts are in surplus, because we have either increased the rents or given derisory increases to the authorities for management and maintenance.

Local authorities are reaching crisis point, and in future only a handful will not be in deficit and repaying housing subsidy directly to the Government. It is estimated that local housing authorities will return £1 billion to the Treasury this year. How can that be right, when we have identified that there is a backlog in repairs to local authority housing of some £20 billion? The simple answer is that, although we try to convince ourselves that we are fully funding housing benefits, we are not.

To give an example from one of my authorities, once again Barnsley, this year's estimate for the total cost of benefit payments is £24.5 million. The total benefit subsidy notionally received from the Treasury is also £24.5 million. The calculation of total subsidy payable to the authority, using the current system of notional housing revenue account, gives the authority £14.6 million, which leaves a funding gap that is repayable to the Treasury of £9.9 million. Next year's position will be disguised by the introduction of the major repairs allowance, paid through the subsidy system rather than through capital allocations. That was the case with credit approvals, which have virtually disappeared with the introduction of the MRA.

Even with an estimated MRA of £11.6 million, Barnsley forecasts that it will be in negative subsidy for the next two years. However, that authority is not profligate. As you will be aware, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we always spend our money wisely in Yorkshire. A survey of tenants found that the housing service is good, and the Government continue to rate Barnsley as above average, with a good management service. A recent certified valuation of the housing stock revealed that nearly £90 million needs to be spent on repairs and replacements over the next five years, which is more than double the likely available resources in that period. Despite that, we as a Government ask authorities throughout the country such as Barnsley to repay, to the Treasury, money that should be spent on maintaining the housing stock. Clearly, we cannot do both: we either fully fund housing benefit or take money away from local authorities that sorely need the subsidy for investment purposes.

We need a housing benefit scheme that is neither so complex, nor subject to continuous change. We must simplify and stabilise the housing benefit system. The Social Security Committee report contains several positive proposals, and I congratulate the Committee on its work. I hope that, in the fullness of time, most of the points will be given full consideration by the Government for inclusion in a new housing benefit system that caters more for housing benefit recipients.

4.8 pm

Ms Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Highgate): My hon. Friends the Members for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) and for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) painted graphic, if depressing, pictures of the desperate situations in their constituencies because of their local authorities farming out to a private company the delivery of housing benefit to their residents. In the light of those contributions, I should say that my borough—the London borough of Camden—has received two charter marks for the excellence of its delivery of the housing benefits system.

I am somewhat bemused that neighbouring authorities with similar problems did not ask my borough of Camden for advice or hints on how best to administer the housing benefits system. Perhaps there was a different Government in office when the change in benefits delivery came in, and they were not allowed to go to a local authority.

In his opening remarks, the Chairman of the Select Committee referred to his shock at some of the rents that are charged in London. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis) made a contribution that was not London-based. I join him in congratulating the Chairman and the Select Committee on an excellent report. I sincerely hope that the Government will take on board its recommendations and, as far as London is concerned, that they will process some of the changes more expeditiously than they seem to be doing at present.

I am grateful for a handy little booklet about London that was published this year by the National Housing Federation and entitled "A Tale of Two Cities". It contains many facts that I imagine most London Members are familiar with, but I thought that it might be helpful on the subject of rent levels. The London Research Centre rents bulletin, which was published in March 2000, indicates that a two-bedroomed property costs on average £285 a week in the private sector. One would expect to pay nearly £380 a week for three bedrooms. I am dealing with a case in my constituency involving a studio flat that is currently renting for £390 a week; the landlord wants to increase the rent to £650a week.

Another point that may be useful with regard to London—I do not think that I am overly stressing London's housing crisis—is that more than 70 per cent. of all new lettings by London housing associations are to households that have no wage earner. That fact is from National Housing Federation statistics released in January 2001. Yet London's population continues to grow. In common with my hon. Friends who touched on the point, I strongly welcome the Government's commitment to affordable social housing, the release of capital receipts and the money for local authorities to enter into partnerships for new build, refurbishment and rehabilitation of properties. However, for a considerable time to come, the majority of people in London will find homes for themselves and their families only within the private rented sector and with rents at the levels that I have elicited, housing benefit will clearly be vital.

My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North highlighted the fact that housing benefit is claimed by some of the most vulnerable in our

society. We know who they are: pensioners, people with disabilities and single-parent families. I hope that the Government will attack with some speed the issue of how people are kept in poverty by the present structure of housing benefit. The Government have introduced policies to encourage single parents back into the work force because of the benefits that that can provide. Those benefits are not exclusively financial, but include a sense of worth and dignity and a model for children of how life could be. I hope that the Government will examine the situation where a woman—it seems to affect women particularly—finds a job, but the minute that she starts work, she is in danger of a reduction in housing benefit and of losing the family home. That must be tackled with some speed.

I wish to mention some issues in my own constituency. The London borough of Camden's delivery of housing benefit is excellent. However, some constituents who come to my surgery will never be housed by a local authority because they will never fit into the statutory categories in London. They are exclusively dependent on the private rented sector, and are finding increasingly that, due to failures in the delivery of housing benefit, private landlords are unwilling to let to tenants who—perhaps only in the first instance—may need to pay their rent via the housing benefit system. I believe that to be true throughout London.

The issue has also impacted on several housing associations that are responsible for properties in a much wider area of London than my constituency. A housing association in my constituency that has worked in the sector for a considerable number of years, and which has a high reputation for being efficient, innovative and practical, at one stage was looking at a cash shortfall of £6 million. That is almost unsustainable in a sector where those who are engaged in such matters and who are subject to pressures on the ground and from London Members of Parliament must be able to concentrate their efforts on increasing the affordable housing stock. They have to spend hours, if not days, tracking down local authorities to find out when they will receive rent for the properties that the housing association is managing well. That is unacceptable, given the level of human commitment and the costs to housing associations. It is not the only housing association that I know of in London that has suffered such a serious shortfall because of the inadequacies that its tenants have experienced in obtaining housing benefit.

The problem has severely affected those mainly voluntary organisations that operate hostels for rough sleepers who are temporarily in that position. It should be possible to ensure that such people are not, as one administrator said, almost hung out to dry because of the failure of housing benefit to reach their coffers. The hostels are improving all the time; none the less the available bed space or room space is known. Invariably, because of London's housing crisis, they are full. As my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North said, housing benefit is part of the social security system and, in a sense, it is paid by the state to individuals in that way. Why cannot such establishments receive annually the cost of the total housing benefit? If, at the end of the year, a couple of rooms or beds were not used 365 days of the year, a repayment could be made to central Government or the money could be rolled on into the payments for the following year.

Angela Eagle: Does my hon. Friend recognise that, when the verification and identification requirements were introduced—in other words, housing benefits could not be accessed without there being a national insurance number or identification to stop fraud—we realised that problems arose because of people who had difficulty with identification? Such people were often rough sleepers and the homeless. We introduced an exception for the hostels, which say that that has very much helped homeless people access the system. We are aware of some of the difficulties of applying the full rigour of the system to those who are most vulnerable.

Ms Jackson: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. I would not want her or the Government to believe that organisations that deal directly with rough sleepers and the homeless are not immensely grateful for the changes that have been introduced to the benefits system. The changes have enabled such individuals to make a claim. None the less, that is only one part of the picture. The other part of the picture—the money being delivered to the organisation running the hostel—is not as smooth or immediate as it should be. As it is extremely likely that such establishments will be full for a considerable period, additional benefits might accrue if the Government were to fund such establishments for, say, a year, with safeguards in place.

When I floated the idea at a conference of rough sleepers, a rough sleeper said to me, "That would be entirely wrong, because it would take away the right of the rough sleeper to turn down a hostel if he did not like it. He would have to go where the money was." I understand that point entirely, but it begs the question of why the pavement is more acceptable to rough sleepers and homeless people as a bed for the night than the hostel. That is a wider issue than housing benefit, and relates to wider social inequities in this country.

The other issue on which I would like to touch stems from a report conducted by the London Housing Unit for and on behalf of the Brent private tenants rights group, which was briefly touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North. The issue detailed in the report is the shortfall between what is agreed by a rent officer as the acceptable rent for a property and what the private landlord charges for that space. I admit that the report examines only a small group in Brent. However, it is abundantly clear that, in that part of London, it is the tenants of the poorer, less well-maintained properties—which have fewer facilities, poorer decoration and, in some instances, less security—who face much greater shortfalls than tenants of properties in the same area which are better-maintained and for which the rent may be higher. That warrants the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Department of Social Security examining the guidelines and rules within which rent officers are working.

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North highlighted the fraud that everyone knows is being perpetuated by some, but—I hasten to say—not all private landlords. The most grievous fraud, however, is

[Ms Jackson]

when a rent is charged that bears no relation whatever to the value of the property concerned, and when an individual has to pay a sizeable proportion of that rent because the housing benefit does not meet it in total. I repeat that the people whom we are considering are, almost exclusively, some of the most vulnerable people in our society. As I said, I trust that the two Government Departments that are most involved in this area will conduct a joint examination of the matter.

The Government's commitment to affordable social housing, their attempt to make the benefits system infinitely easier to understand and the changes that they have made to housing benefit, as well as other initiatives, are intended to begin to break down social exclusion and to afford equality of opportunity for everyone. As my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North said, how can people participate in the wide variety of programmes stemming from the Government if they do not have a home of their own? I would hate to think that the huge thrust of the Government's policy in those areas would run into the sand on the issue of housing benefit not being paid.

The Government have invested a considerable amount of money in the rough sleepers unit, for example, and, through the ideas of Supporting People, a new approach to some of the most vulnerable people in our society is being contemplated. It would be a complete waste of public money and of the best possible intentions if housing benefit within London were not tackled even more urgently than at present. If it is not tackled, more people will become homeless. I am sure that no hon. Members would want to see a return to the numbers of homeless people on the streets of London that were seen in the early 1980s. That was a shame and a stain on the city and society.

4.25 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I understood that I would be called alongside other Front-Bench speakers, but I am happy to speak now. The measured speeches of hon. Members have built on a very good report that makes criticisms, yet has the support of all parties.

Housing benefit will celebrate its 18th birthday in April. However, as the National Housing Federation rightly said in its report of this week, that is not a cause for celebration because, for many people, it is a cause of great despair. Let us hope that some of the 34 recommendations made by the Select Committee will lead to serious change. More than 4 million people claim housing benefit, which costs more than £12 billion. Evidence from the report, from other literature and from practical casework—certainly in my constituency—shows that the system does not deliver. It puts people in debt, makes people homeless and causes landlords and tenants much grief, so today's debate is very timely.

I shall discuss regulations and reality. Housing benefit regulations state that claims can be processed within 14 days.

Angela Eagle: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that the processing time of 14 days is a target for local authorities? However, the clock does not start ticking on the target until the local authority has gathered all the relevant information. Part of the problem of the claiming process is the need to create a situation in which that can occur sensibly. The target does not tell the whole story.

Mr. Burstow: One can conclude from the Minister's intervention that the target is meaningless and does not help in understanding how local authorities discharge their responsibilities under the rules and regulations set out by the Department.

The reality is somewhat different from the target. The average delay is more than 20 weeks and in London it can be as long as six months. The National Housing Federation states that average arrears are £1,102. Nationally, 1.5 million people are in arrears because the system does not work, and that costs £1.6 billion.

The hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) mentioned costs incurred by housing associations, in addition to the costs faced by individuals. The associations estimate that they bear costs of £84 million as a consequence of failures of the system.

I am sure that other hon. Members have seen the letter from the Places for People Group, which is a large organisation that covers a number of registered social landlords and housing associations. It wrote to a number of hon. Members who they believed might participate in the debate and cited figures that graphically demonstrate the point made by the hon. Member for Islington, North. The letter said:

"NBH is dependent on Housing Benefit for 60 per cent. of its rental income. Our annual turnover is £140m. Conservative estimates from our staff estimate that £2.5 million is owing in housing benefit. This represents 31 per cent. of current arrears, 2.3 per cent. of our rent roll. The following demonstrates the financial impact of Housing Benefit delays on NBH in the last year were as follows: impact of four week rule—extra £1.75 m arrears; verification framework—£0.5m arrears; poor local authority administration—£0.25m."

Those figures may be borne out by many other housing associations throughout the country.

The system is failing for several reasons with which the report deals. It is too easy to blame local government, but today's speeches show that criticism is levelled not simply at local government but at the system with which it has been lumbered and of which it must try to make the best. Governments of any hue must take the responsibility for sorting out the mess. The hon. Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis) is right to recognise the complications and costs that local government faces in administering the system. Some 12 per cent. of the social security budget is expended on the housing benefit system. The matter must be addressed seriously and as rapidly as possible.

Performance varies throughout the country. Hon. Members have provided anecdotal evidence of how variable practice is. Performance can be poor but, on the other hand, we should acknowledge that some councils provide an excellent service from which we should learn.

The Select Committee's central conclusion was that housing benefit was far too complicated. In the past year, 80 circulars and regulations were issued by the Department to make changes within the system. The hon. Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough

referred to his chief financial officer's comment that, on average, 90 changes had been made in a year. It is no wonder that it is a sheer nightmare to run the system. Will the Minister say whether, at least in the short term, greater stability could be given to the system?

The report rightly advocates a change to a simpler system. I shall refer to a few issues raised in the report, in the hope that the Minister will respond to them. First, the report refers to the possibility of creating more stability for the housing benefit recipient by introducing fixed entitlement periods. In "The Way Forward for Housing" Green Paper, the Government said that they were willing to take that direction in respect of pensioners, to give them more certainty that they could meet their housing costs. The paper produced by the Chartered Institute of Housing on the subject makes the point that that policy would allow us to target resources better in dealing with the more risky claims and ensuring that they were processed fairly, efficiently and quickly. The policy of fixing the period at six or 12 months needs to be considered, but the Government, despite claiming that they would consider it, have given no commitment. Will the Minister tell us what the time scale is for that consideration and when we will see the outcome? The year 2003 has been suggested as a possible date for those changes to be brought in. Given what we have heard about overall fundamental reform, that sounds a long time away. Perhaps something could happen sooner than that.

The second issue relates to discussing with social landlords their role and establishing how they can play a part in verification procedures. The Places for People Group has invested a large sum of money in assisting and working alongside housing associations to ensure that their tenants receive their housing benefit as soon as possible. Surely, however, a further role could be discussed and appropriate standards set, monitored and delivered to accelerate the verification of various documents. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Islington, North that some smaller housing associations may not be able to do that. I hope that in the discussions that the Minister said would take place with registered social landlords the Government will pursue the possibility of giving them some role in bringing the process up to speed. Results can then be delivered more quickly, and we can avoid problems whereby people lose or do not receive their benefit in time and lose their property.

Thirdly, I welcome the initiative to establish housing benefit help teams to assist in areas where there is failure.

Angela Eagle: It is important to put it on record that the help teams have been established not to go into areas where there is failure but to help local authorities that are experiencing difficulties and request access to extra managerial and strategic help. If we were to use the term "failure", no one would want a visit from an expert help team. The concept relies on joint partnership and local authorities being sufficiently confident to ask for assistance. I would therefore prefer the hon. Gentleman to use another word.

Mr. Burstow: I accept that point, which relates to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) about how we choose our language in respect of fraud. The point relates to how we raise the standards of all to those of the very best, and make use of the skills and expertise of people in local government, in the Department of Social Security and elsewhere. In that regard, it would be helpful if the Minister told us by what criteria Bristol city council, East Ayrshire council, Kingston upon Hull city council and the London borough of Lambeth were selected for inclusion in the first tranche of the exercises. It would be useful for other local authorities that may want to take part and to benefit from the housing benefit help team if she clarified that.

I understand that, when the Minister launched the initiative at the London borough of Camden open day, reference was made to the possibility of teams supporting bids for additional resources for housing benefit units in local authorities. How much scope will there be for that? Dare I say that that may further encourage local authorities to participate in the scheme?

The fourth issue has been touched on by several hon. Members today. The Minister knows that I have raised the single-room rent restriction at the Committee stages of legislation in the House, and I remain concerned that we are not moving as far as we should. The Committee recommended that the restriction should be scrapped because it undoubtedly causes a great deal of difficulty for the under-25s, especially in high-cost areas. The restriction applies to the lower end of the market and excludes properties that have their own toilet, kitchen and living room. It must exclude an awful lot of housing. It would seem that one would have to be living in a tent before the single-room rent restriction applied.

The single-room rent restriction causes hardship and homelessness, and it is time that the Government embraced the need to do away with a nasty change to the rules made by the previous Government, and which the current Government should have reversed by now. We approach the end of the Government's term of office, and it behoves them to outline when we will see an end to that set of restrictions. The cost of returning to the previous position would be 0.25 per cent. of the housing benefit budget. Although that is not a significant cost, it would make a significant difference to the lives of a great many people.

Housing benefit problems are not simply matters for local government. It is easy to take pot shots at local councils for not delivering the system that we would like. It is our responsibility, and ultimately the responsibility of the Government to remember that the rules that are set and the methods that are employed can either contribute to or hamper the way in which local government delivers the benefit. Reference has been made to local public service agreements in respect of housing benefit as a way of strengthening and deepening the partnership between local and central Government. Will such an approach be taken, and if so, on what time scale?

The fundamental reform called for in the report is a long way down the track. It will be fully implemented in seven to 10 years. During the intervening period, it will be necessary to rely on a succession of fine-tuning adjustments and tweaks to the existing system. The weaknesses of that system will keep people in areas of high housing cost, and they will be trapped on benefit and in dependency, instead of being able to get back into work. During that period, people will face, at best,

[Mr. Burstow]

doubt about their housing, and at worst debt, eviction and the stigma of losing credit ratings and all that that entails.

The hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) is correct: there will not be a big bang. There will be a long, slow fizzle over a seven to 10-year period. I hope that the Minister will say that a fundamental reform of the system, which guarantees housing for people who need it, will be implemented sooner rather than later. That would be a cause for celebration.

4.40 pm

Mr. Andrew Love (Edmonton): As I was reading the Select Committee report, I was reminded of the size of the housing benefit budget. It is the largest single support for low-income tenants. It amounts to 12 per cent. of the social security budget, or 1 per cent. of GDP. It is a massive annual budget, and it is the most complex.

Table 1 of the report describes the estimated and outturn housing benefit expenditure. It shows that the Government have restrained expenditure in the past few years, from an underspend of £470 million in 1997-98 to an underspend of £1,700 million in 1999-2000. Those savings have occurred for several reasons, and they will continue. The claimant count has been reduced to below 1 million, which is a Government success, as is the introduction of the working families tax credit, which has had an impact on housing benefit. There has also been much comment on the verification framework and the rent restrictions that were introduced by the previous Government in 1996.

The present Government's success in restraining expenditure allows for flexibility under the budget. It also gives scope to implement short-term changes in anticipation of the longer-term changes that the Minister mentioned, which will be delivered in seven to 10 years.

Such matters should be examined in terms of overall Government strategy in this policy area. Their priorities are to reduce poverty, to restrain increases in the social security budget—and there is not necessarily a contradiction between those aims—and to make work pay. In that context, there are three important issues concerning housing benefit, on which hon. Members have commented. The first is simplification, which is crucial because housing benefit is complex. The second is work incentives: if they are to achieve their aims, housing benefit must be reformed. The third is administration, which is causing great concern at present.

In the Green Paper, the Government highlighted the fact that simplification is one of their priorities. I have several suggestions to make about that. First, all changes to people's incomes, however small, immediately lead to a redetermination, which clogs up the system. I understand that the Government have been examining the possibility of a 12-month fixed period for pensioners. The suggestion of a six-month fixed period for working tenants has much merit, as it would bring things into line with the working families tax credit. However, if we intend to introduce a fixed period, safeguards must be provided for people whose circumstances change so as to reduce their income and, perhaps, place them in difficulty. With the proviso that safeguards must be provided, that would be one way of improving or simplifying the benefit.

A second approach relates to non-dependant deductions. The Select Committee report refers to the six different rates that currently apply, and suggests abolishing the higher ones. Some people have called for a limit on deductions, perhaps up to a maximum of 50 per cent. of the rent, and some have called for abolition, which I understand would cost about £230 million. That would be the wrong approach, but we should consider limiting non-dependant deductions, and we should restrain future increases, which have resulted in problems and increasing complexity. It would be sensible to restrain increases, perhaps to the rate of inflation or the rate of increase in wealth in the country. That would help simplify the administration of housing benefit.

The third approach relates to rent restrictions, which create complexity and, sadly, as has been attested to by every hon. Member this afternoon, increase hardship. I could cite many examples, but we need only refer to the research carried out by the Government on single-room rent and local reference rents to know the hardship that has been created. I am well aware from the Green Paper and the response that the Government are seriously considering reforming single-room rents. They should reconsider the matter.

Controversy surrounds the cost of abolishing single-room rents. Shelter's estimate is considerably different from the Government's. I understand that changes such as behavioural effects must be taken into account, but will the Minister discuss the Government's thoughts on single-room rents and the likely consequences of a radical change or of abolition?

I could cite lots of statistics on local reference rents. My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) and others have already eloquently discussed the impact that such rent is having in their locality. It is contributing massively to a drying-up of tenancies for low-income people in all our constituencies, and especially in high-rent areas. Hurdles are now being introduced, such as the requirement for a high deposit before people can access a tenancy, which is as much of an exclusion as not allowing someone to take up a tenancy.

It is a fiction to believe that in areas such as London, where demand is high, tenants can negotiate with their landlord a limited reduction in rent. The reality is that tenants do not have a genuine choice in Greater London and other high-rent areas, as evidence from Shelter and other housing organisations and, indeed, the Government attests.

Most organisations active in the field suggest a Government review of local reference rents, which urgently needs to be undertaken. Such rent has had a dramatic impact on low-income tenants, and reform is on the cards.

Work incentives are, rightly, a high Government priority, but the interaction between housing benefit and earnings and other income is complex. It is certainly not an aspect that I understand well. Housing benefit is also poorly integrated because it is difficult to reform in any radical way; the Minister commented on that several times this afternoon.

I understand the problem with rents. They do not have the necessary coherence and they are certainly not fair across the country. The seven to 10-year time scale that we are talking about to reform rents in this country is too long if we are to deliver a change in housing benefit that will assist those who are most in need in high-rent areas such as my own.

Angela Eagle: When I was asked about the likely time scales for the radical restructuring of housing benefit—in other words, the introduction of flat-rate benefits that was mentioned in the Green Paper—I said seven to 10 years because there is no point in going ahead before we have a coherent rent structure. People cannot be expected to trade down, if that costs more because rents are all over the place. I did not mean that we would not make any changes to housing benefit in the interim. I said earlier that the tax credit agenda forces us to look at the structure of housing benefit and how it integrates with tax credits.

Mr. Love: I am pleased to hear that. I shall talk about the tax credit agenda later. I am well aware of the comments that were made in the summary of the Green Paper. I should first like to refer to earnings disregards, which the hon. Member for Roxburgh and Berwickshire (Mr. Kirkwood) mentioned. There has not been a change since 1988. The cost of restoring earnings disregards to the figures for 2000 would be roughly £35 million to £40 million. That is a relatively limited sum. It could be done in other ways. The earnings disregard is a simple change. It is easy for those who implement it and those who receive it to understand. It does not add anything to the complexity of housing benefit but, perhaps most important, those who have benefited least from the introduction of the working families tax credit and who also receive housing benefit would gain the most from such a change.

The next area that I should like to focus on is greater reform of housing support, which was mentioned in the summary of the Green Paper. The Minister talked about looking at a flat-rate element as a possible way forward. Because of the high combined marginal tax and benefit withdrawal rates, it is extremely difficult in current circumstances to introduce a taper that would make a significant difference or would not have the effect of extending withdrawal to a massive range of income. After the introduction of the working families tax credit, 200,000 families in this country still experience withdrawal rates greater than 80 per cent. In other words, the difficulty of amalgamating the current housing benefit scheme with the working families tax credit has been enormous.

A number of organisations, including Shelter and the Chartered Institute of Housing, have therefore suggested the possibility of some form of tax credit. I do not know whether that is what the Minister was referring to when she spoke about a flat-rate element. One of the advantages would be that, if it were introduced as part of the working families tax credit, it would take a large number of people and families out of the poverty trap. I accept that there will be winners and losers in any of the changes that are introduced, and perhaps a cost to the Exchequer. Looking at the Minister, I am sure that the Government have pored over the problem for many months. It is worth further consideration, however, because people on the lowest incomes are very badly affected by the current interaction between housing benefit and the new tax credits—and the problem may get worse as the tax credit scheme is developed over the next couple of years.

Hon. Members have already spoken about administration. I am aware of the pleasing charter marks received by the London borough of Camden for its housing benefit administration. Sadly, not many others in Greater London or the rest of the country have received similar awards. The picture is extremely bleak.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) spoke about the decline in response rates when housing benefit is claimed. A response is supposed to be made in 14 days. We know that that target is not achieved, but do we know how badly the response rate has declined? Statistics from Shelter suggest that, in 1997-98, 79 per cent. of recipients received their benefit within 14 days, but by 1999-2000 the figure had dropped to 67 per cent. We are witnessing an overall decline in administrative standards, which must be dealt with urgently. I was pleased that the Minister highlighted that problem in her response. It featured prominently in consultation and the Government have taken it into account.

Some important issues arise from the Select Committee report and from the comments of housing organisations that are directly affected by the administration. Local authorities have received an increase in support, but because of the additional burdens it must continue to increase. Extra support should, however, be linked to proper training of local authority staff, and performance must meet the Government's targets. Performance service agreements could be a way forward and are being actively discussed. We should focus on local authorities with the worst record. It is nice to talk about Camden, but there are far more authorities with a bad than a good record.

Most controversially—my background is in local government and I know how unwelcome this will be—the Government should assume more powers to require local authorities to get involved in the changes that we want to promote. When local authorities start to get it right, it will greatly benefit their local populations.

My final point is about fraud and error. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, I have scrutinised the matter in detail. We must get the methodology right. We have not got it right in the past because of confusion between fraud and error. Complexity is another problem. We must sort out the difference between "confirmed fraud" and "suspected fraud" before we bandy figures about. It has become a party political issue and is likely to become an election issue. The argument is based on the flimsiest of evidence at the moment.

The Public Accounts Committee was told that, under the present complex income support system, 10 per cent. of adjudications will always be wrong. That applies equally to housing benefit. Unless we simplify the system, it will be difficult to eliminate fraud or, more especially, error. I am sympathetic to the aims of the verification framework, but we must recognise its partly negative impact. It is slowing down the process, which cannot be good for anyone, and the most vulnerable customers are reacting badly to it. We may be deterring people from making legitimate claims.

[Mr. Love]

The relationship between registered social landlords and local authorities and others is also deteriorating. Landlords are taking advantage of their tenants in an effort to get local authorities to improve the system. Much has to be done.

I hope that the Minister responds to all the pertinent concerns expressed by hon. Members of all parties. I accept her estimate that it will take seven to 10 years to achieve radical reform of housing benefit, but we cannot stand still. We need to move forward and help the most vulnerable in our society. Some of the changes suggested in the report and in our discussion will help to achieve that.

5 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I will be brief. I apologise to members of the Committee for having stood up from time to time—and thank you, Mr. Hood, for having allowed me to do so. I am sure that anyone who has had an attack of sciatica will sympathise with me.

I congratulate the Select Committee. One always expects a high-quality report from Select Committees and this report is indeed high quality and thought provoking—so much so that it probably had the good effect of provoking the Government into producing their Green Paper. There has been much agreement among hon. Members in their analysis of the problems facing the housing benefit system. I am an outer-London Member and I join hon. Members representing inner London in reporting problems with the administration of housing benefit. The hon. Member for Barnsley, East and Mexborough (Mr. Ennis) pointed out that there had been some 300 DSS circulars and 85 new regulations since May 1997. I have slightly different figures, but all those changes cannot have helped lessen the complexity of the system.

I was glad to hear from the Minister that a standard form—I see that she has a copy—has been sent to local authorities, which they have been encouraged to use. I would be most interested to know how many of them had indicated that they had taken it up. It might be a bit early to get a return on that. I do not know whether she is planning any sanctions if they do not use the form, but I encourage them to do so. As we all know, at the moment, there is a different form for every local authority. As I said, I too have experienced administrative problems.

Capita are the people who look after housing benefit in Bromley. Like the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), last summer was a fairly gruesome time for me in my surgeries and I received letters from people who were having enormous difficulty. I came to a slightly different conclusion on the matter to Opposition Members, but like the hon. Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn), I suspect that the contract is at fault. The problem reminds me of early contracts for, dare I say, grass cutting which tended to specify that grass must be cut twice a week rather than saying that it must be kept to a certain length and the grass cuttings swept up; in August the grass needs to be cut only once a fortnight whereas in May it has to be cut more often. The text of the contract is often the core of the problem, which was the conclusion to which I came in my discussions with Bromley about the difficult situation with Capita.

I confess, as could other people, that in working with the various housing associations in Bromley we have tacitly adopted a system that helps alleviate the problem. As soon as a piece of paper turns up with the portcullis on it—surprise, surprise, things are fixed. It is of great sadness to me that so many people with so many different problems, across the spectrum and not just in housing benefit, have to rely on that piece of paper before anyone takes them seriously. That is perhaps one of our advantages as Members of Parliament, but it is sad that systems work like that.

Some hon. Members have said that housing benefit should be centralised and brought into the DSS or tax credit system. I should be interested to hear the Minister's view. We need to consider carefully whether it is advisable to go down that road. Do we want local authorities to be no longer involved in housing benefit? If that is a conscious political decision, we can probably have a good political argument about it, but I should not like it to emerge as the way forward without our having had a thorough discussion about the role of local authorities.

Interestingly, one issue that has not been discussed is the effect on the housing benefit budget of the reduction in unemployment. A number of people have talked, rightly, about the read-across from housing benefit into the working families tax credit. Several people have come to my surgery because they are having difficulties with the working families tax credit and the rigid six-month rule used by the Inland Revenue, which is not proving as flexible as perhaps it needs to be when there are changes of circumstance. I have had constituents who, through no fault of their own, have suddenly had to repay six months' worth of working families tax credit. That can make as big a hole in their finances as not receiving housing benefit and then being pursued for arrears. We need therefore to consider the interaction between working families tax credit and housing benefit, the tapers and administration. We also need to consider whether it is a good idea to go down a straight six-month route or whether any fixed period of time is the most effective way of delivering housing benefit to those who need it.

There has been some discussion of fraud, but I am mildly surprised that no one has talked about the Social Security Fraud Bill, which will have its Second Reading in a couple of weeks. Some of the measures in it are designed, as I understand it, to reduce fraud in the social security system, which includes housing benefit. As the Minister will know, there were constructive discussions in the other place, and many of the concerns about fraud were taken on board. I look forward to further discussions to ensure that the Bill is as effective as possible at minimising fraud.

Apart from simplifying the administration of housing benefit, we need to consider how we can encourage best practice. It is not just a question of being able to use the standard form; local authorities should be encouraged to talk to one another and adopt best practice. We also need to consider whether we can move down the route of simplifying regulations, which everyone agrees is needed. We could annualise them, so that at one point in the year—perhaps 5 April, to coincide with the tax

year—the changes in the year's housing benefit come in as one piece rather than as a constant dribble of changes that cause administrative hassle every time.

The hon. Member for Edmonton (Mr. Love) talked about the need to eliminate errors and complex regulations from the system. Errors, delays and complex regulations have certainly created a situation in which those who wish to defraud the system can flourish. Those problems need to be removed from the system, so that those who are behaving fraudulently find it more difficult to do so.

I do not know about the situation in other hon. Members' constituencies, but we have a number of people in Bromley who, perhaps because their children have left home, would like to downsize. They find it difficult to do so and the housing benefit system does not help them. Perhaps a way forward could be found by sharing with them any savings to be gained from moving downwards in terms of property size. People can manage a smaller house or flat more easily than a large one.

With those few words and queries to the Minister, I have broadly set out our views on a good report, and I hope that there is sufficient time for her to answer the questions that have been asked.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Social Security (Angela Eagle): I am not sure that there will be sufficient time to answer all questions in great detail because, as we know, housing benefit is complex to debate in public policy terms and, more crucially, in administrative terms. If any benefit is likely to fail in delivering help, it is housing benefit because it has been so complex to administer since its creation. Its management and administration was fragmented to form 409 local authorities, so the primary legal responsibility for administering and delivering housing benefit now falls to local authorities.

As the Minister in Whitehall who is responsible for housing benefit, I have limited powers to cajole local authorities into following certain policies. We can make things compulsory, but it is not always possible, when one is sat at the centre, to realise the effect of doing that in every one of the 409 authorities. As we know, there are large authorities with big housing benefit case loads, tiny ones with small case loads, and everything in between. We must look at the administrative doability of the suggestions that we come up with. The debate has been a good one but, as always, it has been much easier to analyse what is wrong with housing benefit than either to design a brand spanking new system to solve all our problems or to come up with deliverable changes that would work on the ground.

That is not to say that we will not make changes, but there is a tension between having too much upheaval, and the widely shared view that change is necessary. We have heard complaints today about too many changes, a plea for radical and urgent reform and one for stability. That encompasses the tensions that I have to deal with, day in day out, when I examine the problems of housing benefit. We must have a balance between change and stability, especially when the entire welfare structure is changing.

People say, rightly, that there have been many circulars, and we are looking at how we can brigade them more effectively. The Conservative party suggested that we have one day per year for change, but what would be done with upratings, the introduction of joint claiming for the jobseeker's allowance and other changes? It would be difficult to arrange everything that impacts on the housing benefit system from different Departments to change on one day. In some ways, it would be simpler, but it would be a big bang in the year and it would make it harder to change housing benefit quickly, because we would have to wait for the change date.

There would be practical difficulties in having one mega-circular that appeared on 1 April rather than a string of them through the year. Some circulars, for example, inform local authorities of the new telephone number of an official who has moved job. They are counted in the official numbers, but do not cause huge administrative problems. Others make beneficial changes that the Social Security Committee would support; presumably, they are not the ones that are causing the complaints. I agree that there is an issue, and we are trying to make the production and distribution of the circulars timely, more predictable and easier to deal with from a local authority's point of view, particularly when benefit changes or redesigns involve computer reprogramming. When that happens, it can be difficult for local authorities.

Many of the hon. Members who spoke pointed out that delivery and administration of housing benefit throughout the country are patchy. My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson) has the good fortune to represent one of the authorities that does it extremely well. Other hon. Members, notably my hon. Friends the Members for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) and for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) do not have that good fortune. I will say no more about that.

We want to find out why those variations exist, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate pointed out, in places that are close geographically and that share similar social structures, demands and issues. We have noticed that, if local authorities think that housing benefit is important and give it priority at both officer and member level, it tends to be better. In many authorities, housing benefit is off at the side, something on which people do not focus. As with anything, if those who work in it and those who are responsible for administering it give it priority, it tends to be better done. Clearly, we need to raise the priority of housing benefit in those areas where it is not given priority.

We have moved from the laissez-faire system of administration that we inherited—409 authorities that were largely left alone—to one that is more prescriptive and demands higher standards. We are asking for changes to be made, not only because of welfare changes, but because we want to tackle fraud and to drive up the standards of administration. Those changes have been a shock in some areas. There has been a gap—I will put this gently—between what some authorities have been doing as standard practice and what the law says that they actually should be doing. To some extent, the verification framework has pointed out such discrepancies. In a benefit where there is a rent test and a means test, it is expected that the means test will be done. When the verification framework was put into effect in some local authorities, we discovered that people were simply taken at their word for the means test. When

[Angela Eagle]

claimants are told that they will have to confirm what is in their bank account, the process inevitably takes longer. By securing the gateways, delivery of the benefit will be slowed up in some instances but, once through those periods, administration will be more effective and harder to defraud.

I am not complacent about some of the difficult effects that the changes have caused—we heard them eloquently described today—in the lives of individual claimants. It is unacceptable that administrative failings, whether by an outsourced company or a local authority, are visited upon claimants. In many ways, the claimants are used, piggy in the middle, by landlords who say, "If I issue a notice for eviction, perhaps they will pay faster and I will get to the front of the backlog queue." I have constituents who have been treated in that manner. That is not an acceptable standard practice. It is not acceptable that claimants' security and peace of mind is affected in such a manner. I condemn that.

We are working on a new partnership with local authorities to try to improve housing benefit administration. We have a responsibility to improve the design of the scheme and its delivery. We began that with some of the administration changes that were announced in the aftermath of the Green Paper, particularly the help teams that are now available. The announcement of extra resources for administration—for the first time since 1993—is for three years; local authorities can make plans knowing what their funding will be.

We must also ask why some local authorities do a good job and how we can spread best practice. Best value itself will achieve some of that. The benefit fraud inspectorate, although it is not fantastically loved, is producing reports that demonstrate what works and what does not and where things need to be tightened up. The inspectorate has led us in its investigations to produce the form. It does not look much, but it is a template of a housing benefit claim form. It is 20 pages long, but it is easy to read and to fill in. It passes all verification framework standards.

I do not know whether hon. Members have read some of the current housing benefit forms. At present, local authorities produce their own. The forms range from pretty good—Camden, again—to absolutely atrocious. It may not seem important, but I regard it as such. The template has been made available to all local authorities. We are translating it into the 12 ethnic minority languages, which will save a lot of local translation costs and problems. We will also make that available. It is too early to say how many local authorities will use it, but I cannot force them to do so.

Mr. Corbyn: That is exactly my point. I realise that the Minister cannot force local authorities to use the form, but as housing benefit is a national benefit that is paid by local authorities, surely there should be scope to put more pressure on them to produce identical forms. There is no basis for local variations.

Angela Eagle: I agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that local authorities will consider how they can make use of the form. All the artwork is available. They can just send the form to the printers when they run out of their current forms. I hope that the template will be used widely. We shall see. Clearly, we shall decide whether we should set out other such proposals in the light of the popularity of the form.

I wish to deal with rent restrictions. The single-room rent definition is being widened. We have consulted on the new definitions, which involve shared-room rents. Such properties exist in the market and the regulations will be on their way to the Social Security Advisory Committee—if they are not there already. We hope that they will be in force soon. We are considering June or July for implementation, although local authorities consider that that period is quite tight. The changes to the single-room rent restriction will not abolish it. They will ease the difficulty, and we are trying to get the changes on to the statute book as soon as possible.

We are also introducing regulations that will change the nature of the discretionary housing scheme, something that the Social Security Committee was particularly interested in when I gave evidence to it. It will make the scheme discretionary at a much more local level. It will make it clear that exceptional hardship is not what some local authorities considered it was, but is largely within the bounds of the definition. The scheme will be much more discretionary.

However, as I said to the Social Security Committee, we will be creating a system whereby if local authorities do not spend the money given to them for discretionary housing awards on a year-to-year basis, we will take it back off them. There will be no incentive for them not to spend the money in the new scheme whereas there was in the old discretionary payment scheme. We are hoping that the change will be implemented alongside that on the single-room rent. As we speak, big changes are happening in connection with the move from housing benefit appeal boards. There will be an independent right of appeal to the Appeals Service. I accept that that is a big work load for local authorities. In the next few months, they will have their work cut out dealing with such issues.

I was interested that the Conservative party's proposal to create one day for circulars to come in would save £250 million.

Mrs. Lait: We are not suggesting that there should be just one day when all circulars arrive in a great thump from the Department, but as happens with social security benefit upratings, we want the changes to housing benefit to happen on one day.

Angela Eagle: That is fine, but I am still not sure how £250 million will be saved by cutting error and overpayment. I was interested in what the hon. Lady said about nationalising housing benefit and bringing it back within the control of the Benefits Agency.

Mrs. Lait: Centralising.

Angela Eagle: The hon. Lady says centralising. Well, we considered the matter and concluded for several reasons that it would not be a good idea in the current circumstances. First, there is a huge change under way at the Department of Social Security, so such a

proposal could not probably be accommodated even if we wanted to do it. Secondly, announcing that we would bring in such a change, but being unable to do it for a long time would blight the administration of housing benefit when it is important to drive up the standard of that administration. Thirdly, such a proposal would probably cost a great deal of money.

Mrs. Lait: My point, which I probably did not make clearly enough, was that underlying other people's comments was the centralisation of housing benefit. I was not suggesting it. I was merely pointing out that such a suggestion had been implied by others.

Angela Eagle: Yes, but the Conservative party is suggesting that housing benefit administration be taken away from the worst performing councils—I do not know how that would be defined—and moved to the Benefits Agency. It says that that would save £40 million, but I do not understand how.

I want to end the use of the argument, "Oh, it's their fault. It is nothing to do with us. It is the Government's fault," about housing benefit administration and to work in partnership with local authorities to drive up standards. We want to be helpful by providing the nationally designed claim form, more money, the help teams and by working closely to solve administrative problems. That is the best way forward rather than saying that, at some time in the future, we may take administration away.

We are also taking other action to help on a day-by-day basis. I keep referring to remote access terminals—RATs—when discussing housing benefits. They give a window on the Benefits Agency systems. We are developing the integrated inquiry service, which is a super-RAT with batteries. It enables local authorities to have a wider look at our systems. The fraud Bill will enable much more joint fraud working, such as the national fraud hotline. There will be more ability to swap and check information to ensure that housing benefit claims are put into place much faster. We hope that we can develop a single claims process for some linked benefits, such as housing benefit, jobseeker's allowance and income support. Those are some of our ambitions.

Ms Buck: I am aware that my hon. Friend is coming to the end of her remarks, but will she respond to the proposals about rent restrictions from the private tenants and landlords group and comment on the review of the mechanism for establishing local reference rents?

Angela Eagle: It is probably best if I write to my hon. Friend about that, given the amount of time that we have left. Although it is not my ministerial responsibility, it is important to note that the rent service has undergone some changes to centralise it recently. Clearly, it is beginning to look at how the system can be organised reasonably. We would not rule out considering the local reference rent, but changing it is not a priority at the moment. We need to ensure that the rent service and the rent officer service are as efficient and effective as they can be in all localities. I shall reply to the representations made by the organisations to which she referred.

Getting housing benefit right is extremely important. We are considering carefully fixed-term awards, particularly for pensioners, to see whether we can remove much of the senseless administration that surrounds them. I hope that an announcement will be made shortly. We are also considering the working age and how housing benefits take away the incentive to work. The solutions in that regard are different from those in respect of people of pensionable age. That is why we believe that disaggregating the DSS, so that we have a working age agency and a pensions directorate, will provide some solutions to the different needs of housing benefit recipients.

There is a lot of work to do. We are not complacent about the problems that exist. We welcome the Social Security Committee's report and I personally welcome the debate that we have had today. I am sure that such debates will continue. We want to work together in partnership to get such an extremely important benefit right.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at half-past Five o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 5 March 2001

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Departmental Policies (Hull, North)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Hull, North constituency, the effects on Hull, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150623]

Mr. Wills: Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Hull, North constituency and on the city of Kingston upon Hull have been placed in the Library.

Cheshire and Halton LEAs

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what specific funds have been allocated to (i) Cheshire local education authority and (ii) Halton local education authority since May 1997 for *(a)* pre-school, *(b)* primary school, *(c)* secondary school, *(d)* special school and *(e)* post-16 education. [148848]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 14 February 2001]:* The funds allocated to Cheshire local education authority for each category since 1997–98 are shown in the table. Figures for Halton are available only from 1998–99, when it became a unitary authority. The figures include each authority's Standard Spending Assessment, Nursery Education Grant, Standards Fund, Schools Standards Grant, and Budget Support Grant. For some specific funds that are not distributed on the basis of these categories, we have estimated the amounts for each category. From 1998–99 Nursery Education Grant has been used to fund free places in the private, voluntary and independent sectors and new free places in the maintained sector. New places in the maintained sector are funded only for one year via Nursery Education Grant, and after that are normally funded through Standard Spending Assessment.

In 1997–98, Cheshire County Council included Halton and Warrington. Since 1998–99, Halton and Warrington have been separate unitary authorities.

Funds allocated to Cheshire and Halton local education authorities

£ million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Cheshire[1]				
Nursery	20.5	—	—	—
Primary	151.2	—	—	—
Secondary	158.6	—	—	—
Post-16	24.7	—	—	—

Funds allocated to Cheshire and Halton local education authorities

£ million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Cheshire[2]				
Nursery	n/a	16.7	16.9	17.7
Primary	n/a	103.8	114.5	125.2
Secondary	n/a	109.9	116.8	127.3
Post-16	n/a	18.9	19.0	19.7
Halton				
Nursery	n/a	3.9	4.6	4.7
Primary	n/a	25.0	26.7	29.3
Secondary	n/a	24.9	26.4	29.1
Post-16	n/a	2.4	2.6	3.2

[1] Including Halton and Warrington
[2] Excluding Halton and Warrington

In addition Cheshire has been allocated £60.6 million and Halton £9.5 million for capital expenditure since 1997–98. Capital funding cannot be broken down into the categories requested.

Under this Government funding nationally per pupil has already increased by over £300 in real terms, and it will increase by a further £150 per pupil for 2001–02.

FE Colleges

Mrs. Virginia Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what information he has collated about the academic achievements and funding per student at *(a)* Farnham College and *(b)* Godalming College in the last year for which figures are available; and what the corresponding average figures are for (i) Surrey, (ii) England and (iii) the UK. [150301]

Mr. Wicks: The achievement rates for further education colleges in England are contained in the table:

	Achievement rate 1998–99 (percentage)
Farnham College	93
Godalming College	93
All sixth form colleges in England[1]	86
All colleges in Surrey	66
All colleges in England	76

[1] Farnham and Godalming Colleges are both sixth form colleges, therefore this achievement figure offers a more valid comparison

The level of funding of students by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) is determined by a tariff system which provides a number of "units" of funding for various aspects of the course and student. Most "units" are for the length and type of course; others cover achievement, entry and additional support, for example.

The average level of funding (or ALF) per unit varies between colleges, mostly for historical reasons but is converging by deliberate council policy. The ALF (1998–99) for Godalming College is £16.91 and for Farnham College is £17.75. This methodology will continue for the first year following the inception of the LSC. Following that, a revised system will be introduced which will simplify the FEFC system but maintain separate elements for course length and type and for achievement.

Under the current methodology, funding per full time equivalent (FTE) student will depend on type of courses, level of achievement, mode of attendance and other factors. The following figures on funding per FTE are affected by the factors as well as average level of funding per unit.

	Student numbers (1998–99)			*Funding (1998–99)*	
	Council funded	*Non-council funded*	*Council funded full time equivalents (FTE)*[1]	*Total FEFC funding (£ million)*	*Funding per FTE (£)*
Farnham College	921	—	575	1.8	3,200
Godalming College	1,962	77	1,695	3.9	2,323
All FE institutions in Surrey (excluding HEI)	44,224	8,055	18,561	55.3	2,979
All FE institutions in England (excluding HEI)	3,348,100	765,500	957,102	2,932.5	3,064

[1] Full time equivalents (FTEs)—for the purpose of this exercise, a full time student is defined as one who studies at the college for 655 hours. College FTEs are calculated by dividing total student hours by 655.
This allows for a more standardised comparison in terms of funding per FTE student.

Shakespeare

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received regarding the teaching of Shakespeare in secondary schools; and if he will make a statement. [150539]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 15 February 2001]:* The requirement for secondary schools to teach Shakespeare, as well as other major literary figures, was identified clearly in our review of the National Curriculum, which was completed last year. We maintained a consistent position, despite some proposals to the contrary, that pupils between the ages of 11 and 16 should be required to study the works of a range of major writers and poets, including two plays by William Shakespeare. The range also includes plays, novels, short stories and poetry from the English literary heritage. Major classical authors are represented, including Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, John Milton and William Wordsworth.

These proposals were the subject of wide consultation, which produced strong public support. We have no plans to change the requirement for the teaching of Shakespeare in secondary school.

Learning Support and Pupil Referral Units

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what the target ratio is of *(a)* learning support units and *(b)* pupil referral units to secondary schools; [150712]

(2) how many additional pupil referral units he estimates are needed September 2002 in order to meet the Government's commitment to provide a place for all young people who have been excluded from school. [150795]

Jacqui Smith: The ratio of Learning Support Units to secondary schools varies from LEA to LEA. Some, such as City of Nottingham, have chosen to set up LSUs in all their secondary schools; others have targeted those schools with greatest need in terms of rates of exclusion, attendance and severity of behavioural problems. However, in Excellence in Cities areas there is an average of one LSU for every two secondary schools. There are now over 1,000 LSUs in England.

We are providing education authorities with the resources to ensure that all excluded pupils receive a full-time education by 2002. Such education will take place in a range of settings including PRUs, the voluntary sector, further education and work experience. From April, funding to tackle truancy and exclusion increases to £174 million and already there are over 1,000 more places and nearly 600 more teachers, instructors and education support assistants at PRUs compared to 1997. Education authorities are assessing locally their requirements for increasing provision taking account of the number of exclusions and the successful re-integration of excluded pupils into mainstream school. In 2000 one third of PRUs reported offering full-time provision to pupils and two thirds offered 13 or more hours tuition each week. Planned LEA funding for PRUs increased by 13 per cent. this year compared to last, and we expect to see a 10 per cent. rise in the number of PRUs in 2001 compared to 2000. LEA plans indicate that in 2001 nearly two thirds of authorities will move to the full timetable for excluded secondary pupils. The recent Ofsted Annual Report noted the improving performance of PRUs and in particular highlighted improvements in teaching, pupil progress and re-integration into mainstream school of key stage 2 and 3 pupils.

Golden Hellos

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teachers have been given golden hellos broken down by *(a)* gender, *(b)* number of UCAS points and *(c)* age. [151003]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 28 February 2001]:* Golden hellos are awarded irrespective of gender, number of UCAS points and age. The information requested is therefore not collected centrally.

Compared to 1998–99, before the introduction of golden hellos for maths and science, graduate recruitment is up 23 per cent. for maths and 8 per cent. for science. In September 2000, golden hellos were extended to modern languages and technology. Graduate recruitment for 2000–01 is up by 13 per cent. and 23 per cent. respectively compared to last year.

Admission and Application Figures

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the admission figures were for the last three academic years, and for academic year 2001–02, what the latest application figures are, for higher education institutions, broken down into *(a)* UK based students, *(b)* EU and EEA students and *(c)* other overseas students, indicating in each case the figures for (i) full-time and (ii) part-time students. [151161]

Mr. Wicks: The available data on the home domicile of students, covering students applying for full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), are shown in tables 1 and 2. UCAS does not cover applicants or accepted applicants to part-time courses. The available data, collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, on entrants to part-time undergraduate courses are shown in table 3. Information on the numbers of part-time entrants for 2000–01 will be available in April 2001.

Table 1: Accepted applicants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses via UCAS institutions in the UK

Thousand

	Academic year of entry		
Domicile	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
UK	298.2	303.1	308.7
EU	15.9	15.5	14.0
Other overseas	15.7	16.0	17.0
Total	329.8	334.6	339.7

Table 2: Applicants[1] to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses via UCAS institutions in the UK

Thousand

	Academic year of entry	
Domicile	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
UK	292.4	296.4
EU	13.6	11.4
Other overseas	14.4	14.8
Total	320.5	322.6

[1] As at 15 December

Table 3: Entrants to part-time undergraduate courses in the UK[1]

Thousand

	Academic year of entry	
Domicile	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
UK	266.3	272.8
EU	3.3	2.7
Other overseas	3.4	3.7
Total	273.0	279.3

[1] Including all undergraduate courses in HE institutions, FE institutions and the Open University

Free School Meals

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals was in *(a)* specialist secondary schools and *(b)* other secondary schools in England for the most recent period for which figures are available. [151165]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information from the Department's 2000 Annual Schools Census shows that the proportion of pupils "known to be eligible for free school meals" was 16 per cent. in mainstream specialist secondary schools currently operational, and 18 per cent. in other mainstream maintained secondary schools. For those mainstream specialist schools designated in 1996 or earlier, the proportion of pupils "known to be eligible for free school meals" was 14 per cent.: for those mainstream specialist schools designated after that date the proportion was 17 per cent.

Oxbridge Applicants

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each constituent college of *(a)* Oxford and *(b)* Cambridge universities the proportion of (i) applicants and (ii) accepted applicants from *(a)* state schools and *(b)* independent schools for the academic years 1999–2000 and 2000–01. [151179]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The available data for Oxford and Cambridge universities are given in the table.

Figures for each constituent college are not available centrally.

UCAS UK-domiciled applicants and accepted applicants to Oxford and Cambridge universities by previous educational establishment

	Oxford				*Cambridge*			
	Year of entry				*Year of entry*			
	1999		*2000*		*1999*		*2000*	
	Nos.	*%*[1]	*Nos.*	*%*[1]	*Nos.*	*%*[1]	*Nos.*	*%*[1]
Applicants								
Independent	3,401	42	3,202	40	3,509	36	3,526	36
Maintained[2]	3,177	39	3,176	40	4,410	45	4,412	45
Other[3]	1,222	15	1,304	16	1,495	15	1,474	15
Not known	287	4	281	4	411	4	413	4
Total	8,087	100	7,963	100	9,825	100	9,825	100
Accepted applicants								
Independent	1,421	48	1,343	46	1,301	44	1,306	44
Maintained[2]	1,106	37	1,130	39	1,258	42	1,232	41
Other[3]	364	12	392	13	340	11	368	12
Not known	73	2	63	2	86	3	93	3
Total	2,964	100	2,928	100	2,985	100	2,999	100

[1] Constituent parts may not sum to totals because of rounding.
[2] Includes comprehensives, grammar, former grant maintained schools, sixth form centres, special schools and other secondary schools.
[3] Includes FE and HE institutions, Sixth Form Colleges, Adult Colleges and City Technology Colleges.

Voluntary Organisations

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to establish training and financial support structures for existing voluntary organisations. [151180]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 28 February 2001]:* My Department has no specific mandate to set up training and financial support structures for voluntary organisations. It is the Home Office Advice Communities Unit that has overall responsibility within Government for the voluntary sector. However, the voluntary sector is essential to the achievement of our objectives and we have put in place a number of arrangements for improvement the way we work with voluntary organisations and to help them improve the quality of their work.

We already provide support and technical assistance to providers working on particular initiatives such as Surestart, Millennium Volunteers and the New Deal Innovation Fund. We have established a short-term Voluntary Sector Support Unit within the Department to enhance the relationship with the sector, and we are introducing a national Funding Formula through the Employment Service and the Learning and Skills Council with effect from April this year.

With the establishment of Learning and Skills Council, we are introducing a Common Inspection Framework, a system of approved providers, longer-term contracts and "joined-up" purchasing arrangements.

We have recently commenced work on developing a new framework for our relationships with providers which will harmonise best practice around the Department and its associated bodies. A consultation exercise on the basis for this framework will be carried out in the spring.

Schools (South Derbyshire)

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 12 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 46W, on schools (South Derbyshire), if he will list the project-specific allocations to individual schools in each of the financial years listed in the table. [151250]

Jacqui Smith *[pursuant to her reply, 12 February 2001, c. 46W]:* The project-specific allocations to individual schools in the South Derbyshire constituency in each financial year from 1993–94 are shown in the tables.

1993–94

School name	*Project description*	*Allocation (£)*
Belmont Primary	Remedial works after flooding	43,598
	Re-roofing work	7,000
Chellaston Secondary	New technology extension and internal refurbishment	550,569
Merrill College	Repairs to pipework	924
	Heating system repairs	10,129
	Heating system repairs	6,221
	Health and Safety work and fire prevention measures	84,205
John Port	Heating repairs	71,904
	Roof repairs and Health and Safety work	31,286
Noel-Baker	Roof repairs	102,875
	Roof repairs	44,633
The Pingle	Security measures	63,585

1994–95

School name	*Project description*	*Allocation (£)*
Belmont Primary	Boiler repairs	4,824
	Replacement classrooms	256,559
Linton Primary	New hall and changing rooms	210,830
Chellaston Secondary	New sixth form	1,139,747
	Replacement of outfall drains	12,163
Merrill College	Repairs to electrical services following water leak	8,534
	Repair to gas pipes following gas leak	14,688
	Re-roofing works	5,498
	Sewer repairs	5,698
	Essential roof repairs and securing of windows	120,792
John Port	Re-roofing works	77,079
	Foul drainage works	34,251
	Four new science labs accommodation and prep rooms	510,034
Noel-Baker	Re-roofing works	78,317
	Upgrade fabric of block	129,787
The Pingle	Extension and roof repairs to technology block	295,093

1995–96

School name	*Project description*	*Allocation (£)*
Belmont Primary	New Classroom Block and toilets	36,000
Linton Primary	Boiler replacement	8,440
Shelton Junior	Developing independent learning through IT	30,000
Chellaston Junior	ICT	117,500
Merrill College	Boiler replacement	6,417
	IT equipment	117,500
	Repairs to drains	4,345
John Port	Disabled access	954
	Repair/replace water installation	26,675
	Replacement of obsolete thermostatic mixing valves	2,500
	Re-roofing works	63,447

1996–97

School name	*Project description*	*Allocation (£)*
Chellaston Junior	Six classroom extension	536,618
Shelton Junior	Asbestos removal	82,002
Pennine Way Junior	Detached three classroom block with covered way	196,496
Merrill College	Health and safety work	64,208
	Mechanical extract ventilation and refurbishment	142,000
	Demolition and reprovision of toilets	54,000
	Replacement of failed boiler	9,038
John Port	New technology provision	450,769
	Health and safety work	49,845
	Boiler replacement in Ashbourne block	76,059
	Ventilation and electrical works	359,372
	Replacement of hot water cylinder	8,540
	Repairs to Ashbourne block	39,996
Noel-Baker	Replacement of heating system	138,240
	Refurbishment of toilets and drainage repairs	42,587
The Pingle	Provision of additional places	265,888
	Repairs to external fabric	125,304
	Provision of additional places	165,304

1997–98

School name	*Project description*	*Allocation (£)*
Repton Primary	Provision of nursery places	50,000
Chellaston Secondary	Sports Hall	178,953
Merrill College	Rewire gym and replace lower school water tank	78,137
	Repairs to science block heating and refurbishment of two laboratories	43,355
	Reglaze and repair windows and extraction canopy in kitchen	39,630
	Repair defective cabling and control equipment	2,796
John Port	Re-roof home economics classrooms	88,900
	Fire compartmentation of Edale Block	45,126
Noel-Baker	Re-roofing of the science block	114,191
The Pingle	Roof repairs	50,456
	Provide ramp and handrails	43,938
	Work to masonry, cladding, windows and doors to main block	129,417

1998–99

School name	*Project description*	*Allocation (£)*
Repton Primary	Modifications to doors, toilets and access to the school	1,000
	Re-roofing works	4,623
Chellaston Junior	Ramp provision	3,765
	Glazing—addition of safety film to windows	5,700
Linton Primary	Replacement of two mobile classrooms	100,178
Shelton Junior	Introduction of Successmaker into the curriculum	36,272
Pennine Way Junior	Install ICT suite, extend and refurbish library	20,000
Merrill College	Completely rewire original building	96,798
	Gas distribution, ventilation and electrical work	38,386
	Rationalisation of school sites	119,875
	Emergency Health and Safety work	6,071
John Port	Complete replacement of failing concrete panels	297,515
	New sixth form (preliminary work)	47,619
	Refurbishment to elevation curtain wall	46,530
	Glazing	11,633
	New sixth form	1,858,795
	Re-roofing works	38,480
Noel-Baker	Repairs to gas pipes	9,521
	Re-roofing works	47,818
The Pingle	Sports hall and changing rooms	200,000
	Roof, cladding, windows and lights	40,853
	Provision of a lift	40,788

1999–2000

School name	*Project description*	*Allocation (£)*
Linton Primary	Emergency replacement of collapsed drain	14,868
Shelton Junior	Emergency replacement of water heater	11,490
Chellaston Secondary	Increase accommodation and refurbish science facilities	200,000
Merrill College	Emergency roofing repair works	25,979
	Emergency drainage repairs	6,004
Noel-Baker	Relocation of specialist facilities	804,925
The Pingle	Two general teaching rooms and conversion of two laboratories	144,760

In addition, Derbyshire local education authority was allocated central Government support for capital investment in schools between 1996–97 and 2000–01 as shown in the following table. Information before 1996–97 is not readily available.

Central Government support for Capital Investment in schools in Derbyshire local education authority

	£000
1996–97	5,088
1997–98	4,037
1998–99	12,708
1999–2000	13,008
2000–2001	27,128
Total	61,969

Fast Track Learning Programme

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) where, and in what form, academic requirements for the Fast Track Learning programme were published prior to its launch; and what changes have been made to the requirements subsequently; [151609]

(2) how many applications have been *(a)* received for the Fast Track Learning programme, *(b)* accepted on application, *(c)* accepted on appeal, *(d)* rejected on application and *(e)* rejected on appeal. [151610]

Ms Estelle Morris: The academic requirements for the Fast Track Teaching programme reflect the demands it will make on those who will participate. The key requirements were published on the Fast Track Recruitment website at the time of the launch in October 2000. They have not been changed since that date. 1,574 applications were received by the closing date of 31 January. In common with accelerated progression schemes for other professions, applicants will undergo a rigorous staged assessment process. We expect that process to continue into April. To date over 400 applicants have proceeded to the second stage. Of those who did not, 21 have asked for their applications to be reviewed. In one case the review has resulted in the applicant progressing to the second stage.

School Transport

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate the annual cost of providing private taxi hire for the purposes of school transport in *(a)* Devon and *(b)* the United Kingdom. [151881]

Jacqui Smith: In 1998–99, the latest year for which figures are available, Devon local education authority spent £11.9 million on home to school transport. The figure for England for the same year was £444 million. These figures are for all forms of transport: we do not have any means of estimating the amount spent on taxis.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much his Department spent on school bus transport in the last financial year; and if he will break down the sums allocated to each LEA. [152009]

Jacqui Smith: My Department does not allocate money to local education authorities specifically for school transport. Money for this purpose is included in LEAs' standard spending assessments, but it is up to individual authorities how they spend it. In 1998–99, the latest year for which figures are available, LEAs in England spent a total of £444 million on all forms of school transport; we do not have a breakdown of how much of this was on buses.

Disability Rights Task Force

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will publish a response to the report of the Disability Rights Task Force, "From Exclusion to Inclusion." [152415]

Ms Hodge: I am delighted to announce that the Government's response to the Task Force, entitled "Towards Inclusion—civil rights for disabled people", is published today. Copies are available in the Library of the House.

We are already taking forward the Task Force's recommendations on civil rights in education in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill, which received its Third reading in the House of Lords on 1 March. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State, Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill), announced on 7 December that he would be consulting separately on the Task Force's civil rights recommendations on transport. The Disability Rights Commission, on which the Task Force made previous recommendations, has been open to the public since 25 April 2000.

"Towards Inclusion" describes our proposals for amending the Disability Discrimination Act's provisions on the definition of disability, employment and access to goods, services, facilities and premises. These proposals will have a major impact on promoting equality for, and safeguarding the rights of, disabled people. They include: covering more people with HIV and cancer; ending the DDA's small employer exemption by 2004; bringing within scope of the DDA occupations and employment such as the police, fire-fighters, prison officers, barristers and partners in business partnerships. By making these changes, we will bring over 600,000 disabled people, in a range of jobs and occupations, into its scope. We will also improve the process for making tribunal complaints; extend the scope of the DDA to cover most functions of public bodies—not just services to the public as now; and introduce a new duty for public bodies to promote equalisation of opportunities for disabled people. We are seeking views on our proposals by 8 June. In addition, we have asked the DRC, as part of its role to monitor and review the DDA, to consider further some other Task Force issues.

"Towards Inclusion" also describes how we have taken forward the Task Force's non-legislative recommendations and outlines the wide range of positive Government action for disabled people over the last four years, in all areas of life.

Our 1997 manifesto made a major commitment to disabled people. We promised to support their comprehensive and enforceable civil rights. With the help of the Disability Rights Task Force, the steps we have taken over the last four years—and what we now propose in "Towards Inclusion"—meet this commitment. We are on the way towards creating a truly inclusive society for disabled people.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Guinea

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the number of refugees in Guinea. [151684]

Clare Short: There are currently around 310,000 Sierra Leonean refugees, and around 122,000 Liberian refugees, in Guinea. Many have been there for a number of years. There are also significant numbers of internally displaced Guineans in the south of the country, in the area adjoining the Liberian and Sierra Leone borders.

Intellectual Property Rights

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the composition, terms of reference and scheduled date of reporting of the planned commission on intellectual property rights. [152141]

Clare Short: The process of selecting the commission is under way, but not yet completed. A selection panel will sit at the end of March and propose recommendations for its membership to me thereafter. The terms of reference are as set out in the White Paper "Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor". We expect the commission to report by the end of this year.

HIV/AIDS

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much money her Department has contributed to research to identify a microbicide to prevent HIV transmission in the last four years; and which research organisations received funding. [151631]

Clare Short: My Department is a major source of international support for reproductive health commodities including male and female condoms. An effective microbicide would be an important addition to the list of reproductive health commodities and would also offer people more choice and control in protecting themselves from infection.

In the last four financial years, we have made the following contributions to organisations in support of research and development, and advocacy for microbicide development:

Medical Research Council: £900,000

Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine: £334,766

Population Council: £136,707

DEFENCE

Departmental IT Policies

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the IT projects his Department plans to undertake in the next year; and if he will state in each case the *(a)* expected date of commencement and completion and *(b)* cost. [151473]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* A number of new Defence IT-related projects are planned to commence during the coming financial year. It is impracticable to list all new initiatives, but the most important is the Defence Information Infrastructure (DII), which will enter its initial assessment phase during 2001–02. This is planned to provide a computing infrastructure across the whole of Defence, and is an important step forward, since it represents a change from stand-alone IT projects to the development of a single Defence-wide computing infrastructure on which both office and business applications will be mounted. The DII is based on, and is planned to subsume, a number of related IT projects. Other business application projects being considered include DRUMM (material management capability), DSMS (Defence Supply Management System), P2P (Purchase to Payment, a component of the Defence e-Commerce programme) and SGIS (Surgeon General's system). All of these are in their formative stages, with completion expected over the next three years. Since contracts for these projects have yet to be awarded and are subject to commercial confidence, I am withholding the information under Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the IT projects currently undertaken in his Department; and if he will state the *(a)* expected completion date and *(b)* cost of each project. [151503]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* Information Technology is a key component of many Ministry of Defence (MOD) projects, both large and small. Consequently the MOD has a large number of information-related systems in service, under development or planned. Many projects are relatively small and are undertaken within the delegations given to budget-holders and Defence agencies. Comprehensive records of these projects are not held centrally. As part of the MOD response to the McCartney report on improving Government IT projects, records are being compiled for medium to large-scale projects. Since these records include commercial in confidence details of projects, I am withholding the information under Exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. Some 45 projects are currently listed and work continues to complete the list and ensure that all useful data have been captured.

Gulf Veterans

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made on the Gulf Veterans Medical Assessment Programme; and if he will make a statement. [151814]

Mr. Spellar: The Gulf Veterans Medical Assessment Programme has been in existence since October 1993 and at the end of February of this year 3,105 veterans had been seen. A paper on the findings from the first 1,000 veterans was published in the *British Medical Journal* in January 1999. A paper on the second 1,000 veterans will shortly be published in the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps and a paper on the third 1,000 veterans, and the 3,000 in total, is almost ready for submission for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. A presentation based on this last paper was made by the head of the GVMAP at a recent conference on Gulf illnesses in the United States.

Psychiatric illnesses are predominant among the illnesses seen at the GVMAP, of which Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, with or without co-morbidity, is the most common. The GVMAP physicians have found a few other Gulf related illnesses, predominantly of a respiratory or dermatological nature. They have not found any evidence of a unique syndrome among Gulf veterans or any unusual pattern of disease among veterans who attended the programme. They have not seen any evidence of increased immunological, neurological or renal diseases, or the appearance of any unusual cancers. The symptoms presented by veterans who have attended the GVMAP are similar to those reported by members of the general population attending their GPs' surgeries.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what reports the Department has received or produced relating to neurological damage sustained by service personnel in the Gulf War; and if he will publish them. [152154]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence has not received any reports relating to neurological damage in Gulf veterans which have not been published in scientific journals or are otherwise publicly available. Nor has the Ministry of Defence produced any such reports.

The MOD is currently sponsoring research at King's College Medical School which is investigating neuro-muscular problems in Gulf veterans. The results of this research will be published in the peer-reviewed scientific literature in due course.

Force Reaction Unit

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date and for what reasons he decided to acknowledge the existence of the Force Reaction Unit; what the limits are on disclosure of information regarding the activities of this unit; and what instructions he has issued regarding the co-operation of former members of the FRU with the Stevens Inquiry. [150583]

Mr. Spellar: I believe my hon. Friend is referring to the Force Research Unit (FRU).

In July 2000 the Ministry of Defence provided a national newspaper with information relating to a court order obtained against a former soldier, known as "R".

The order was obtained in order to protect lives and national security. These papers confirmed that "R" was a former member of the FRU.

Further information regarding the activities of this unit is withheld under exemption 1a of the Code of Practice on Access to Government information.

It would be inappropriate for the MOD to issue instructions to any former soldier who is to be questioned by the police on any issue. Nevertheless, the MOD is fully supportive of the Stevens Inquiry and will continue to provide it with whatever assistance it can.

Troop Statistics

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many service personnel in total have served with the armed forces in Northern Ireland since troops were deployed there in 1969; how many have been killed and injured in the course of their duties; how many are receiving war pensions as a result of injuries sustained in Northern Ireland; and how many widows are receiving pensions where bereavement is attributable to tours of duty in Northern Ireland. [150584]

Mr. Spellar: Since August 1969, the total number of soldiers who have served at least one day in Northern Ireland is 310,831, while the total number of officers who have served at least one day in Northern Ireland is 28,282[1]. In the case of the Royal Air Force, 2,233 officers and 24,236 airmen/airwomen are recorded as having received pay while serving in Northern Ireland and will, therefore, have served at least one month in Province. Comparable information for the Royal Navy is not available.

The number of service personnel who have lost their lives since August 1969 in connection with their military duties and responsibilities in Northern Ireland is detailed in the table.

	Number
Army[2]	651
RN[3]	11
RAF[3]	4

The number of British service personnel injured in Northern Ireland since August 1969 is detailed in the table.

	Number
Army[4]	6,146
RN[5]	165
RAF[5]	154

[1] These figures include regular soldiers, full and part-time members of the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment. They also include members of the TA, who do not play any part in security operations in Northern Ireland, but it is not possible to extract these figures from the overall totals.
[2] Figures are from August 1969–19 February 2001 and relate to terrorist activity. 434 deaths occurred while the individual was on duty.
[3] Figures are from 1 January 1974–19 February 2001 and include injuries/deaths from all causes.
[4] Figures are from August 1969–19 February 2001 and relate primarily to injuries which were incurred while on duty; however, the manner in which data have historically been compiled means some injuries incurred while off duty may also be included.
[5] Figures are from 1 January 1976–19 February 2001 and relate primarily to injuries which were incurred while on duty; however, the manner in which data have historically been compiled means some injuries incurred while off duty may also be included.

Information about the number of widows receiving pensions where bereavement is attributable to tours of duty in Northern Ireland is not readily available. Neither my Department nor the War Pensions Agency categorises these pensions according to the geographical area in which bereavement took place. This information could be obtained only by a manual search of all pension files, which could only be done at disproportionate cost.

Paratrooper Shootings

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what further action has been taken against the three paratroopers alleged to have shot Fahri Bici and Avni Dudi in Kosovo; and what duties have been undertaken since April 2000 by *(a)* the 1st Battalion, Parachute Regiment and *(b)* the three paratroopers against whom allegations have been made. [150632]

Mr. Spellar: This issue is currently being considered by the Attorney-General, and any potential further action will be dependant on the outcome of his deliberations. The 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment has undertaken the following duties since 1 April 2000.

Date	*Duties*
30 April 2000	A Company-Exercise Red Stripe in Jamaica
7–26 May 2000	Operation Palliser in Sierra Leone
31 July–4 August 2000	Arms plot move to Dover
2–20 September 2000	A Company-Operation Barras Sierra Leone
October–December 2000	Northern Ireland Training
December 2000	Rural Roulement Bn (Northern Ireland)-two Companies are in Northern Ireland

They are engaged on a variety of Infantry Training duties.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much depleted uranium was used by each country in the allied forces during the Gulf war. [147377]

Mr. Spellar: As far as we are aware, only UK and US forces used ammunition containing depleted uranium (DU) during the Gulf conflict. The Ministry of Defence's assessment is that UK tanks used fewer than one hundred 120mm rounds against Iraq's military forces during hostilities (this equates to less than one metric tonne of DU). Additional rounds were fired by UK forces during earlier work-up training to establish the round's Mean Point of Impact. In a paper published in December 2000, the US Government reported that US forces in the Gulf had fired ammunition rounds containing some 290 metric tonnes of DU.

National Missile Defence

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions have taken place between *(a)* Government officials and *(b)* Ministers and British companies about the latter's participation in National Missile Defence projects. [151608]

Mr. Hoon: No discussions have taken place between either Ministers or officials of my Department and British companies about participation by the latter in US National Missile Defence projects.

Typhoon

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to review the number of Typhoons which will be *(a)* purchased and *(b)* brought into service by the UK; and what the in-service date for the Typhoon in the United Kingdom is. [151792]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* Typhoon is the name given by industry to the export version of Eurofighter; it is not the name for RAF aircraft.

The UK currently intends to acquire 232 Eurofighter aircraft, and we plan to bring all of these aircraft into service, except for two Instrumented Production Aircraft and one to be used for the Major Aircraft Fatigue Test.

Production contracts for the first 55 RAF aircraft were signed in September 1998. Contracts for the remaining aircraft are planned for 2003 and 2007. The in-service date of Eurofighter, which is defined as delivery of the first aircraft, is June 2002.

"Brits"

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date and for what reason the former serviceman described as Geoff in the BBC television documentary "Brits" was discharged from the Army. [152088]

Dr. Moonie: It is not normal practice to disclose such details of any individual's military service. Such information is confidential between employer and employee and is withheld under Exemptions 8a and 12 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Porton Down

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many new staff have been taken on in the Gulf Veterans Illnesses Unit to deal with issues relating to Porton Down volunteers since 21 November 2000; and in what grades each of these new staff were. [152083]

Dr. Moonie: Since 21 November 2000, the following members of staff have joined the Gulf Veterans Illnesses Unit (GVIU), specifically to deal with issues relating to the Porton Down Volunteer Programme:

1 x Principal (Grade B2).

2 x Senior Executive Officers (Grade C1).

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 21 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 101–02W, on what dates officials from his Department and the Chemical Defence Establishment, Porton Down, held meetings with the Medical Research Council regarding advice on an independent epidemiological study for Porton Down volunteers. [152080]

Dr. Moonie: My staff met representatives from the Medical Research Council (MRC) at Porton Down on 5 March 2001.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 14 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 223W, regarding nerve agent studies, if the research to establish the definitive numbers of Porton Down volunteers who have taken part in nerve agent studies will include an assessment of the safety and ethical procedures which were in force at Porton Down during these studies. [152054]

Dr. Moonie: Yes.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to his answer of 25 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 659W, regarding Oripavine, if he will place in the Library a list of the technical papers which discuss the different aspects of Porton's research on TL2636, specifying the title, number and date of each paper. [152050]

Dr. Moonie: The Chemical and Biological Defence Sector of DERA at Porton Down has identified several internal technical reports which relate to research involving Oripavine TL2636. These are as follows:

Porton Technical Paper 0835: Oripavine derivative (TL2636) as a potential incapacitating agent. 1963

Porton Technical Paper 0951: Prediction of biological activity. 1966

Nancekuke Internal Note 9: Some applications of potentiometric titrations in non-aqueous media. 1965

Nancekuke Internal Note 16: Analysis of tertiary alcohols of the 6:14 endetheno tetrahydro Oripavine series. 1966

Nancekuke Report 78: Preparation of tertiary alcohols of the 6:14 endetheno tetrahydro Oripavine series. 1966

Porton Down Technical Paper 939: N-dealkylation of Oripavine derivatives and its significance in their pharmacological activity. Date unknown.

Technical Paper 008: Neuropharmacological comparison in the cat of the catalepsy producing drugs morphine and bulbocapnine. 1969

Technical Paper 068: Effects of small doses of an Oripavine derivative on human subjects under both laboratory and field conditions. 1972.

The following three reports have some reference to Oripavine TL2636:

Annual Summary Report 1965–1966. 1966

CW Applications Discussion Group: 17th Quadripartite CBR Conference. 1964

Applied Biology Committee Chemical Defence Establishment: Effects of small doses of TL2636 on human subjects at rest and exercising in the laboratory and the field. 1968.

The majority of these reports are over 30 years old and are part of the Porton Down archive holding of records which have been progressively transferred to the main MOD repository at Hayes. Since 1998, the majority of the above technical reports and other material have been forwarded to MOD archives for review, in accordance with normal procedures, and eventual transfer to the Public Records Office.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Chemical Defence Establishment, Porton Down, have made of the report produced by the US Institute of Medicine in 1993 entitled, "Veterans at Risk-the health effects of mustard gas and lewisite"; and on what dates these assessments were made. [152082]

Dr. Moonie: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the ways in which his Department and the Chemical Defence Establishment, Porton Down, have co-operated and provided assistance to the Wiltshire Police during their inquiry into human trials at Porton Down. [152081]

Dr. Moonie: From the start of the investigation by Wiltshire Police, staff at Porton Down have been as helpful as possible in providing them with the material they require. Officers were issued passes to allow them easy access to the Porton Down site and, prior to moving the records to the Police Headquarters, the Police had use of an office containing the archived volunteer files to carry out their work. The Police have also had access to archive material held in the Ministry of Defence's archives, and research advice and assistance from the MOD historical branches.

MOD staff continue to be in regular contact with their opposite numbers in the Wiltshire Constabulary and meet with them whenever necessary to discuss points of concern.

US-UK Strategic Defence Initiative (Memorandum of Understanding)

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the 1985 US-UK Strategic Defence Initiative Memorandum of Understanding. [152052]

Mr. Hoon: I am withholding this information under exemption 1b of the Code of Practice, relating to international relations.

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what arrangements his Department has made to offer stakeholder pensions to members of the reserve forces. [152055]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence is in the process of going out to tender for a designated stakeholder pension scheme. It is intended to offer eligible members of the reserve forces the opportunity to make contributions to the designated stakeholder pension scheme via deductions from their pay.

Policy and Strategy Units

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when his policy planners department was established; which of its reports are placed in the public domain; how many departmental or non-departmental special advisers participate in its work; how many regular *(a)* non-departmental and *(b)* departmental staff participate in its work; and how many of these work for the department on a full-time basis. [150373]

Dr. Moonie: The Directorate of Defence Policy in the Ministry of Defence was renamed the Directorate of Policy Planning in autumn 1999, although the role it undertakes remains similar. It supports the strategic planning process which arose from the Strategic Defence Review, and undertakes policy development work on a range of issues. It also carries out work in support of the Defence Diplomacy initiative and the Government's conflict prevention agenda.

The Directorate does not generally publish reports in the public domain in its own right, but it had a major input, for example, into three recent Ministry of Defence publications (Defence Policy 2001, The Future Strategic Context for Defence and Policy Paper 1: Defence Diplomacy).

The Directorate currently comprises 22 full-time Ministry of Defence employed personnel, both civilian and military, and one French military exchange officer. It does not contain any special advisers.

In undertaking its work, the Directorate works with a wide range of bodies in the Ministry of Defence, other Government Departments, the academic community and other interested parties. Special advisers do not routinely participate in its work, although they may be involved in discussion of work undertaken by the Directorate, in the normal way.

Investment Strategy

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of progress in implementing the Investment Strategy; if he will list the exceptional circumstances under which sites may be offered to other public bodies; what sites have been disposed of in this way, and under what circumstances in each case, in the last four years; and if he will make a statement. [150524]

Dr. Moonie: The Investment Strategy was published as a result of the 2000 Spending Review, which sets out new plans for investment for 2001–02 to 2003–04. At the same time, the Government committed themselves to producing documents that would show how Departments planned to use this funding by setting out a strategic plan for both new investment and the use of existing assets. The Defence Investment Strategy is the result. The Strategy sets out the strategic context the MOD is working in, an analysis of its existing asset base, future investment plans and the systems the Department will be adopting to deliver value for money.

The exceptional circumstances under which sites may be offered to other public bodies are where it will ensure the future preservation of an area of importance for nature conservation, a listed building or scheduled monument or to preserve a community facility which would have no alternative use. Details of the sites which have been disposed of in this way over the last four years are not held centrally, and the costs of retrieving this information would be disproportionate.

Service Personnel Medical Assessment Programme

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many former service personnel have made an appointment with the Medical Assessment Programme at St. Thomas's Hospital since 21 November 2000; and how many of these appointments have been made following a referral from the individual's medical practitioner. [152049]

Dr. Moonie: All appointments with the Medical Assessment Programme (MAP) at St. Thomas' Hospital are made as a result of a referral by the patient's GP. During the period 21 November 2000 to 1 March 2001, 47 former service personnel who served in the Gulf have been referred to the MAP. Of these 26 have been seen.

During the same time period 42 former Porton Down volunteers have been referred to the MAP by their GP. Of this number 12 have been seen.

Firing Ranges

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make available sites designated for live firing for dry military training. [151692]

Dr. Moonie: All sites designated for live firing are used for dry training whenever it is safe to do so.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates army firing took place within each of the firing ranges in the Dartmoor National Park; and which dates were advertised in advance for the year ending 31 December 2000. [151884]

Dr. Moonie: The advertised and actual number of days on which the Armed Forces fired on each of the three firing ranges in the Dartmoor National Park for the year ending 31 December 2000 are as follows:

Range	*Advertised*	*Actual*
Okehampton	60	47
Willsworthy	179	125
Merrivale	128	87

HOME DEPARTMENT

Burglaries and Personal Attacks

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many burglaries and personal attacks for residents of *(a)* housing blocks owned by local authorities and housing associations and *(b)* privately owned houses there were in the last 12 months. [151532]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 27 February 2001]:* Crimes recorded by the police do not provide this information. The most recent results available from the 2000 British crime survey relate to 1999, and estimate the number of burglaries and personal attacks against those in privately owned houses and those renting from social and private landlords. The survey cannot provide figures for people living in

"housing blocks owned by local authorities and housing associations"

as some blocks will have a tenure mix of owner occupiers, private tenants, and social renters. The figures for local authority/housing association properties will also include flats as well as houses. Table 1 gives the figures available.

Table 1: Estimated number of burglaries and violence incidents in 1999 (in thousands), by tenure type (British crime survey estimates)

Tenure	*Burglary*[1]	*Violence*[2]
Owner occupiers	596	1,652
Social rented sector	476	710
Private rented sector	237	703

[1] Includes attempts and burglary with entry.

[2] Comprises the following offences; robbery, snatch theft, wounding and common assault.

Note:

These estimates are based on the number of incidents per 10,000 households/individuals, multiplied up to represent the adult population of England and Wales.

Source:

2000 BCS.

Table 2 shows rates of victimisation in each sector (taking account of the varying number of householders in each). Tenants in private rented accommodation face the highest levels of both burglary and violent incidents, followed by social renters. The wider context needs to be borne in mind. For instance, rented accommodation is more common in urban and inner-city areas, where levels of crime are generally higher.

Table 2: Rates per 10,000 of burglaries and violent incidents in 1999, by tenure type (British crime survey)

Tenure	*Burglary*[1]	*Violence*[2]
Owner occupiers	394	540
Social rented sector	1,040	960
Private rented sector	1,061	1,755
All	585	773

[1] Includes attempts and burglary with entry.

[2] Comprises the following offences; robbery, snatch theft, wounding and common assault.

Source:

2000 BCS.

Either-way Cases

Mr. Lilley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many either-way offences were dealt with by magistrates in each year since 1987; of these how many were *(a)* committed to the Crown court for sentence and *(b)* committed for trial by Crown court; and in how many of these was mode of trial (i) elected by the defendant and (ii) referred for trial where the magistrate declined jurisdiction; [151818]

(2) how many defendants in either-way cases pleaded *(a)* guilty and *(b)* not guilty in (i) cases dealt with by the magistrates court, (ii) cases referred for trial by Crown court on election by the defendant and (iii) cases referred for trial by the Crown court where the magistrate declined jurisdiction in each year since 1987; [151819]

(3) how many either-way offences were committed to trial in the Crown court in each year since 1996, showing the proportion of elected cases to all either-way cases committed for trial in the Crown court. [151820]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office court proceedings database does not contain information on whether defendants elect Crown court trial or are directed for trial there, nor does it contain details on defendants' pleas at magistrates courts. The number of defendants proceeded against at magistrates courts for triable either-way offences in England and Wales for the years 1987 to 1999 are shown in Table A, together with details of those committed for trial or sentence. Table B shows details of plea entered by defendants committed for trial on triable either-way offences at the Crown court in England and Wales for the years 1996 to 1999.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) does not separately record plea by type of offence at magistrates courts, but does record defendants finalised at the Crown court who elected for Crown court trial. Table C, from CPS statistics for the years 1992 to 2000, shows the proportion of defendants committed for trial to the Crown court in England and Wales for either-way offences who elected Crown court trial.

Table A: Defendants proceeded against for triable either-way offences at magistrates courts in England and Wales, and those committed for trial or sentence, 1987 to 1999

Year	Defendants proceeded against	Defendants committed for trial	Defendants committed for sentence
1987	468,900	95,600	5,800
1988	473,300	95,100	6,100
1989	425,900	82,000	5,500
1990	444,500	82,000	6,200
1991	462,400	82,600	7,100
1992	462,000	74,900	5,900
1993	449,600	66,600	3,600
1994	466,800	69,500	3,600
1995	434,100	61,100	3,700
1996	432,600	61,200	4,400
1997	454,400	66,500	6,800
1998	477,500	52,000	18,200
1999	479,900	51,000	19,300

Table B: Defendants committed for trial for triable either-way offences to the Crown court in England and Wales, by plea, 1996 to 1999

Year	Defendants pleading guilty	Defendants pleading not guilty
1996	46,500	21,300
1997	51,000	21,900
1998	40,000	22,200
1999	35,900	21,900

Table C: Crown Prosecution Statistics—Percentage of either-way cases committed to the Crown court in which the defendant has elected Crown court trial, England and Wales, 1987 to 2000

Year	Percentage of triable either-way defendants electing to be committed for trial
1987[1]	52
1988	45
1989	42
1990	38
1991	37
1992	37
1993	35
1994	35
1995	33
1996	32
1997	28
1998	28
1999	32
2000	30

[1] Data available for April to December only

Special Constables

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many special constables there were in Lancashire in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* in the latest year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [151759]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Statistics on the strength of the Special Constabulary have been collected since 1995 by the Home Office research development and statistics directorate. These figures are compiled at the end of March and September each year. Before 1995, figures were collected by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary. The figures for 1992 were compiled at the end of the calendar year.

The Special Constabulary strength figures for Lancashire Special Constabulary for 1992, September 1997 and September 2000 (the latest figures available) are as follows:

	December 1992	September 1997	September 2000
Male	313	286	222
Female	226	214	140
Total	539	500	362

We are currently considering a number of recruitment and retention issues in relation to the Special Constabulary with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities with a view to seeing how best to address the decline in the number of special constables in England and Wales.

Asylum Seekers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers who have had their applications rejected are in receipt of NASS support prior to removal from the country; and if he will make a statement. [151746]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not currently available. However, the national asylum support service (NASS) supports single asylum seekers who receive a negative decision for 14 days following notification to them of the decision. Families with children under 18 who receive a final negative decision will continue to be supported by NASS until they leave the country.

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of crimes committed by asylum seekers in each police authority area in each quarter of *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000. [151237]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information on offences recorded in each police authority area that is routinely returned to the Home Office does not include details of the offender. Information is also not held in respect of statistics relating to asylum seekers themselves. The only statistics which relate in any way to offences committed by those from abroad are court statistics of the number of offenders recommended for deportation, but these relate to others as well as asylum seekers.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many held asylum seekers have been returned to the Democratic Republic of Congo in each month of the last two years. [151289]

Mrs. Roche: The requested information is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Policies (Ilford, North)

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what initiatives embarked upon since May 1997 have benefited Ilford, North; and if he will make a statement. [152028]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office annual reports. A copy of the most recent report, "Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000", is available in the Library. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by basic command unit and crime and disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested, although set out are examples relating to the Ilford, North constituency or the immediate locality.

Redbridge, in partnership with Havering, Barking and Dagenham and Waltham Forest, is running a drug arrest referral scheme. The borough is policed by the Metropolitan police, who have increased the amount of class A drugs seized by 23 per cent. from 1997 to 1998. The borough also benefits from a Londonwide domestic violence and racially motivated crime initiative being run by the Metropolitan police.

The Redbridge crime and disorder reduction partnership audit, which covers Ilford, North, was published in 1999. It showed, among other findings, that Redbridge has the second lowest crime rate in London. Redbridge's crime and disorder reduction strategy for 1999–2002 was published later in the year, setting three-year objectives for each priority area and identifying specific projects to enable these to be met.

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

The Redbridge YOT covers the constituency of Ilford, North. The YOT is working with other youth justice agencies to deliver the Government's pledge to halve the average time taken from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders from 142 to 71 days. According to local information, the Redbridge youth court achieved an average of 40 days for the last quarter.

The YOT is carrying out initial assessments of young people using a research-based structured assessment tool. Assessment interviews are conducted jointly by YOT staff members from two different professional backgrounds to enhance the quality of the assessment process.

A bail support scheme is in operation locally in order to reduce the incidence of secure remands and reoffending by young people while on bail. Structured group work and individual programmes of differing intensities have been developed in order to address different levels of offending behaviour. 89 per cent. of young people receiving a community-based order are seen for their first appointment within one working day. All community-based orders contain a focus on the consequences of the offending for the victim. Local victim-offender mediation and mentoring projects have been established to support the YOT in the delivery of programmes. The team also works closely with the Odyssey under-18 drug and alcohol project. Two thirds of young people in contact with the YOT receive an input on education and training. Significant progress has been made in preventing school exclusions.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Ilford, North to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 crime and disorder reduction partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Departmental Policies (Bolton, West)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Bolton, West constituency, the effects on Bolton, West of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150605]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office annual reports. A copy of the most recent report, "Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000", is available in the Library. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service

Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by basic command unit and crime and disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested, although set out are examples relating to the Bolton, West constituency or the immediate locality:

Reducing Burglary Initiative:

Our scheme covering Bolton, North-East was awarded £174,000 under round two of the reducing burglary initiative.

One other scheme, for £189,000, was submitted under round three of the reducing burglary initiative, and is currently under consideration.

Neighbourhood Wardens Schemes:

One scheme covering Great Lever, Hutton, Lane and Deane, has been awarded £343,000.

Youth Offending Teams (YOT):

The Bolton YOT covers the constituency of Bolton, West. The YOT has achieved an 85 per cent. compliance with national standards for the production of written court reports within agreed timescales. The YOT has also achieved a reduction in the number of young people being remanded into local authority accommodation. The availability of bail supervision programmes is targeting young people who previously would have been remanded by the courts and preventing reoffending while on bail. Reoffending by young people on bail is also being reduced through the introduction of Narey court procedures, as courts are now processing the cases of young people faster.

The police final warning scheme has been in operation since January 2000 and approximately 201 young people have been referred to the YOT for assessment and intervention work. More than 50 per cent. have engaged in some form of reparative activity. The YOT has also established a project to facilitate victim/offender mediation in support of the new community-based court orders. They are also providing victim awareness programmes for young people.

The health workers within the YOT have established links with child and adolescent mental health services; immunisation clinics; teenage pregnancy and sexual health programmes promoted by health staff.

Greater Manchester (including the Bolton, West constituency) is benefiting from the Youth Justice Board's development fund, which has awarded grants of approximately £3,754,000 over three years for one bail support scheme (covering the Greater Manchester area) and seven intervention programmes).

There is one additional intervention programme benefiting from grant funding by the Youth Justice Board which is specific to Bolton. The project is receiving a grant of approximately £15,000 over three years. This grant, together with match funding from health and social services, has allowed the "360° substance misuse project" to be established for young people. The project provides a drug treatment service covering all drugs and provides a community-based response offering a safe environment in which young people can assess their current lifestyles.

The youth justice board also provided funding for the operation of Splash schemes during the summer holidays in 2000. These schemes provided constructive and positive leisure activities for young people most at risk of offending. A Splash scheme was run in Johnson Fold.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Bolton, West to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 crime and disorder reduction partnerships have been established:

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000;

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website: (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

Foot and Mouth Disease

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce legislation to provide during the period of a foot and mouth emergency for *(a)* one free postal delivery of municipal election addresses, *(b)* moneys to be spent promoting voting by post, *(c)* Northern Ireland local government elections to be brought forward to 3 May and *(d)* moneys to promote awareness among those using postal votes in Northern Ireland of the different method for voting between Westminster elections and that used for electing members of local authorities; and if he will make a statement. [151880]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government have no current plans to extend the provision of free posting of electoral addresses to candidates in local elections. A Home Office-funded campaign to publicise the changes in postal voting procedures began on 19 February, shortly after they came into force.

The conduct of local government elections in Northern Ireland is a matter for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. We have no plans to introduce either of the suggested measures.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessments he has made of the implications of the current foot and mouth outbreak for the feasibility of holding national or local elections in *(a)* April and *(b)* May. [152168]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The date of a parliamentary general election is not a matter for me. The law requires the local elections schedule for 3 May to take place on that date. At the moment we have no intention to change that.

Race Relations (Amendment) Act

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps have been taken to prepare for commencement of the Race Relations (Amendment)

Act 2000; and what public bodies he has consulted concerning future application of a general duty to promote race equality. [150613]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A commencement order has been made for the provisions of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act to come into force on 2 April 2001. There is one exception to this. To enable the immigration provisions to work effectively from 2 April 2001, the order provides for section 1 of the Act to come into force on 26 March 2001 (for the purposes of the imposition of requirements or giving of express authorisations (as defined) by a Minister of the Crown).

A public consultation paper was issued on 22 February 2001 setting out the Government's proposals for extending the list of public bodies in the Act that are subject to the general duty to promote and the specific duties to promote race equality that might apply. The paper has been circulated widely among the public bodies that are likely to be affected by the new duty and to other interested parties for comments by 15 May 2001. A copy has been placed in the Library. The paper is also available on the Home Office website at: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/raceact/welcome.htm.

Religious Affiliation (Prisoners)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will break down by religious belief *(a)* the prison population and *(b)* the population as a whole. [150614]

Mr. Boateng: On 30 June 1999, there were 64,529 prisoners in England and Wales. Information on inmates' religious affiliation is recorded as a standard part of the reception process on entry into prison.

Of the inmates, 42 per cent. were Anglican, 17.5 per cent. were Roman Catholic and 3 per cent. belonged to other Christian denominations. Further, 7 per cent. were Muslim, 1.5 per cent. were Buddhist, Hindu or Sikh and 1 per cent. belonged to other religions. The remaining 28 per cent. of the population did not profess to belong to any religion.

This information is also published in "Prison Statistics England and Wales" (Table 6.6 of the 1999 edition, Cm 4805) copies of which are in the Library.

Information on the religious composition of the general population is currently available only through the British social attitudes survey, which is conducted annually. This is a sample survey of 3,500 randomly chosen households in Great Britain, of whom 3,143 responded to the following question: "Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?"

In 1999, the responses were as follows: 27 per cent. were Anglican, 9 per cent. were Roman Catholic and 16 per cent. belonged to other Christian denominations. Further, 1.5 per cent. were Muslim, 1 per cent. were Buddhist, Hindu or Sikh and 0.6 per cent. belonged to other religions.

Forty-four per cent. of the sample claimed no religion. One per cent. refused to divulge their religion or did not answer.

The information for 1999 is published in Appendix III of "British Social Attitudes—The 17th Report" (2000), a copy of which is available in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Hull, North)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Hull, North constituency, the effects on Hull, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997, [150618]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, "Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000", is available in the Library. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by basic command unit and crime and disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested, although set out are examples relating to the Hull, North constituency or the immediate locality:

Targeted Policing:

Humberside police, in partnership with Kingston-upon-Hull city council, was awarded £377,000 for a project aimed at reducing the level of anti-social and low-level criminal behaviour in Bransholme.

Reducing Burglary Initiative:

Three projects were awarded a total of £275,000—one scheme covering the Stoneferry and Bransholme area of Hull, was awarded £135,000 under the first round of the reducing burglary initiative. Two schemes, both covering Hull, West, were awarded a total of £139,000 under round two of the reducing burglary initiative.

Youth offending Teams (YOTs):

The Kingston-upon-Hull YOT covers the constituency of Hull, North. The YOT is working with other youth justice agencies to deliver the Government's pledge to halve the average time taken from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders, from 142 to 71 days. Locally the average time for the youth court is below the Government target of 71 days. The YOT is also preparing 100 per cent. of all pre-sentence reports on young people within the adjournment period specified by the courts for the preparation of such reports.

The YOT is utilising the ASSET assessment system in order to ensure intervention work is effectively targeted at the personal, family, social, educational and health

problems that contribute to the causes of a young person's offending behaviour. The YOT is achieving a 96.6 per cent. completion rate for assessment work at the pre-sentence report stage and a 100 per cent. completion rate for assessment of young people referred to it through the police final warning scheme.

The YOT is also delivering intervention programmes for young people referred to it through the operation of the police final warning scheme. 96.4 per cent. of all programmes delivered as the result of a police final warning contain an element of either direct or indirect reparation to victims. The team is also working with victims as a result of the operation of the police final warning scheme and the community-based reparation order.

Kingston-upon-Hull (including the Hull, North constituency) is benefiting from the Youth Justice Board's development fund, which has awarded grants of approximately £483,000 over three years for one bail support scheme and two intervention programmes.

The Youth Justice Board also provided funding for the operation of Splash schemes during the summer holidays in 2000. These schemes provided constructive and positive leisure activities for young people most at risk of offending. A Splash scheme was run in Orchard Park.

The YOT is also working in partnership locally in order to address youth crime. For the first time it has created a single and coherent database about youth crime so it can establish a baseline for local youth crime reduction targets.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Hull, North to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 crime and disorder reduction partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000;

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

Speed Cameras

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much revenue was raised from fixed speeding penalties, arising from police cameras in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997, *(d)* 1998, *(e)* 1999 and *(f)* 2000. [150624]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Available information showing the number of fixed penalties for speeding offences, where cameras have provided evidence, from 1995 to 1999 is given in the table. Automatic camera devices provided evidence from 1995 to 1998 and all camera types for 1999. Data for 2000 are not yet available. From 1995 to 1999 the fixed penalty charge for speeding offences was £40.

Fixed penalties for speeding offences detected by cameras[1], England and Wales, 1995–99

Year	Fixed penalties[2]	'Estimated' revenue (£ million)[3]
1995	170,000	6.8
1996	212,600	8.8
1997	288,600	11.5
1998	338,800	13.6
1999	423,000	16.9

[1] Automatic cameras until 1998, all camera types for 1999
[2] Paid ie no further action
[3] 'Estimate' based on £40 fixed penalty charge from 1995 to 1999

Departmental Policies (Vale of Clwyd)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Vale of Clwyd constituency, the effects on the Vale of Clwyd of his Department's policies and actions since May 1997. [151931]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the right and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, "Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000", is available in the Library. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by basic command unit and crime and disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested, although examples relating to the Vale of Clwyd constituency or the immediate locality are set out as follows:

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

The Rhyl south-east scheme was awarded £159,000 under the first round of the CCTV initiative. The scheme is a four-camera extension of the existing town centre system, covering three educational sites with additional surveillance capabilities for the surrounding residential and smaller commercial areas. The scheme proposes to impact on incidents of criminal damage, burglary and anti-social behaviour.

Reducing Burglary Initiative

One scheme, covering houses in multiple occupancy in Colwyn Bay, Abergele and Rhyl, elderly persons sheltered housing in Flintshire, and the areas of Gwenfro and Y Wern in Wrexham was awarded £33,000 under round two of the reducing burglary initiative. Interventions include: covert observations; high profile and targeted policing; high profile media press strategy; preparation/distribution of crime prevention literature and a crime stoppers campaign.

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

The central north Wales YOT covers the constituency of Vale of Clwyd. The YOT is making an excellent contribution to reducing delays within the court process

by producing 98 per cent. of court reports within the agreed timescales. A bail supervision scheme has been established to reduce the incidence of secure remands and reoffending by young people while on bail. The YOT is also performing well against national standards and objectives with 90 per cent. of all final warning assessments being completed within 14 days.

A community reparation scheme is being operated in support of the community-based court orders and 11 agencies are supporting community reparation work. As a result, 60 per cent. of local reparation work is community-based. There is also a trained YOT worker in place to consult and liaise with victims of crime on their willingness to become involved in direct reparation work. The YOT has also developed protocols with appropriate agencies with the aim of involving parents in the youth justice process.

The Youth Justice Board is also providing funding for Splash schemes to be run during Easter and summer school holidays in 2001. These schemes provide positive and constructive activities for young people most at risk of offending. Easter and summer Splash schemes are planned for Rhyl.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Vale of Clwyd to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 crime and disorder reduction partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000;

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

Criminal Bar

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to address members of the Criminal Bar Association on their relationships with the criminal fraternity; [152133]

(2) what plans he has to meet the Chairman of the Bar Council to discuss the criminal justice system and the conduct of barristers; [152131]

(3) what plans he has to bring forward legislation enabling action to be taken against barristers at the criminal bar who are suspected of acting unprofessionally. [152132]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend has no such plans. Barristers are subject to the Bar code of conduct. The code is a matter for the Bar Council, which is responsible for its enforcement, including investigating allegations of professional misconduct.

Mode of Trial

Mr. Sedgemore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) when he intends to bring forward the Mode of Trial Bill; [152130]

(2) if he will abandon his previously announced plans to restrict trial by jury. [152129]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As was affirmed in the speech from the Throne, the Government propose to give the courts, rather than the defendant, the power to decide where an either-way case should be tried. No decisions have been taken on the timing of this measure.

Sewerage Charges

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average annual level of sewerage charges is on homes in *(a)* Devon, *(b)* the United Kingdom and *(c)* his Department's estate in Denbury. [151882]

Mr. Boateng: Unmeasured sewerage charges consist of a fixed charge and a charge based on the rateable value of the property, both of which vary by water company. Information on unmeasured sewerage charges published by the Office of Water Services (Ofwat) show that in England and Wales in the financial year 2000–01, the weighted average fixed charge is £41.50 and the weighted average charged based on rateable value is 46.89p in the pound. Figures for South West Water, which covers Devon, are £42 and 112.35P in the pound respectively. The charges for the properties in the former Prison Service quarters estates are based on South West Water's figures and are equivalent to the charge which would be made by that company.

Exemption Certificates

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many exemption certificates have been issued on the grounds of national security since the implementation of the Data Protection Act 1998. [151119]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* Since the Act came into force I have signed one certificate, which relates to categories of personal data held by the Security Service. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has signed two certificates which relate to categories of personal data held by the Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ) and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) respectively.

Serco Contracts

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the contracts that exist between SERCo and his Department, its executive agencies and associated public bodies; and if he will list those which have existed in the last three years. [151336]

Mr. Straw: I list the details on existing contracts with SERCo. The available information shows that there have been no other contracts between SERCo and my Department, its agencies and associated public bodies in the last three years.

Title of contract	*Awarded by*	*Contract start*	*Contract finish*
Facilities Management at Police Scientific Development Branch Langhurst	Home Office	6 January 1998	31 January 2002
Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) Mandatory Training	Fire Service College	28 September 1998	31 March 2003

Ministerial Visits

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the Ministers in his Department who visited any of the constituencies which are in the Peterborough unitary authority area between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001, indicating in each case *(a)* the date of the visit, *(b)* the constituencies included in the visit and *(c)* if the local hon. Member met the Minister. [151027]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The list of Ministers within my Department who have visited the Peterborough unitary authority area within the specified period above are as follows:

Area	*Date*	*Minister*
Huntingdon Life Sciences, Cambridgeshire	8 June 2000	Mike O'Brien
Newmarket, Cambridgeshire	19 April 2000	Mike O'Brien

The Minister did not meet the local MP on these visits.

Proceeds of Crime Bill

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the draft Proceeds of Crime Bill. [152128]

Mr. Straw: I have today published a Command Paper, CM 5066, entitled "Proceeds of Crime Bill: Publication of Draft Clauses." Copies have been placed in the Library. It is also available on the Home Office website, www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

The draft clauses we are publishing provide for the establishment of an asset recovery agency; the introduction of civil recovery; the application of taxation powers to suspected criminal assets; the creation of new specific powers for the tracing and investigation of criminal assets; the restraint of assets of suspected persons during a criminal investigation instead of only at the point of charge; improvements in the United Kingdom's ability to assist foreign jurisdictions; and the reform and updating of confiscation procedures and money laundering offences. The Bill, the work on which has been undertaken on a collaborative basis, will introduce equivalent measures in Scotland and Northern Ireland, adjusted for the legal systems of those jurisdictions.

The Government will take account of the responses to the Command Paper before finalising the Bill for introduction. We are asking to receive replies before the end of May.

Immigration and Asylum

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* operators and *(b)* hirers of self-drive vehicles have been liable for penalties under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 Carriers Liability (Clandestine Entrants and Sale of Transporter) Regulations 2000 attributable to the actions of their clients; and if he will make a statement. [151797]

Mrs. Roche: The civil penalty provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 enable the imposition of a penalty on those who, through negligence or otherwise, allow their vehicles to be used by persons seeking to enter the United Kingdom clandestinely. Owners, hirers and drivers of vehicles found to have carried clandestine entrants are jointly and severally liable to a penalty of £2,000 for each clandestine entrant carried.

Since 3 April, when the provisions were implemented, and as at 28 February 2001, a total of 815 civil penalties have been imposed on persons found to have carried between them 4,514 clandestine entrants. Eighteen of the penalties have been imposed on the owners, hirers and drivers of self-drive vehicles in respect of a total of 193 clandestine entrants carried.

A code of practice, issued in accordance with the legislation, sets out the practical measures that should be taken by those seeking to prevent unauthorised entry into their vehicles, and provides a basis for a defence against a penalty should clandestine entrance nevertheless be found. Vehicle owners who believe they are unable to fulfil the requirements of the code of practice are advised to seek ways to offset any financial liability to which they may be exposed.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Corus

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many apprentices and other trainees have been affected by the Corus closures announced on 1 February; and what action he is taking to secure continuity in their training programmes. [148986]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* Corus informs me that where there have been major job reductions/closures in the past, the company has been able, with very few exceptions, to get all trainees through to the end of their apprenticeships. The company's intention is to ensure that all current trainees have the opportunity of completing their training. This may require some to relocate.

The announcement on 1 February related to several plants in England and Wales. The company has provided me with the following information about the number of apprentices/trainees at the plants as follows:

	Number
Ebbw Vale	48 apprentices
Scunthorpe and Teesside	No impact on trainees as they are employed directly by local colleges
Llanwern and Port Talbot	130 apprentices
Shotton	30 apprentices
Rotherham	17 apprentices/trainees

Corus has a good track record on training and we will encourage it to maintain this record.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will list the occasions on which he met the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the job losses at Corus in Wales, prior to the announcement on 1 February; and if he will make a statement; [150253]

(2) if he will list the occasions on which he met the Secretary of State for Wales to discuss the job losses at Corus in Wales, prior to the announcement on 1 February; and if he will make a statement; [150255]

(3) if he will list the occasions on which he discussed the proposed job losses at Corus in Wales with the Economic Development Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales, prior to the announcement on 1 February; and if he will make a statement. [150254]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 13 February 2001]:* I have maintained a regular dialogue with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, my right hon. Friend the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales and the Economic Development Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales in recent months about a range of issues. Since 5 December, when Corus announced its intention to restructure, I have met them on the following occasions to discuss the matter:

Date	*Names*
15 December	Paul Murphy and Rhodri Morgan
17 January	Paul Murphy, Rhodri Morgan and Mike German
31 January	Paul Murphy and Rhodri Morgan
1 February	Paul Murphy
5 February	Paul Murphy
6 February	Paul Murphy
8 February	Paul Murphy
13 February	Paul Murphy
26 February	Paul Murphy, Rhodri Morgan and Mike German

Project Grants (London Boroughs)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list each category of grants given to projects in *(a)* Westminster and *(b)* the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99, (iii) 1999–2000 and (iv) 2000–01. [148598]

Mr. Caborn: Westminster and the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea have benefited from a range of DTI initiatives since 1997 to support innovation and promote business development.

Direct business advice and support to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) has been provided by the DTI through core programmes and Business Links. While the Department does not collect detailed statistical information on a borough basis, Business Links have handled 12,758 requests for advice, information and support from SMEs in Westminster and 4,158 requests from SMEs in the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea since 1997. During the same period grants totalling over £533,000 and £128,000 have been awarded to SMEs in Westminster and the royal borough respectively, for innovation and technology projects under the Smart scheme.

All wards in both boroughs are eligible for the enterprise grant scheme, which was introduced in 2000.

Universal Banking Services

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith) of 12 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 20W, if universal banking services will be registered as a bank or be subject to prudential regulation; if the Post Office card account will permit *(a)* phased withdrawals of benefits due and *(b)* the setting up of direct debits to councils and public utilities; and if the card account and universal banking services will have a single payment system manager. [150973]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* There is a lot of detailed work to be done to implement the concept of universal banking services between now and 2003 when it is due to come on stream. The project is at too early a stage in its development to be prescriptive about issues such as whether the Post Office will need to register as a bank; or whether there will be a single payment systems manager.

The intention is that the Post Office card account will permit phased withdrawal of benefits. With regard to the setting up of direct debits, users of the basic bank account element of universal banking services will be able to benefit from direct debit facilities, which will mean that gas and electricity bills are reduced. It is also the intention of the Post Office to provide a bill payment service alongside the card account, with the aim that such payments will attract discounts in a similar way to those offered to direct debit customers. Development of this is at an early stage.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if export licences have been granted for the export of *(a)* depleted uranium materials and *(b)* manufactured products of which depleted uranium materials form part; and how many such licences were granted and in which years. [151043]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The export of depleted uranium is controlled under entry 0C001 of Annex 1 of Council Regulation (EC) No. 1334–2000. This entry also covers natural uranium and thorium. Since May 2 1997 details of licences granted covering the export of goods rated 0C001 have been outlined in the Government's annual reports on strategic export controls. In addition, between 1 January 2000 and 11 February 2001, seven standard individual export licences (SIELs) and four open individual export licences (OIELs) have been issued covering goods with this rating. As regards how many of these licences covered the export of depleted uranium, investigations are being made and I will write to my hon. Friend as soon as possible and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

Manufactured products of which depleted uranium materials form part would be controlled under the relevant entries in Part III of Schedule 1 of the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 and also under the relevant entries in Annex 1 of the Dual Use and Related Items (Export Control) Regulations 2000. The control would cover the product itself and not the depleted uranium contained therein. Consequently, it would entail disproportionate cost to establish which, if any, licences covered the export of manufactured products of which depleted uranium materials form part.

There are also certain forms of depleted uranium, for example, when specifically fabricated for certain non-nuclear applications, which are not covered by strategic export controls and would not therefore require an export licence.

Post Offices

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much money has been allocated to fund pilot schemes for post offices in Scotland to act *(a)* as Government general practitioners and *(b)* internet learning and access points. [151798]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Scottish Executive received a funding consequential of £3.5 million as a result of money being allocated in England for the support of pilots of Government general practitioner and internet learning and access points. All funding consequentials contribute to a block allocation to the Scottish Executive. It is for Scottish Executive Ministers to decide how that money is allocated.

Departmental Policies (Bolton, West)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Bolton, West constituency, the effects on Bolton, West of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150608]

Mr. Caborn: The Department does not maintain statistical information at constituency level.

My hon. Friend's constituents, like many others throughout Greater Manchester, will have benefited from my Department's employment rights policies, which include the national minimum wage, working time directive, part-time working regulations and improved maternity leave.

All wards in Bolton, West are eligible for the enterprise grant scheme. Halliwell and Blackrod are included in the revised assisted area map and are therefore also eligible for regional selective assistance.

In the north-west region, my Department's policies have contributed to growth in employment by 107,000 and a fall in unemployment by 63,000, and to reductions in youth unemployment by 75 per cent. and long-term unemployment by 54 per cent.

Departmental Policies (Hull, North)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Hull, North constituency, the effects on Hull, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150620]

Mr. Caborn: The Department has provided the following support for firms in Hull since May 1997. Information at constituency level is not available in all cases.

Regional Selective Assistance (RSA)

RSA is a capital investment grant linked to the creation or safeguarding of jobs in designated areas of need. 24 RSA grant offers totalling £4,485,000 have been made to firms in the Hull, North constituency, to support projects with a capital expenditure of £74,118,750, and to create and safeguard a total of 854 jobs.

Enterprise Grants

The enterprise grants scheme is a simplified scheme that was introduced in April 2000 to help small firms undertake fixed capital investment projects. Three offers totalling £54,000 have been made to firms in the Hull, North constituency, to support projects with a capital expenditure of £466,675.

Smart

Smart awards are designed to help small firms with the introduction of new products and processes. 15 Smart awards totalling £743,933 have been made to firms in Hull (information is not available at constituency level).

Business Link

Business Link Humberside have provided services to small business in Hull (including the Hull, North constituency) since 1997. This has included general and specialised advice to help businesses expand, export development counselling, ICT advice, and a full range of specialist information. From April 2001, these services will be provided by the Small Business Service operating through a new Humberside Business Link.

Departmental Policies (Ilford, North)

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what initiatives embarked upon since May 1997 have benefited Ilford, North; and if he will make a statement. [152036]

Mr. Caborn: The parliamentary constituency of Ilford, North has benefited from a range of initiatives since May 1997. Direct business advice and support to small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) is available from the DTI through core programmes and Business Links. While the Department does not collect detailed statistical information on a constituency basis, over 394 requests for advice, information and support from SMEs in Ilford, North have been handled by the Business Links since May 1997.

All wards in the constituency are eligible for the enterprise grant scheme, which was introduced in 2000.

Post Office Counters Ltd.

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many employment tribunals were outstanding against Post Office Counters Ltd. at the beginning of February. [151780]

Mr. Alan Johnson: As of 31 January 2001, the public registers of applications and decisions for England and Wales and Scotland showed a total of 11 employment tribunal claims against Post Office Counters Ltd. as still outstanding with no decision recorded in these cases.

Nuclear Industry

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much has been allocated to the insurance liability fund set aside to underwrite accidents at United Kingdom nuclear facilities; and what steps have been taken to increase the amount of compensation available under the Nuclear Installations Act 1965. [151601]

Mr. Hain: There is no specific insurance liability fund set aside by the Treasury. Under UK legislation, implementing the Paris and Brussels conventions on third-party liability in the field of nuclear energy, it is the duty of the operator of a nuclear installation to maintain insurance cover of £140 million per accident.

In the event of a nuclear accident causing damage exceeding this amount, public funds would be made available, at present up to a guaranteed amount of 300 million special drawing rights (approx £300 million). Parliament may vote additional funds. Proposals currently under consideration as part of the negotiations to revise the Paris and Brussels conventions would significantly increase the amount of guaranteed compensation provided.

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the incident that occurred at the high level radioactive waste storage tanks at Sellafield in January; and what report he has received from the nuclear installations inspectorate in respect of the incident. [151598]

Mr. Hain: The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) informed my Department on 29 January 2001 that on 26 January, the ventilation system in B215, the building which houses the highly active liquid storage vessels at Sellafield, was out of action for two and three quarter hours. The problem occurred during work to install a new caustic scrubber to improve the building's ventilation system. This work is being undertaken in line with requirements of the Environment Agency (EA). No radioactivity was released and no worker was exposed to enhanced levels of radiation.

I understand that HSE's nuclear installations inspectorate (NII) has directed BNFL to halt work on the ventilation system in B215 and to review the conduct of operations within that plant. BNFL are required to submit a report to HSE within four weeks (ie by 5 March). HSE's consent will be required before BNFL can resume work on modifying the ventilation system. The HSE has also informed the Department that as a result of its action THORP remains closed.

Working Time Directive

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 15 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 289W, how many specialist working time officers there are in the United Kingdom. [151822]

Mr. Alan Johnson: There are currently seven specialist working time officers at the HSE, who work solely on working time enforcement. As described in my previous answer, the working time officers carry out their functions as an integral part of the HSE's wider structure of regulatory teams based throughout the country.

Intellectual Property Rights

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the Department for International Development concerning the establishment of a commission to investigate intellectual property rights. [151675]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The establishment of the new Commission for Intellectual Property Rights was discussed in contacts between the Department for International Development and the Department of Trade and Industry and the Patent Office, as well as a number of other Departments, in the context of the preparation of the White Paper "Eliminating World Poverty: Making Globalisation Work for the Poor", and officials will continue to work together.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what work his Department has carried out to identify how many of those workers earning below the minimum wage as recorded by the new earnings survey should have been in receipt of the minimum wage. [151768]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* An estimate of the number of workers being paid below the national minimum wage can be made from central estimates based on the Office for National Statistics' new earnings and labour force surveys. However, this in itself is not an indication of the extent of non-compliance. There are a number of factors which need to be taken into account. Exactly which jobs and workers have been included in the surveys, for example, the different components of pay received and the composition of hours of work, can all affect the estimates. There is also the issue of sampling variation in the survey results, which means that any estimates should properly be provided as a range. The surveys do not tell us how many people are receiving free accommodation, are Government trainees, or are working for their family business and thus exempt. Account needs to be taken of the level of economic activity in the informal economy, which may not be picked up by the central estimates. The Low Pay Commission is monitoring and evaluating the impact of the minimum wage and is due to report its findings by July. I look forward to receiving the commission's report. My Department is also working with the Inland Revenue, which enforces the national minimum wage and administers the Working Families Tax Credit, to obtain indications of the level of minimum wage non-compliance from those sources.

Telecommunications Masts

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on progress made by the Radiocommunications Agency in its audit of mobile phone base stations and masts and the assessment of emissions from them. [151129]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The Radiocommunications Agency's audit of mobile phone base stations started at the end of December 2000. The focus of the audit is schools with base stations located on their premises and these schools were asked to register with the RA to express an interest in their being included in the audit. 107 schools have registered their interest.

The first eight surveys have now been completed and the results are published on the RA website www.radio.gov.uk. All the surveys have shown emissions that will lead to exposure substantially inside the public exposure guidelines of the International Commission for Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP). The

adoption of these guidelines was recommended by the Stewart Group, and this recommendation was accepted by the Government.

Maternity Pay

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proportion of mothers with children born in 1999–2000 were entitled to *(a)* statutory maternity pay and *(b)* maternity allowance. [150997]

Mr. Bayley: I have been asked to reply.

Both statutory maternity pay and maternity allowance are payments made to pregnant working women to help them take time off work around the time of the birth.

It is estimated that 42 per cent. of mothers with children born in 1999–2000 received statutory maternity pay and that 6 per cent. received maternity allowance.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Policies (Vale of Clwyd)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Vale of Clwyd, the effects on the Vale of Clwyd of his Department's policies and actions since May 1997. [151930]

The Solicitor-General: In October 1998 the Colwyn Bay and Bangor offices of Crown Prosecution Service, North Wales, in liaison with the police and courts, became a Narey Pilot site. All defendants charged with a criminal offence now make their first appearance before local magistrates courts within 96 hours. Current information indicates that around 40 per cent. of defendants now have their cases finalised at that first hearing.

On 1 June 2000 the Crown Prosecution Service, North Wales altered its structures in line with the proposals contained in the Glidewell review to establish a Criminal Justice Unit and Trials Unit in Colwyn Bay. This enabled the Crown Prosecution Service to place greater emphasis on more serious crime proceeding to the Crown court.

The Crown Prosecution Service, North Wales is also piloting statutory time limits in youth cases and has worked together with the other agencies locally to speed up youth justice, particularly persistent young offenders. Since May 1997, the Crown Prosecution Service has reduced the time taken to finalise prosecutions arising in the Vale of Clwyd area, especially cases involving youth offenders. This has resulted in the target of 71 days being achieved in two of the quarters in the current year. All these changes illustrate the Government's successful policy of speeding up the work of the criminal justice system.

North Wales is also piloting the Victim Information Bureau at Wrexham which provides detailed explanations to victims when cases are dropped or charges substantially amended. Meetings are also offered to victims in certain cases and so far, since the commencement of the pilot in April 2000, seven meetings have been held.

Action and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office affect my hon. Friend's constituency only indirectly.

Departmental Policies (Hull, North)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Hull, North constituency, the effects on Hull, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150621]

The Solicitor-General: The Hull branch of the Crown Prosecution has worked closely with the police and courts to implement a number of changes which have reduced delay in the prosecution process. Other changes now in hand aim to improve the preparation of more serious cases for trial in the Crown court.

In October 1999, in line with national policy, the Narey proposals were implemented. Defendants now appear in Hull magistrates court within 36 to 72 hours of being charged by the police. Before this change there was often a delay of four to five weeks. To ensure that all relevant information is available for court, CPS lawyers and caseworkers attend at the police station and liaise with police staff prior to court. This means that in spite of the shorter timescales more cases can be finalised at the first hearing rather than being adjourned.

Further changes in January this year have enabled serious cases such as robbery, rape and murder to get to the Crown court much more quickly. In one recent case a defendant appeared at Hull Crown court only eight days after committing an offence of robbery and was sentenced to three years' imprisonment. Last year it would have taken around 12 weeks to deal with the case. All these changes illustrate the Government's successful policy of speeding up the work of the criminal justice system.

Progress is being made on the structural changes recommended by Sir Iain Glidewell's review of the CPS. Lay staff known as designated caseworkers now deal with straightforward guilty pleas and road traffic cases in the magistrates court. In Hull they cover eight courts per week which would previously have required a lawyer. The lawyers freed from this routine work are able to spend their time on more serious matters and in June they will form a specialist Trials Unit dedicated to Crown court cases.

Actions and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office affect my hon. Friend's constituency only indirectly.

Departmental Policies (Bolton, West)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Bolton, West constituency, the effects on Bolton, West of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150609]

The Solicitor-General: In November 1999, in line with national policy, the Bolton/Wigan branch of the Crown Prosecution Service, in liaison with Greater Manchester police and Bolton magistrates court, introduced the Narey proposals. All adult defendants charged with a criminal offence now make their first appearance before Bolton magistrates court within 48 hours. The present figures suggest that more than 50 per cent. of all defendants now have their case finished far more quickly than was previously the case. In January 2001, also in line with national policy and new legislation, the Crown Prosecution

Service and the magistrates courts started sending the most serious cases to the Crown court within one week of the first appearance in the magistrates court. Henceforth, Crown court judges will monitor the progress of these cases and they will be finalised more quickly than previously.

So far as young offenders are concerned, the Crown Prosecution Service, together with the police, the magistrates court and the local Youth Offending Team, have agreed procedures designed to bring persistent young offenders before the courts much more quickly. A recent survey of independent consultants revealed that the Crown Prosecution Service in Bolton reviewed 69 per cent. of trial files on the day of receipt, 8 per cent. within 48 hours of receipt, 8 per cent. within three days of receipt and 15 per cent. within six days of receipt. All these changes illustrate the success of the Government's policy of speeding up the work of the Criminal Justice System.

The Crown Prosecution Service has also contributed to the formulation of a local crime and disorder strategy which, after widespread consultation, identified the types of offence which cause the greatest public concern. It is now working with other criminal justice agencies to meet targets which the strategy group has set for the reduction of those offences.

Actions and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office affect my hon. Friend's constituency only indirectly.

Operation Care

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Solicitor-General how many of the cases referred to the CPS as part of Operation Care were *(a)* accepted and *(b)* refused; and what the main reasons for refusal were. [151613]

The Solicitor-General: Operation Care is an investigation into allegations of sexual and physical abuse of children in care in the Merseyside area from 1960 to the present day. Since April 1996, when Operation Care commenced, Merseyside police have submitted cases relating to 181 suspects to the Crown Prosecution Service. The CPS prosecuted 59 suspects; 20 pleaded guilty, seven were convicted after trial, 10 were acquitted, four died before trial and 16 suspects sill await trial. Allegations against a further 21 suspects have been referred back to the police for further inquiries to be made. In addition, one person has been cautioned for a single sexual offence, which was unlikely to result in a sentence of imprisonment.

The CPS advised the police that a prosecution was not justified in the cases of the remaining 100 suspects. There was insufficient evidence against 90 of the suspects. The circumstances of the remaining 10 suspects meant that the public interest test in the Code for Crown Prosecutors was not satisfied.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Housing

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many affordable housing units were built in the Wandsworth planning area in *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 1999, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1997 and *(e)* 1996. [148123]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The information requested is, as far as possible, as follows:

1999–2000

Units completed: 117

Units approved: 42.

Earlier figures are unavailable as information of this type was not routinely collected before the 2000–01 Housing Investment Programme (HIP) allocation round.

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many affordable housing units were built in the Wandsworth planning area through planning gain (Section 106) in *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 1999, *(c)* 1998, *(d)* 1997 and *(e)* 1996. [148122]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The information requested is, as far as possible, as follows:

1999–2000

Discounted/free land: nil

Financial contributions: nil.

Earlier figures are unavailable as information of this type was not routinely collected before the 2000–01 Housing Investment Programme (HIP) round.

Departmental Policies (Tooting)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Tooting parliamentary constituency, the effect of his Department's policies and actions since 1 May 1997. [149866]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The principal kinds of funding which this Department has provided to the London Borough of Wandsworth since 1 May 1997 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Tooting. It is for the local authority to decide where, within its boundaries, these resources are invested.

£

Nature of funding	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
(examples include):			
Revenue Support Grant[1]	126,825,635	128,711,991	122,542,693
Income from National Non-domestic Rates[1]	60,589,879	65,495,908	73,718,842
Highway Maintenance Standard Spending Assessment (SSA)	7,763,000	7,968,000	7,293,000
SSA Reduction Grant (SSA review)	7,498,940	0	0
Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Support Grant	33,601,236	30,198,391	29,740,875
Housing Investment Programme (HIP)	8,249,000	8,484,000	20,832,000

£

Nature of funding	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)	2,226,000	2,283,274	3,260,264
Local Transport Capital Expenditure	2,308,000	2,080,000	1,676,000
Central Support Protection Grant	n/a	6,304,020	6,523,300

[1] This relates to the grants for 1998–99 as amended by 'The Local Government Finance Report (England) 1998/1999: Amending Report 2000'

Single Regeneration Budget (SRB)

SRB Round 3—Wandsworth Town—A new urban centre

Currently in its fourth year of operation, this Round 3 SRB scheme incorporates the original Round 1 scheme. The central aim of the scheme is to transform Wandsworth into a new urban riverside centre for the 21st century. This scheme is delivered through the Wandsworth Challenge Partnership.

SRB Round 4—East Battersea Powerhouse

This is a six-year programme to ensure the redevelopment of the Battersea power station site benefits the surrounding community and contributes towards the overall regeneration of the East Battersea area.

SRB Round 6—Young People—Agents for change in Tooting

The purpose of this seven-year programme is to support and involve young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged and socially excluded from mainstream activity, in the development of their community in the Tooting priority community area. It focuses on four themes: Young People and Society; Young People, Education and Learning; Young People and Work; and Young People, Health and Wellbeing.

Hastings Bypass

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the cost-benefit ratio is for the A259 Hastings bypass recommended by the Steer Davies Gleave multi-modal study, according to the same methodology used by his Department appraising other schemes. [150901]

Mr. Hill: Guidance on the methodology for multi-modal Studies (GOMMMs), published by DETR in March 2000, provided a framework for applying the Government's new approach to appraisal (NATA) as part of the multi-modal study process. GOMMMs was followed by the Access to Hastings study which was completed in November 2000. The final report for this study provides a table of impacts which contains all the significant costs and benefits of the strategies. The balance of this information gives an 'overall net value' of the strategies. This includes an assessment of the affordability of the strategies, represented in more conventional terms of a cost benefit analysis.

An error was made by the consultants in their cost-benefit analysis for their two preferred strategies within the final report. Revised figures have been circulated and provide a benefit-cost ratio (BCR) of 0.5 for Strategy 12 ("without bypasses") and of 1.0 for strategy 13 ("with bypasses"). An assessment of the A259 Hastings bypass schemes provided a BCR of 1.7. These figures relate only to the economic assessment and not to other aspects of the appraisal, for example the environmental assessment.

Local Transport (Sefton)

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much capital programme (local transport plan) has been allocated to Sefton Council for 2001 to 2006; and if he will indicate the sums allocated to support schemes relating to *(a)* travel to schools, *(b)* walkwise, *(c)* traffic management and signing, *(d)* CCTV televisions, *(e)* cycling measures, *(f)* bridge maintenance, *(g)* principal road maintenance, *(h)* quality of life, including local safety schemes, street lighting, traffic calming and home zones, and *(i)* forward planning, in (i) 2000–01 and (ii) each year since 1994. [151568]

Mr. Hill: The information is as follows.

Financial years 2001–06

The block allocation local transport plan settlement for Merseyside for 2001–06 is as follows:

£000

	Integrated transport block	Maintenance	Total
Allocation			
2001–02	34,000	11,164	45,164
Indicative allocation			
2002–03	31,700	11,628	43,328
2003–04	32,000	8,721	40,721
2004–06	31,600	8,721	40,321
2005–06	31,900	8,721	40,621

Of the total allocation for Merseyside for 2001–02, £5.163 million has been allocated to Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC). This covers both maintenance (principal road and bridge maintenance) and the integrated transport block, which includes the other elements referred to in the question. It is for Sefton MBC to decide how it will spend this allocation, but expenditure should be in accordance with the aims and objectives of the local transport plan for Merseyside.

The indicative allocations for 2002–03 to 2005–06 are Merseyside-wide, and the five local authorities will together decide the exact allocation to each on an annual basis.

Financial 2000–01

The allocation to Sefton MBC for 2000–01 was £2.847 million. This represents Sefton's share of the £22.967 million block allocation to Merseyside for the maintenance and integrated transport programme contained in the 'provisional' Merseyside Local Transport Plan.

Financial years 1994–99

Prior to the introduction of Local Transport Plans, local transport funding was allocated under Transport Policies and Programmes system. Funding was allocated in four areas and the figures for Sefton MBC are detailed in the table.

£000

	Bridge maintenance	Principal road maintenance	Local safety schemes	Minor works—transport projects under £2 million
1994–95	363	185	319	308
1995–96	328	248	266	1,220
1996–97	510	192	200	1,000
1997–98	605	540	225	957
1998–99	170	190	181	979
1999–2000	640	192	254	1,222

It was for Sefton MBC to decide how to spend these allocations on the other specific elements mentioned in the question.

Road Schemes

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those major road schemes which were provisionally accepted in the 1999 local transport financial settlement, indicating for each whether they have *(a)* been given full approval, *(b)* require further work or *(c)* have been subsequently rejected. [151557]

Mr. Hill: The following schemes were provisionally accepted in the 1999 local transport financial settlement:

Barnsley: Coalfields Link Road Phases 2 and 3

Bedfordshire: A507 Ridgmont Bypass and Woburn Link

Bedfordshire: Bedford Western Bypass

Buckinghamshire: A4146 Stoke Hammond and Linslade Western Bypass

Cambridgeshire: A142 Fordham Bypass

Doncaster: A6023 Denaby Main Diversion[1]

Hertfordshire: Baldock Bypass

Manchester, Salford: Manchester/Salford Inner Relief Road (Regent Road/Gore Street)[1]

North Yorkshire: Scarborough Integrated Transport Scheme

Nottinghamshire: A617 Mansfield Ashfield Regeneration Route

Suffolk: Stowmarket B1115 Relief Road

[1] These schemes have now been given full approval.

Work on the remainder is still in progress. None have been rejected.

Teenage Lone Parents

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many foyer projects have been established for teenage lone parents since 1997; how many teenage lone parents they accommodate; and where they are located. [151745]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Edmund's Court Foyer in Birmingham, which opened in July 1997, has 48 bedspaces for teenage lone parents. Aberdeen Foyer, which opened in April 1998, also has a number of units held exclusively for teenage lone parents to use. Many other foyers across the country also have a small number of flats or converted units, which would be appropriate for use by this group.

Southampton Airport

Sandra Gidley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Government have asked the British Airports Authority to examine the feasibility of adding an extra runway to Southampton Airport; and if he will make a statement. [151674]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: As part of the ongoing South East and East of England Regional Air Services (SERAS) study we asked BAA and other operators of major airports to provide technical assistance to the Department's consultants who are preparing possible options for development of airports to serve the study area. This work by the airport operators is subject to audit by the Department's consultants. The appraisal of the options, in line with the published framework, is being carried out entirely by our consultants.

We are currently appraising a very large number of options and will proceed through successive sifts to narrow down these options to a final shortlist, on which there will be a full public consultation before Ministers come to decisions. The published terms of reference clearly indicate that the study should consider both scenarios incorporating additional capacity and no additional capacity, and should consider both terminal capacity and runway capacity.

In advance of the consultation, it would be premature to comment on the status of any specific option. Releasing information in the early stages of a possible project, in advance of final options, could result in unnecessary and lengthy blight, as well as multiplying uncertainty and anxiety. This approach is consistent with my Department's Code of Practice on the Dissemination of Information during Major Infrastructure Developments.

Local Strategic Partnerships

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions who is responsible for deciding the membership of each local strategic partnership. [151786]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The membership and size of a local strategic partnership will depend on local circumstances. To be effective any strategic partnership will need to involve the key public agencies who provide most local services, such as local authorities, the health authority, police, Employment Service and Benefits Agency. However, local strategic partnerships must also include the private sector, voluntary organisations and local people in their core membership. The specific membership in any area should reflect local needs and priorities (as identified by the community strategy and local neighbourhood renewal strategy). Local authorities should take the first steps to ensure that a local strategic partnership is set up, building on existing effective partnerships in the area wherever possible.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he intends to issue further guidance on the establishment of local strategic partnerships; and if he will make a statement. [151758]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Draft guidance on the establishment and key objectives of local strategic partnerships was issued for consultation in October 2000. Over 250 responses were received. The Government have considered these responses and are drafting final guidance in light of the comments made and other

relevant policy developments on neighbourhood renewal, local government modernisation and urban and rural issues. We intend to issue this guidance shortly.

Neighbourhood Renewal Scheme

Miss Geraldine Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if Lancaster city council is entitled to apply for funding under the neighbourhood renewal scheme. [151659]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Neighbourhood Renewal Fund is a new fund that will provide grants to local authorities over the next three years to improve services in the most deprived areas.

88 local authorities will benefit from this fund. Lancaster city council is not eligible to receive money from the NRF. However, it is one of the authorities invited to express an interest in taking part in the Neighbourhood Management pilot schemes.

MPG6

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review Minerals Policy Guidance 6 following the recent floods. [151812]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Minerals Planning Guidance Note 6 (MPG6) sets out "Guidelines for the provision of aggregates in England". It is currently under review and it is at present planned that public consultation on a draft revision will be undertaken later this year. That draft revision will make appropriate references to other guidance including Planning Policy Guidance Note 25 (PPG25) "Development and Flood Risk". The publication of a revised draft of PPG25, for fast-track consultation, was announced by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning in a written answer to my hon. Friend on 6 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 456W. That draft refers briefly to mineral workings in flood plain areas that could affect water storage and the control of flooding. We will consider, in the light of responses, whether this needs to be elaborated in the final text of PPG25. This will be the primary document giving planning guidance on flood risk.

Air Pollution (Leeds)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the days on which in the last five years, the air quality in Leeds city centre was classified as severely polluted. [152018]

Mr. Hill: The dates when levels of air pollution were recorded as high or very high at the Leeds city centre monitoring station are as follows.

1996

16 January
28 February
11 March
15 March
16 March
17 March
18 March
19 March
21 March
22 March

1997

14 January
15 January
16 January
26 January
27 January
30 January
11 March
12 March
11 April
12 April
15 April
16 April
17 April
18 April
10 July[1]
11 July[1]
19 August[1]
29 October
30 October
31 October
6 November

1998

18 November

1999

1 August[2]
12 August[1]

2000

Nil days

Note:

Particles (PM_{10}) were responsible for the majority of days when levels were high or very high, apart from dates indicated [1] when sulphur dioxide levels were high and [2] when ozone levels were high.

Urban Development Plans

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the time frame required for publication of UDPs following their approval. [151838]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The procedures to be followed for the adoption or approval of development plans are set out in the Town and Country Planning (Development Plans) (England) Regulations 1999. These require printed copies of a development plan to be available for inspection or purchase, as soon as practicable after its adoption or approval. There are currently no plans to prescribe a timescale for plan publication.

Bus Vehicle Inspectors

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many bus vehicle inspectors are in post in each traffic region. [152002]

Mr. Hill: The Vehicle Examiners and Traffic Examiners employed by the Vehicle Inspectorate check Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs), Passenger Service Vehicles (PSVs) and other road vehicles for roadworthiness, emissions and compliance with drivers' hours and other traffic legislation. Vehicle Examiners also carry out standards control checks

at MOT testing stations and support the Traffic Commissioners in their operator licensing functions. The total number of Vehicle Examiners and Traffic Examiners in post in each Enforcement Group Area in 1999–2000 and the equivalent resource deployed on PSVs are shown in the table.

Enforcement Group	*Number of Vehicle Examiners (VE)*	*Number of Traffic Examiners (TE)*	*VE resource deployed on PSV work*	*TE resource deployed on PSV work*
Scottish	26	17	2.0	1.7
North Eastern	48	29	3.3	3.2
North Western[1]	42	25	2.9	2.7
West Midlands	26	17	1.4	1.3
South Wales	14	9	1.4	0.8
Eastern	41	28	2.6	2.4
South Eastern and Metropolitan	39	29	2.3	3.4
Western	40	21	2.2	2.4
Total	276	175	18.1	17.9

[1] Including North Wales

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many buses were inspected by bus vehicle inspectors in the West Midlands Traffic Commission area in the *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01 financial year to date; and how many were found to be defective in each year. [151999]

Mr. Hill: Vehicle Examiners (VEs) and Traffic Examiners (TEs) employed by the Vehicle Inspectorate check buses and coaches at the roadside and at operators' premises for roadworthiness, emissions, weight and compliance with drivers' hours and other traffic legislation. Where serious defects are found, or offences detected, an immediate or delayed prohibition notice may be issued and the offence may be reported for prosecution. The tables show the number of passenger service vehicles checked in the West Midlands Traffic Area and the enforcement action taken in 1999–2000 and in the half year to the end of September 2000.

Results of PSV spot and fleet roadworthiness checks and emission spot checks

	Spot and fleet checks	*Emission checks*
Number of vehicles examined		
1999–2000	2,634	—
Half year 2000–01	1,068	—
Spot check prohibitions		
1999–2000		
Number of checks	2,195	664
Percentage	10.3	0.6
Half year 2000–01		
Number of checks	880	143
Percentage	14.1	1.4
Fleet check prohibitions		
1999–2000		
Number of checks	439	—
Percentage	11.8	—
Half year 2000–01		
Number of checks	188	—
Percentage	4.8	—

PSV traffic enforcement examinations, weighings and offences prohibited and prosecuted

	1999–2000		*Half year 2000–01*	
	UK	*Foreign*	*UK*	*Foreign*
Number examined (inc. number weighed)	1,822	71	933	68
Number weighed	85	0	47	2
Offences found and action taken:				
Drivers' hours tachographs and records				
Report for prosecution	60	—	149	—
Convicted	52	—	148	—
Prohibited (foreign only)	—	0	—	2
Overloading				
Prohibited	0	0	1	0
Other				
Report for prosecution	9	—	23	—
Convicted	8	—	10	—

GM Crop Trials

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will advise the removal of flower heads from the winter and spring trials as a precautionary measure in line with the advice from the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), in a Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions press release of 23 August 2000. [151539]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The News Release of 23 August 2000 set out the arrangements for the farm-scale evaluations of autumn oilseed rape. It recognised that the review of separation distances for GM crops published by MAFF earlier that month had highlighted that increased separation distances might be required for certain types of oilseed rape. As an interim measure the News Release announced 100 m separation distances for varietal association oilseed rape pending full consideration of the NIAB report. If as a result the separation distances turned out to be greater than 100 m, consideration would be given to other risk reduction measures such as removal of flower heads from the rape plants to prevent pollen dispersal.

MAFF announced the outcome of their review and the distances to be applied to future rounds of the farm-scale evaluations on 6 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 492W. As a result, the Government have asked the agriculture and farming industry body SCIMAC to incorporate two changes into their revised code of practice on GM crops. The first is to continue to apply the 100 m separation distance used at the autumn sown sites where varietal association oilseed rape was nearby, as mentioned in the 23 August press release. The second is an increased distance of 80 m for maize crops. This is intended to ensure that contamination of neighbouring crops does not exceed 1 per cent.

The MAFF announcement means that it is not necessary to remove the flower heads from the GM oilseed rape fields presently growing or planned for this spring where they are near conventional crops of varietal association oilseed rape. There are no maize or beet sites presently being grown. The new separation distance for maize crops will be implemented at all of the spring 2001 sites, when they are sown later in the year.

Local Authority Reserves

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those local authorities which have been advised by the Audit Commission to increase their reserves in each of the past three years. [152142]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is the responsibility of the independent auditors appointed by the Audit Commission to consider the financial practices of authorities and to comment direct to an authority where they identify any matter which gives any cause for concern. This may include the level of an authority's reserves. The Audit Commission does not advise authorities on the level of reserves nor does it keep any central record of the recommendations of individual auditors.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those who have responded to the three-month consultation on the NATS PPP; when the consultation period will end; and when he plans to announce his decision. [152377]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Government undertook to hold further discussions about the public-private partnership for National Air Traffic Services during a period of three months from the date of Royal Assent to the Transport Act 2000. Royal Assent was given on 30 November, so the discussion period ended on 28 February. A report will be made to Parliament shortly.

During the three-month period, my colleagues and I had meetings with, or received written representations from, the following organisations:

Air 2000
Air Transport Users Council
Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association
Airport Operators Association
Association of British Travel Agents Ltd.
Aviation Environment Federation
BAA plc
Birmingham International Airport Ltd.
Board of Airline Representatives in the UK
British Air Transport Association
British Airline Pilots Association
British Helicopter Advisory Board
Civil Aviation Authority
Civil Aviation Authority Retired Staff Association
Federation of the Electronics Industry
Gatwick Airport Consultative Committee
General Aviation Manufacturers and Traders Association
Guild of Air Traffic Control Officers
Heathrow Airport Consultative Committee
Independent Pilots Association
International Air Carrier Association
International Air Transport Association
International Civil Aviation Organisation
Institute of Directors
Institute of Logistics and Transport
Institution of Professionals, Managers and Specialists
London Luton Airport Consultative Committee
Manchester Airport plc
National Air Traffic Services Ltd.
Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety
Popular Flying Association
Public and Commercial Services Union
Royal Aeronautical Society
Society of British Aerospace Companies Ltd.
Strategic Aviation Special Interest Group of the Local Government Association
Trustees of the Civil Aviation Authority Pension Scheme.

Rail Fares

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if it is the policy of the Government to maintain the existing formula for capping regulated fares on the railway for the purpose of new or revised rail franchises; [152375]

(2) if it is the policy of the Government to extend coverage of regulated fares on the railway; [152374]

(3) what arrangements have been agreed for new franchise agreements for the capping of regulated fares in respect of (i) the Chiltern franchise and (ii) the South Central franchise. [152376]

Mr. Hill: The regulation of fares is a matter for the Strategic Rail Authority. The Authority has no current plans to extend or change the existing formula for capping regulated fares on the railways, but it is reviewing the relationship between performance and fare caps. The current arrangements will apply to new or revised franchises including Chiltern and South Central, unless or until revised arrangements are subsequently agreed.

Railway Records

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what the policy of his Department and the Strategic Rail Authority is in respect of historic railway documents previously kept in the British Railways Board Records Centre; [152366]

(2) if it is the policy of his Department and the Strategic Rail Authority to sell the British Railways Board Records Centre, London W2; [152365]

(3) what consultation takes place with Railtrack before railway records relating to the railway infrastructure are disposed of; [152368]

(4) if it is the policy of his Department and the Strategic Rail Authority permanently to transfer records from the British Railways Board Records Centre to Railtrack and to the Public Record Office. [152367]

Mr. Hill: The great majority of the British Railways Board's (BRB's) responsibilities have been assumed by the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) as a consequence of the Transport Act 2000. The management of the BRB records is, therefore, a matter for the SRA. With the ending of the BRB's operational responsibilities, a decision was made in 1997 to rationalise the archive and to retain only those documents necessary to meet the on-going requirements of the Board to deal with its continuing legal liabilities. Under an appraisal process agreed by the Public Record Office (PRO) and the Railway Heritage Committee, records of historical importance are being deposited with the PRO or County Record Offices. Railtrack (and where appropriate any other successor body) are being advised of those records in which they may have an interest for the on-going running of the railway. The building in which the former BRB Records Centre is housed is now much larger than that appropriate for the number of records held and will be sold in due course.

Rough Sleepers (London)

Mr. Lammy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress his Department has made in reducing the number of people sleeping rough in London. [152410]

Ms Armstrong: Using information from street counts carried out in 12 London boroughs on 11 December 2000, it was estimated that there were around 438 people sleeping rough on any one night in London. This is a reduction of 29.5 per cent. from the baseline of 621 in June 1998. A borough by borough breakdown is available in the Library of the House. Using information from street counts carried out in central London on 1 March 2001, it is currently estimated that there are 380 people sleeping rough in London.

Waste Management

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he is giving local authorities in planning their municipal waste management strategies; and if he will make a statement. [152427]

Mr. Meacher: Best value guidance which was published last December already sets out clear standards for local authorities to adhere to in delivering waste management services.

Today I am publishing guidance for English local authorities in preparing their Municipal Waste Management Strategies. It sets out the new statutory targets for authorities on household waste recycling and composting, which we promised in "Waste Strategy 2000". Overall these statutory targets will double recycling of such waste by 2003–04 and triple it by 2005–06. The guidance encourages Collection and Disposal Authorities to work closely together to deliver these targets. It also includes guidance on the Waste Minimisation Act 1998. Copies of the guidance have been deposited in the House of Commons Library and are being sent to all relevant English local authorities.

Concessionary Fares (Students)

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to extend concessionary travel fares to students. [152121]

Mr. Hill: Travel concessions are primarily a matter for local authorities. They already have powers to provide discounted fares for young people under 19 years of age who are in full-time education.

Environmentally Sustainable Fuels

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the relative environmental sustainability of *(a)* the liquid biofuels, biodiesel and bioethanol and *(b)* the road fuel gases CNG and LPG. [152066]

Mr. Hill: The Government have undertaken an environmental assessment of a range of alternative fuels, including biofuels and road fuel gases, as part of the Government's Green Fuel Challenge. The Government will make a further announcement about the Green Fuel Challenge in the Budget.

Building Regulations

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the outcome of the review of Part L of the Building Regulations will be announced; and what technical changes he plans to introduce as a result of consultation. [152449]

Mr. Raynsford: The review of Part L of the Building Regulations is now almost complete. The Government wish to implement the changes at the earliest opportunity to maximise the reduction in Co_2 emissions that will result. In order to allow the construction industry the maximum time possible to gear up to the changes in the Building Regulations with regard to energy efficiency, we are working towards publishing the proposed draft Approved Document in the near future, in advance of its formal publication, with a view to making amendment regulations in August of this year.

The draft cannot be finalised and formally published until after we have received the responses to the current consultation on Part E of the Building Regulations, which deals with sound insulation. We recognise the interaction between these two parts of the regulations, and specifically sought any further comments on Part L in the consultation on Part E. This consultation closes on 20 April 2001.

A key issue in the consultation on Part L was the target U-values. We have listened to the views expressed in response to the consultation, and have decided to implement the changes in one stage rather than two, to reduce the disruption to the industry. We have also accepted that the U-value of 0.30W/m^{2}K for walls would

put an undue burden on builders and their materials and component suppliers in circumstances where European standards for declaring thermal insulation performance have yet to settle, and have relaxed it to 0.35 W/m^{2}K. This is still an important improvement on the current standard and we will work towards a further reduction at a future date by early signalling of the prospective higher target.

Lead Pipes (Lancashire)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that lead pipes carrying water into domestic properties in Lancashire are replaced; and if he will make a statement. [152276]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Under Regulations laid before Parliament in December 2000, North West Water and other water companies are embarking on major programmes of new and improved treatment to minimise the capacity of water to dissolve lead from pipes. These programmes should enable the Drinking Water Directive's interim standard of 25 microgrammes of lead per litre of water (25 µgPb/l) to be substantially met by December 2003, and will go a long way towards meeting the final standard of 10 µgPb/l which has to be complied with by December 2013. Where the standards are not met, water companies will need to replace (or line) their own lead pipes and advise consumers as to any action that it is desirable that they take in the interests of their health. We shall know the full extent to which these additional measures will be needed when the treatment programmes have been completed. Property owners remain responsible for the pipes within their own properties.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pension Credit

12. **Ms Squire:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the responses received during the consultation period on pension credit. [150493]

Mr. Rooker: We have received over 400 responses to the pension credit consultation paper so far and are now carefully considering the points raised in them.

Child Support Agency

14. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many complaints he has received about the operation of the Child Support Agency over the past year; and if he will make a statement. [150495]

Angela Eagle: Normally, complaints about the operation of the Child Support Agency are addressed to the chief executive of the CSA. Around 16,000 complaints have been received to date this financial year. The agency is committed to reducing complaints, and these are currently within the target set by Secretary of State of 0.15 per cent. of the total caseload.

Mrs. Betty Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the operation of the Child Support Agency. [150503]

Angela Eagle: The child support scheme is being completely reformed to address the failures of the current system. The new system will be straightforward and easily understood, allowing the Child Support Agency to deliver an effective and reliable service.

Housing Benefit

15. **Mr. Brazier:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the administration of the Housing Benefit system. [150497]

Angela Eagle: Following years of neglect by previous Governments, improving administration is the biggest challenge facing the Housing Benefit system.

We published our strategy to achieve this in December. One of our first steps is the formation of the expert help team. Working in partnership with local authorities, the team will help authorities turn things around.

23. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he proposes to take to improve the administration of Housing Benefit. [150507]

Angela Eagle: We recognise that some local authorities provide a better service than others. The Housing Green Paper set out our strategy for reforming the complex and fragmented Housing Benefit system that we inherited. Our priority is to work with local authorities to improve standards, drive our fraud and error and promote work incentives.

Our response to consultation on the Green Paper set out a wide-ranging package of measures to help improve service delivery and streamline the system, making Housing Benefit easier for councils to administer and those in need to claim.

We will work with local authorities to develop the detail and discuss timing for the introduction of these measures.

We have already announced the setting up of the expert help team, which will help those councils committed to working in partnership to develop and manage improvement plans. I am pleased to see that East Ayrshire council is among the first wave of local authorities to take advantage of the help offered by the team.

28. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the action he will take against local authorities which have a poor record for addressing Housing Benefit fraud. [150512]

Mr. Rooker: We are working in partnership with local authorities, through the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) and other agencies, to ensure that the unacceptable levels of fraud and error are reduced. Fighting fraud is fundamental to the good administration of Housing Benefit. If the BFI identifies administrative weaknesses in a local authority, we expect the authority to act quickly to remedy them. Where the BFI finds evidence of persistent service failings, we will use our statutory powers to direct the authority concerned on the standards it is to achieve and the time scales for doing so.

Retirement Pension Payments

16. **Mr. Clifton-Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to review the system

of paying retirement pensions to ensure that payments are made from the actual day of entitlement rather than from the following Monday. [150498]

Mr. Rooker: There are no plans to change the present arrangements, which work well and take account of the sensitivities at the time the pension is no longer required as well as when it is claimed.

New Deal (Disabled People)

18. **Mr. Watts:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has had from employers organisations about the New Deal for Disabled People. [150500]

Mr. Bayley: We have consulted widely, including with employers. Their views are helping us to target our measures more effectively to support those currently claiming incapacity benefits who wish to move into work.

The New Deal for Disabled People has already helped over 6,200 people move into work. We will be extending services nationally from July this year and in addition we are currently tendering for job retention and rehabilitation pilot providers.

Free Television Licences (North-West)

19. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioner households in the north-west are in receipt of a free television licence. [150501]

Mr. Rooker: TV Licensing, which administers this concession for the BBC as licensing authority, is not able to provide geographical breakdowns of the number of free licences issued.

However, using family resources survey data, we estimate that 360,000 pensioner households may qualify for a free television licence in the North West Government Office Region.

New Deal (Lone Parents)

20. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received on the New Deal for Lone Parents. [150504]

Angela Eagle: Ministers from this Department and the Department for Education and Employment attended regional events last week in advance of the national advertising campaign for the New Deal for Lone Parents, which starts today. These events brought together employers and some of the over 200,000 lone parents who have participated in the programme.

Latest results show the number of lone parents dependent on Income Support continuing to fall and the number has fallen by over 100,000 since May 1997.

Benefit Take-up

21. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to *(a)* increase the take-up of benefits and *(b)* simplify the procedure for receiving benefits. [150505]

Mr. Rooker: This week the Department is writing to pensioners who might be eligible for the Minimum Income Guarantee as a result of the April increases to the capital limits. We are also reducing the size of the MIG claim from 40 pages to 10 pages.

Pensioners

22. **Mr. Bennett:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to help pensioners who have savings. [150506]

Mr. Rooker: Pensioners who make provision for their retirement should be and will be rewarded for doing so. From next month, we will raise the capital limits in the Minimum Income Guarantee.

In addition, the pension credit will be designed to reward pensioners with modest pensions and savings. Part of our proposals for the pension credit includes the abolition of the current capital rules, with consideration given to the income from savings instead.

26. **Liz Blackman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what recent discussions he has had with pensioner organisations about the level of spending by his Department on pensioners. [150510]

Mr. Rooker: All spending on benefits by my Department is scrutinised by Parliament. I have not had any recent meetings with pensioner organisations to discuss issues specifically relating to spending—nor would it be appropriate for me to do so. However, the fact that we are spending £4.5 billion this year on pensioners has been widely welcomed.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to tackle pensioner poverty. [150508]

Mr. Rooker: Our record speaks volumes. This April, around two million of the poorest pensioner households will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997. That is a real terms rise in living standards of at least 17 per cent.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will propose to amend the Social Security Benefit (Computation of Earnings) Regulations 1996 so as to provide that where the dependant of a state pensioner earns money and is paid monthly there would be no deduction from the state pensioner's benefit in respect of any weeks within that monthly period in which no money was earned by the dependant. [152004]

Mr. Rooker: The Computation of Earnings Regulations, which were introduced in October 1996, align the method of calculation of earnings for the non-income-related benefits with that used for the income-related benefits. The change was designed to remove inconsistencies between benefits and reduce complexity in the social security scheme. The current rules are intended to make the calculation of earnings fair, easy to understand and straightforward to administer, while ensuring similarity of treatment between people in similar circumstances.

We have no plans to change the present arrangements.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the impact on income-related benefits for pensioners of the basic state pension being uprated in line with earnings from 2002–03. [151796]

Mr. Rooker: In 2002–03, we will be spending over £5 billion a year extra in real terms on pensioners as a result of policies since 1997. This will be £3 billion more a year than if the basic state pension had been linked to earnings since April 1998.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what arrangements he has made to ensure that his Department can inform individually those who will be retiring with a SERPS pension after 2002 that their spouse will not be entitled to full inherited rights. [151919]

Mr. Rooker: We are writing to all pensioners to reassure them that they will not be affected by the change in the rules. Regulations were laid on 26 February to put into effect the proposals announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on 29 November. Subject to parliamentary approval for these regulations, arrangements are being made to inform the large number of people affected and to answer queries from individuals about their own entitlement to SERPS.

Disability Benefits

25. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many persons no longer receive disability allowances which they previously received over the past 12 months. [150509]

Mr. Bayley: About 170,000 awards of Disability Living Allowance and 283,000 awards of Attendance Allowance were terminated in the 12 months ending 31 January 2001. Awards are terminated when people's condition improves and their care and/or mobility needs reduce, they go to live abroad, they enter long-term residential care, or they die.

During the same period about 186,000 awards of Disability Living Allowance and 6,000 awards of Attendance Allowance were renewed, and 270,000 new awards of Disability Living Allowance and 330,000 new awards of Attendance Allowance were made. There was therefore a net increase in the number of people receiving Disability Living Allowance and Attendance Allowance in the period.

Minimum Income Guarantee

27. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners are eligible for the Minimum Income Guarantee in *(a)* Wales and *(b)* England; and how many and what proportion have had their applications approved to date. [150511]

Mr. Rooker: There are currently some 97,000 pensioners in Wales and some 1.4 million in England in receipt of the Minimum Income Guarantee. This figure does not include spouses and dependants, who account for some 2 million beneficiaries in GB. As a result of the national take-up campaign over 182,000 additional claims have been processed by the end of January, of which some 82,000 were successful.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people have been sent letters inviting them to apply for the Minimum Income Guarantee; how many tear-off slips have been returned; how many of the letters have resulted in a successful claim; how many people have contacted the Minimum Income Guarantee helpline; how many claims have been submitted as a result of a helpline inquiry; and how many of the helpline inquiries have resulted in a successful claim. [151497]

Mr. Rooker: Since the launch of the campaign last May, 2.4 million pensioners have been written to and around 840,000 pensioners have responded. Over 475,000 calls have been received by the MIG claim line service and some 365,000 pensioners have requested a postal claim pack. At the end of January, the Department had received over 182,000 additional claims. Claims continue to be received and processed.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in the Leeds, Central parliamentary constituency are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee. [151668]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to my reply to him on 26 February 2001, *Official Report,* column 541W.

Disabled People

29. **Mr. Amess:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he last met *(a)* the National Autistic Society, *(b)* Mencap, *(c)* the Royal National Institute for the Blind, *(d)* the Royal National Institution for Deaf People, *(e)* the Council for Disabled Children and *(f)* the Down's Syndrome Association to discuss the provision of benefits. [150513]

Mr. Bayley: I last met the National Autistic Society in February 1999; Mencap in November 2000; the Royal National Institute for the Blind in May 2000; and the Royal National Institute for the Deaf in May 1999. I have not met the Council for Disabled Children or the Down's Syndrome Association, though I have recently written to the latter about a report it produced on benefits.

Winter Fuel Payments

30. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received about the exclusion from eligibility for winter fuel allowance of those who are aged 60 years or over on the relevant date. [150514]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not kept in the format requested. So far this winter, around 11 million people have benefited from Winter Fuel Payments. The representations we have received concerning exclusions from the scheme are negligible.

Widows Benefit

31. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security pursuant to his oral answer of 29 January 2001, *Official Report,* column 1, what the value is of bereavement benefit anticipated to be paid out; and what conveniently available figures he has for the likely number of recipients. [150515]

Angela Eagle: The information available is in the table.

Estimated expenditure on bereavement benefits 2001–02

	Gross expenditure (£ million)	Number of recipients (Thousand)	Average amount of weekly benefit (£ per week)
Lump-sum bereavement payment	110	60	—
Widowed parents allowance	340	60	100
Bereavement allowance	40	20	50
Total	490	'80	—

'Due to overlaps between the numbers receiving lump sum bereavement payment and those receiving weekly benefits, the total number of recipients counts numbers of weekly benefit recipients only.

Notes:

1. Figures estimated by the Government Actuary's Department and are consistent with the latest pre-Budget report. Estimates are in cash terms.
2. Expenditure estimates are rounded to the nearest £10 million; recipient numbers to the nearest 10,000; and average amounts to the nearest £10. Figures may not sum due to rounding.
3. Income-related benefit effects are excluded. Figures do not therefore represent changes in overall benefit expenditure due to the reforms to widow's bereavement benefits, nor do the average amounts represent average changes in weekly incomes.
4. No explicit assumptions are made about levels of take-up.
5. For the lump sum bereavement payment it is assumed that a certain proportion of payments in early 2001–02 continue to attract a payment of £1,000 as the deaths occurred in the previous financial year.
6. Figures do not include women who receive Widow's Pension under the current rules.

Means Testing

32. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the means testing of benefits. [150516]

Mr. Bayley: I refer the hon. Member to the replies given to the hon. Members for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) and for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) earlier today, *Official Report*, Column 16.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what estimate he has made of the savings in means tested social security payments to his Department of a lone parent with one child aged over 11 leaving unemployment and entering a job that pays *(a)* £20,000 per annum and *(b)* £7,500 per annum; [151545]

(2) what estimate he has made of the average change in benefits and tax credits paid when a participant in the New Deal for Lone Parents enters full-time employment; [151638]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The information is in the table.

Weekly income related benefit savings of a lone parent with one child aged 11–15 moving into work (at April 2000 rates)

£

	Out of work benefits	In work benefits	Income related benefit saving
No rent			
Earn £20,000	87.95	—	87.95
Earn £7,500	87.95	70.40	17.91
Private renter			
Earn £20,000	166.35	—	166.35
Earn £7,500	166.35	94.18	72.17
Local authority renter			
Earn £20,000	131.27	—	131.27
Earn £7,500	131.27	70.04	61.23

Notes:

1. This table assumes:
(a) work of 30 hours or more per week
(b) no child care costs involved in WFTC assessment
(c) private rented housing average rent of £78.40
(d) local authority housing average rent £43.32
(e) council tax of £9.90.
2. Working Families Tax Credit has been treated as an income-related benefit for these calculations.
3. Of the examples in this table the one that is most typical of a lone parent moving from benefit into work would be a local authority renter.

Savings Incentives

33. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals he has to provide a greater incentive to save by those in receipt of, or on the threshold of, benefits. [150517]

Mr. Bayley: Investment in income-related benefits such as the Minimum Income Guarantee has provided the most effective and immediate way of tackling poverty. Modernising current systems through the development of tax credits and more tax-like assessments of benefits will provide a more efficient and simpler way of ensuring that people on low and modest incomes receive the security to which they are entitled.

Social Security Fraud

34. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many prosecutions for social security fraud were secured in each calendar year since 1996. [150518]

Mr. Rooker: These figures are collected by financial year and are not available by calendar year. The number of prosecutions by financial year were given in my written answer to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) on 10 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 575-76W.

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to combat social security fraud. [150499]

Mr. Rooker: The Fraud Bill currently before Parliament sets out measures that will make it easier to detect fraud and provide greater deterrents for those thinking of committing fraud.

Yesterday we launched a national advertising campaign that will raise public awareness and reinforce the message that benefit fraud is wrong, unfair and hurts everyone who has to pay for it.

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on his proposals for reducing fraud in social security. [150492]

Mr. Rooker: We have already taken steps to tighten the gateways to benefit, improve the training of fraud investigators, modernise technology to identify cheats, and we are seeking new powers to toughen the penalties against persistent offenders and gather the information necessary to catch them.

Today we have also launched a national advertising campaign that will raise public awareness and reinforce our message that benefit fraud is wrong, unfair and will not be tolerated.

Maternity Pay

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would be the estimated cost *(a)* to the Government and *(b)* to employers of paying statutory maternity pay at 90 per cent. of earnings for a period of 13 weeks, followed by (i) 13 and (ii) 39 weeks at a flat rate of £100. [150996]

Mr. Bayley *[holding answer 28 February 2001]:* The information is in the table.

£ million

	Estimated cost to:	
	Government in 2001–02	*Employers in 2001–02*
Statutory maternity pay at 90 per cent. of earnings for 13 weeks followed by 13 weeks at flat rate of £100	1,300	600
Statutory maternity pay at 90 per cent. of earnings for 13 weeks followed by 39 weeks at flat rate of £100	2,100	1,200

Notes:
1. Costs to Government take no account of effects on tax revenue, or of any income-related benefit offsets.
2. Costs to employers include an estimation of the costs of engaging and training staff cover for employees on maternity leave and other costs, assuming the mother does not return to work during the statutory maternity pay period.
3. Possible benefits to employers such as staff retention are excluded.
4. Costs assume 100 per cent. take up by mothers eligible for receipt of statutory maternity pay in 2001–02

Departmental Policies (Ilford, North)

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what initiatives embarked upon since May 1997 have benefited Ilford, North; and if he will make a statement. [152029]

Angela Eagle: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual Opportunity for all reports. Our second report, Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Ilford, North since May 1997.

Measures in our first four Budgets will lift over 1 million children out of poverty. These include record increases in Child Benefit, Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Ilford, North 11,420 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Ilford, North the number has reduced from 2,200 to 1,500. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally, and in Ilford, North from 1,600 to 1,500.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty, so we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 17,000 older people in Ilford, North have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 16,400 pensioners in Ilford, North will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State Pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s, of whom we estimate there are about 7,000 in Ilford, North. 2,700 pensioner families in Ilford, North are receiving the minimum income guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include the new Pension Credit in 2003, designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings. The launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 will both help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Bolton, West)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Bolton, West constituency, the effects on Bolton, West of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150604]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Bolton, West since May 1997.

Measures in our first four Budgets will lift over one million children out of poverty. These include record increases in Child Benefit, Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Bolton, West 11,106 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The new deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Bolton, West the number has reduced from 1,200 to 1,100. Since May 1997, the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally, and in Bolton, West from 1,100 to 1,000.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Over 15,500 older people in Bolton, West have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 14,500 pensioners in Bolton, West will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic state pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s, of whom we estimate there are about 5,800 in Bolton, West. 2,000 pensioner families in Bolton, West are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include the new pension credit in 2003, designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings. The launch of stakeholder pensions in April this year and the introduction of the state second pension in April 2002 will both help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Hull, North)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Hull, North constituency, the effects on Hull, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150617]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Hull, North since May 1997.

Measures in our first four Budgets will lift over one million children out of poverty. These include record increases in Child Benefit, Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Hull, North 11,834 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Hull, North the number has reduced from 4,400 to 3,300. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally, and in Hull, North from 2,900 to 2,800.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Over 13,500 older people in Hull, North have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 12,300 pensioners in Hull, North will benefit from the substantial increases

in the basic state pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s, of whom we estimate there are about 5,100 in Hull, North. 3,300 pensioner families in Hull, North are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include the new pension credit in 2003, designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings. The launch of stakeholder pensions in April this year and the introduction of the state second pension in April 2002 will both help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Regulated Tenancies

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many tenants of regulated tenancies are not in receipt of housing benefit. [151877]

Angela Eagle: The information available is as follows.

It is estimated from the survey of English housing data for 1999–2000 and other sources that there are some 80,000 regulated tenancies in Great Britain where housing benefit is not received.

Notes:

1. Rounded to nearest five thousand.

2. Information from the Family Resources Survey 1998–99 is used to estimate the ratio of regulated tenancies in Scotland and Wales to those in England. It is assumed that regulated tenancies are those commencing prior to 1998–99.

3. The Survey of English Housing data for 1998–99 is used to estimate proportions in receipt of HB, results for 1999–2000, the latest available, are used to estimate the number of regulated tenancies in England.

4. The above estimates are based on survey information rather than administrative data with regard to benefit receipt. This follows published information for England in the "Housing in England" publication.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what research he has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* commissioned on the income distribution of regulated new tenants. [151878]

Angela Eagle: We have not undertaken or commissioned any research on the income distribution of regulated tenants.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions published a range of information on the economic status of regulated tenants in the publication "Housing in England 1998–99", which is available in the Library.

War Pensions

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to allow those who are 15 per cent. disabled to be eligible for a war pension. [151685]

Mr. Bayley: Where service disablement is assessed at 20 per cent. or more, the War Pensions Agency pays an on-going pension based on a weekly or annual rate. Where the assessment is less than 20 per cent. a war pension is paid as a lump sum gratuity.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to spend more money on processing claims for war pensioners; and if he will make a statement. [151686]

Mr. Bayley: The War Pensions Agency is an Executive Agency of the Department of Social Security and as such remains subject to gross expenditure control under the Parliamentary Vote system.

The agency expects to meet all targets in its current business plan relating to claims and appeals processing for 2000–01. It is confident of receiving sufficient funding for 2001–02 to deliver further improved performance and to continue to reduce the total number of cases in action at the agency.

Correspondence

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will respond to letters from the hon. Member for West Derbyshire dated 19 January and 8 February relating to the case of Mr. and Mrs. Walker of Broadholme Lane Farm, Belper. [152261]

Mr. Bayley: A reply was issued on 5 March 2001.

PRIME MINISTER

Lord Levy

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Prime Minister which department organises and books *(a)* air flights and *(b)* other travel arrangements, when Lord Levy is travelling abroad as his personal envoy. [148516]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* Lord Levy's air flights are normally booked by his personal assistant. On a few occasions, they have been booked by the Foreign Office travel centre in London or by embassies in countries visited by Lord Levy, and Lord Levy has reimbursed the cost.

Other travel arrangements are made by embassies in the countries visited by Lord Levy.

Hammond Inquiry

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will take steps to establish the origin of the appearance in Sunday newspapers of details of the findings of the inquiry set up under Sir Anthony Hammond into the Hinduja passport affair; if he will identify publicly the person or persons responsible; and if he will make a statement. [151837]

The Prime Minister: No. Sir Anthony Hammond was still compiling his report when a number of speculative newspaper reports appeared. I have made clear that I will publish Sir Anthony's report.

Prime Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Prime Minister how many times he met the Irish Prime Minister between 1 January and 1 July 2000; what the dates of each meeting were; and where each meeting took place. [152060]

The Prime Minister: I met the Taoiseach on the following occasions between 1 January and 1 July 2000:

Date	*Location/event*
16 February	Talks at No. 10
23 March	Bilateral talks, Lisbon
18 April	Dinner, Dublin
20 April	Webcast at No. 10
2 May	Lunch at No. 10
4 May	Talks at Hillsborough
7 June	Dinner at No. 10
19 June	Meeting in Oporto

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 338W, concerning the Cabinet Secretary's meeting with the Hinduja brothers, from whom the advice came that it would be beneficial for the Cabinet Secretary to accept the lunch invitation. [152064]

The Prime Minister: As is normal with such invitations, the Secretary of the Cabinet took advice from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Albania

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will discuss with *(a)* the President of France, *(b)* the Chancellor of Germany, *(c)* the Prime Minister of Italy and *(d)* the Prime Minister of Greece, KFOR's response to Albanian incursion into (i) Macedonia and (ii) Southern Serbia. [152337]

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs has discussed this issue with his EU and NATO colleagues on 26 and 27 February respectively and with the FRY Foreign Minister on 28 February. We have also remained in close contact with partners in the region including Macedonia.

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Prime Minister if the Performance and Innovation Unit's research into new technologies to address HIV/AIDS in developing countries is considering microbicides; and if he will make a statement. [151630]

The Prime Minister: The Performance and Innovation Unit project, announced on 8 November 2000; is considering how to increase the availability of technologies for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. As part of this, the project is looking at increasing incentives for research and development of new technologies. Technologies being considered include preventative measures such as microbicides as well as treatments.

CABINET OFFICE

Policy and Strategy Units

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when her Performance and Innovation Unit was established; which of its reports are placed in the public domain; how many departmental or non-departmental special advisers participate in its work; how many regular *(a)* non-departmental and *(b)* departmental staff participate in its work; and how many of these work for the unit on a full-time basis. [150364]

The Prime Minister: I am replying to this question, as it relates to matters for which I am responsible.

I announced the establishment of the Performance and Innovation Unit on 28 July 1998. The PIU provides the Government with a capacity to analyse major policy issues and design strategic solutions. Since then it has published the following reports:

Encryption and Law Enforcement (published May 1999)

E-commerce@its.best.uk (September 1999)

Rural Economies (December 1999)

Wiring It Up: Whitehall's Management of Cross-Cutting Policies and Services (January 2000)

Adding It Up: Improving Analysis and Modelling in Central Government (January 2000)

Reaching Out: The Role of Central Government at Regional and Local Level (February 2000)

Winning the Generation Game—Improving Opportunities for People Aged 50–65 in Work and Community Activity (April 2000)

Recovering Criminal Assets (June 2000)

Counter Revolution—Modernising the Post Office Network (July 2000)

Adoption (July 2000)

e.gov—Electronic Government Services for the 21st Century (September 2000)

Rights of Exchange—Social, Health, Environmental and Trade Objectives on the Global Stage (September 2000).

The modernising government White Paper recommended that the PIU examine future strategic challenges. In addition, a research study "Migration: An Economic and Social Analysis" produced by the research, development and statistics directorate of the Home Office, with the assistance of the Performance and Innovation Unit, was published in January 2001. Copies of PIU reports have been placed in the Library of the House of Commons. Details of all completed and current projects can also be found the PIU website.

Most projects are overseen by an advisory group of outside stakeholders and senior Whitehall officials including some special advisers. Details of these groups can be found in the published reports.

The PIU primarily works on individual projects, using small teams drawn from government and across the public, private and voluntary sectors. The unit has about 50–60 staff at any one time. As at 1 March 2001, 10 members of the PIU are permanent employees of the Cabinet Office, 22 are on loan from other Government Departments and 19 have been brought in from the wider public sector and the private and voluntary sectors. All except five members of staff are employed on a full-time basis.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Committee on the Rights of the Child

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what communication he has had

with other Government Departments concerning his contribution to the UK periodic report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. [150601]

Mr. Ingram: All Northern Ireland Departments were consulted concerning the Northern Ireland Office's contribution to the UK periodic report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Smuggling

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people have been *(a)* charged, *(b)* brought to court, *(c)* found guilty and *(d)* given a custodial sentence for smuggling goods across the Irish border in each of the past 10 years; if he will break down prosecutions in each of those years by (i) class A drugs, (ii) class B drugs, (iii) alcohol, (iv) tobacco, (v) petrol, (vi) arms and (vii) videos and musical recordings; if he will break down sentences in each year; and if he will break down arrests in each year by the electoral district in which the arrest was made. [150580]

Mr. Ingram: The information is not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the IT projects currently undertaken in his Department; and if he will state the *(a)* expected completion date and *(b)* cost of each project. [151508]

Dr. Reid: The Northern Ireland Office is currently undertaking the following IT projects:

Project	*Completion date*	*Cost (£000)*
Knowledge Network	December 2001	106
Redesign of NIO website	December 2001	80
Intranet	June 2003	500
Replacement hardware for Records Management System	March 2001	14.5
Forensic Science DNA Database	December 2001	100
Oasis Resilience	March 2001	127
Oasis Infrastructure Communications lines	March 2001	130
Replace Electoral Register System	June 2002	300
xGSI	June 2001	110
Visitor Records Booking System	December 2001	200
COMPASS	September 2002	£2 million
PRISM	December 2003	£3 million

To ensure probity and value for money, my Department complies with EC public procurement rules, Government accounting rules, national audit requirements and UK Government domestic procurement policy and best practice guidance when contracting for IT projects.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the IT projects his Department plans to undertake in the next year; and if he will state in each case the *(a)* expected date of commencement and completion and *(b)* cost. [151472]

Dr. Reid: The Northern Ireland Office is currently considering its medium-term IT strategy. Subject to the conclusions of this, it currently plans to undertake the following projects, commencing in the year 1 April 2001–31 March 2002:

Project	*Start date*	*Completion date*	*Cost*
Criminal Justice information systems and sharing (£ million)	April 2001	March 2004	1.5
Extension of Oasis to compensation agency and tariff scheme (£000)	May 2001	Stage 1: December 2001 Stage 2: March 2002	300
Integra software upgrade (£000)	April 2001	August 2001	200
Document and records management system (£ million)	April 2001	December 2003	1.2
Electronic commerce (£000)	April 2001	April 2002	20
PAFIS software upgrade (£000)	April 2001	August 2001	200
YOC access control (£000)	April 2001	December 2001	60
Atlas operations (£000)	April 2001	December 2001	40

Ministerial Visits

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the Ministers in his Department who visited any of the constituencies which are in the Peterborough unitary authority area between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001, indicating in each case *(a)* the date of the visit, *(b)* the constituencies included in the visit and *(c)* if the local hon. Member met the Minister. [151031]

Dr. Reid: There have been no visits by Ministers in my Department to any of the constituencies in the Peterborough unitary authority area between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001.

Normalisation Measures

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list each of the normalisation measures taken in Northern Ireland since 1 April 1998. [150297]

Mr. Ingram: The information is in the table.

Date	*Base demolition/closure*
12 October 1998	Demolition of Crumlin Road Sangar, Belfast
21 October 1998	Demolition of R16 roadside Sangar, Newry
23 November 1998	Demolition of three Bessbrook PVCP's
January 1999	Vacation of six Fermanagh Patrol Bases—Mullan Bridge, Rosscor Bridge, Wattle Bridge, Clonatty Bridge, Annaghmartin, Killyvilly
3 February 1999	Demolition of Aughnacloy PVCP
8 February 1999	Demolition of Hump PVCP, Strabane
12 February 1999	Demolition of Muff PVCP, Londonderry

Date	Base demolition/closure
26 February 1999	Demolition of Letterkenny PVCP, Londonderry
April 1998 to April 1999	Withdrawal of troops from RUC Stations: Corry Square, Warrenpoint, Castlederg, Carrickmore, Kesh, Rosemount, Andersonstown, Springfield Road
21 May 1999	Demolition of Fort Whitrock, Belfast
4 August 1999	Demolition of Gortmullan PB, Fermanagh
5 September 1999	Closure of Carrickfergus Royal Irish Base
31 December 1999	Closure of Castlereagh Holding Centre
May 2000	Withdrawal of troops from RUC Pomeroy
16 June 2000	Templar House Op, Belfast closed and handed back
21 June 2000	Broadway Op, Belfast closed and handed back
4 August 2000	Demolition of Boruchi Sangar, Crossmaglen
1 October 2000	Closure of Strand Road Holding Centre
8 October 2000	Demolition of R16 Base, Cloghoge, Newry completed
8 November 2000	Cookstown Royal Irish Base closed and demolished
8 November 2000	Demolition work at Fort George, Londonderry complete. Site to be handed over to the Harbour Commissioners
27 November 2000	Long Kesh vacated and handed over to contractors for demolition
12 January 2001	Demolition of Killyvilly PB completed
17 January 2001	Demolition of Wattle Bridge PB completed
19 January 2001	Demolition of Rosscor Bridge PB completed

Other normalisation measures include the return to Land Command of two roulement battalions. Three of the remaining four roulement battalions are now rear-based in GB with elements called to Northern Ireland as and when required.

When the Good Friday agreement was signed there were 18 battalions under the command of the GOC (NI). There are now 15 battalions (six resident battalions, four roulement battalions, and five home service battalions of the Royal Irish).

Also, since the Good Friday agreement, the security forces have been able to return areas of previously requisitioned land to their original owners.

In addition, the police are making increased use of soft-skinned and high-profiled liveried vehicles and beat patrols. Police officers increasingly wear fluorescent jackets and now patrol without Army support in most parts of the Province.

Saville Inquiry

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what has been the cost to public funds, broken down by Department, of *(a)* establishing and *(b)* running the Saville inquiry up to 31 December 2000. [149876]

Dr. Reid: The cost of the Bloody Sunday inquiry to my Department, from its establishment in January 1998 to 31 December 2000, was £33,834,904. In addition, I estimate that around £81,705 was incurred in staff and other administrative costs within the Department over the same period. Since no departmental staff are employed full-time on inquiry work, it is not possible to give precise figures.

I am advised that the Ministry of Defence's expenditure until 31 December 2000 was £8,823,819. This includes the cost of staff employed full-time on inquiry-related work.

Other Departments do not employ staff full-time on inquiry work so are able to estimate only the costs to them. I am advised that the approximate expenditure of the Cabinet Office for this period was £33,600; for the Home Office the figure was £56,000[1]; and for the Treasury Solicitor's Department the figure was £12,247. The security and intelligence agencies have also incurred costs of this nature, but it is not Government practice to disclose expenditure by these agencies. I am not aware of any other Department incurring expenditure in connection with the inquiry.

[1] This includes the cost of providing legal advice to the Northern Ireland Office, which is covered by the Home Office Vote.

Post

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what percentage of *(a)* letters and *(b)* parcels posted in Northern Ireland in the past 12 months were sent to *(a)* Northern Ireland, *(b)* Ireland, *(c)* Great Britain, *(d)* the European Union, *(e)* Europe (other), *(f)* USA, and *(g)* elsewhere. [152084]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

I am advised by the Post Office that it does not hold this information for the last 12 months. However, the Post Office has provided snapshot figures for letters and parcels posted in Northern Ireland as follows:

Destination	Percentage
Letters (Royal Mail)	
Northern Ireland	65
Republic of Ireland	10
Great Britain	20
Rest of World	5
Parcels (Parcelforce Worldwide)	
Northern Ireland	20
Republic of Ireland	4
Great Britain	70
Rest of World	6

SCOTLAND

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the special advisers working for her will relinquish their posts when the next general election is called. [149310]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 13 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 130W.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list the IT projects currently undertaken in her Department; and if she will state the *(a)* expected completion date and *(b)* cost of each project. [151509]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* No IT projects are currently being undertaken by my Department.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will list the IT projects her Department plans to undertake in the next year; and if she will state in each case the *(a)* expected date of commencement and completion and *(b)* cost. [151470]

Mrs. Liddell *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* No IT projects are planned by my Department for next year.

Electoral Statistics

Mr. David Marshall: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many electors there are in each parliamentary constituency in Scotland as per the electoral registers published on 15 February. [151167]

Mrs. Liddell: The table as shown provides the number of electors in each parliamentary constituency in Scotland as per the electoral registers published on 15 February.

	Number
Aberdeen, Central	50,423
Aberdeen, North	53,530
Aberdeen, South	59,495
Airdrie and Shotts	58,785
Angus	60,508
Argyll and Bute	48,819
Ayr	56,297
Banff and Buchan	57,225
Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross	41,181
Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley	65,735
Central Fife	59,705
Clydebank and Milngavie	51,844
Clydesdale	64,928
Coatbridge and Chryston	52,375
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	50,042
Cunninghame, North	55,612
Cunninghame, South	50,568
Dumbarton	55,251
Dumfries	63,502
Dundee, East	57,255
Dundee, West	54,558
Dunfermline, East	52,822
Dunfermline, West	54,185
East Kilbride	67,031
East Lothian	59,422
Eastwood	68,920
Edinburgh, Central	66,296
Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh	59,775
Edinburgh, North and Leith	62,731
Edinburgh, Pentlands	60,484
Edinburgh, South	64,437
Edinburgh, West	62,503
Falkirk, East	58,095
Falkirk, West	53,888
Galloway and Upper Nithsdale	53,189
Glasgow, Anniesland	53,189
Glasgow, Baillieston	49,350
Glasgow, Cathcart	52,055
Glasgow, Govan	53,832
Glasgow, Kelvin	60,000
Glasgow, Maryhill	55,087
Glasgow, Pollok	49,257
Glasgow, Rutherglen	52,175
Glasgow, Shettleston	51,363
Glasgow, Springburn	55,185
Gordon	60,619
Greenock and Inverclyde	48,492
Hamilton, North and Bellshill	54,146
Hamilton, South	47,054
Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber	66,893
Kilmarnock and Loudoun	61,719
Kirkcaldy	51,636
Linlithgow	55,086
Livingston	65,393
Midlothian	49,253
Moray	57,752
Motherwell and Wishaw	52,790
North-East Fife	61,356
North Tayside	62,253
Ochil	45,042
Orkney and Shetland	32,340
Paisley, North	47,982
Paisley, South	53,098
Perth	62,069
Ross, Skye and Inverness West	56,300
Roxburgh and Berwickshire	47,429
Stirling	53,340
Strathkelvin and Bearsden	62,482
Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale	52,396
West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	61,961
West Renfrewshire	52,736
Western Isles	21,941

WALES

St. David's Day

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning declaring St. David's day a bank holiday. [151926]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Minister regularly and discuss a wide range of subjects, including this one.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Departmental Policies (Bolton, West)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Bolton, West constituency, the effects on Bolton, West of her Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150610]

Jane Kennedy: The Bolton community legal service partnership (CLSP), which covers Bolton, West, is one of 165 CLSPs throughout England and Wales.

Throughout the Bolton area, 29 agencies have been awarded contracts with the Legal Services Commission (LSC). The suppliers are generally located in the centre of the city, but provide services to residents of all Bolton wards. The suppliers include 28 law firms, and one district citizens advice bureau. The total value of the contracts awarded amounts to over £790,000 in year one of the contracting strategy.

The 29 agencies are all holders of the CLS quality mark. In addition, there are a further 16 organisations in the Bolton area which provide general help or general help with casework and which have committed themselves to applying for the CLS quality mark by October 2001.

Departmental Policies (Hull, North)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Hull, North constituency, the effects on Hull, North of her Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150622]

Jane Kennedy: The Hull community advice and legal service partnership, which covers Hull, North, is one of 165 community legal service partnerships (CLSPs) throughout England and Wales.

The Hull partnership is reviewing the need for and supply of advice services throughout Hull, and intends to produce its strategy for advice and legal services for consultation this summer.

Throughout the Hull area, 22 agencies have been awarded contracts with the Legal Services Commission (LSC). The suppliers are all located in the centre of the city, but provide services to residents of all Hull wards. The 22 agencies includes 20 law firms, one law centre and one independent housing aid centre. The total value of the contracts awarded amounts to over £1,178,000.

The 22 agencies noted are all holders of the CLS quality mark. In addition, Hull fair trading advice centre has been awarded the quality mark at general help with casework level, and there are a further six organisations which provide general help or general help with casework and which have committed themselves to applying for the CLS quality mark by October 2001.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what sums were offered by each founding partner and sponsor of the millennium dome; and what sums have been paid so far by each sponsor, distinguishing cash payments from benefits in kind. [147781]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) achieved a total sponsorship and donation income of £119.7 million, of which the total value-in-kind sponsorship was £34.7 million. These figures exclude the direct funding by BT and Ford of the costs of their zones and the extra funding for marketing and promotion spent by a number of sponsors over and above the requirements of their contracts. Actual payments of cash and value-in-kind following detailed and lengthy negotiations are subject to the confidentiality requirements of the contracts between NMEC and the sponsors.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will list the dates on which sponsorship agreements for the faith zone at the millennium dome were agreed, listing in each case the amount and the identity of the sponsor; [148362]

(2) how much sponsorship money was received by the New Millennium Experience Company for the faith zone; which organisations contributed funds; and how much each contribution was. [149223]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 2 February 2001]:* On 3 June 1999 NMEC announced that the faith zone would receive £4 million in sponsorship—£2 million from the Laing Family Trusts (Christian charitable foundations); £1 million from the Hinduja Foundation; and £1 million from other Christian Trusts including the Jerusalem Trust. Agreement with the Hinduja Foundation was confirmed on 16 February 1999. Agreement with the Laing Family Trusts was also confirmed in February 1999. Agreements with other Christian Trusts, including the Jerusalem Trust, were confirmed between January 1999 and August 1999. The terms of their agreements with the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) require that details remain confidential.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) on how many occasions Lord Levy acted on behalf of the New Millennium Experience Company in discussion with potential millennium dome sponsors; [149222]

(2) when the New Millennium Experience Company authorised Lord Levy to act on its behalf in discussions with potential sponsors for the millennium dome. [149221]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 6 February 2001]:* Lord Levy was asked to help with advice to NMEC on fundraising in June 1998.

According to my Department's records, Lord Levy attended a meeting on one occasion on 29 October 1998 with the then chief executive of NMEC and representatives of the Hindjua Foundation to discuss their potential support of the faith zone in the millennium dome.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much commission was paid for the securing of sponsorship for the dome; and to whom it was paid. [150932]

Janet Anderson: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 7 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 537W. IMG provided significant support to the in-house team but did not itself deliver sponsorship. No commission has therefore been paid by the New Millennium Experience Company to third parties for securing sponsorship.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money was spent on advertising and promoting the dome. [150928]

Janet Anderson: The figure provided by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is subject to the company's necessary external audit scrutiny. That work will begin shortly and will inform the content of the company's annual report and financial statements for the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000. The report and statements will be published in due course. NMEC has advised that marketing and sales expenditure was £38.8 million. Of that, £24.4 million was attributable to advertising.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money was received from sponsors of the dome in *(a)* cash and *(b)* contributions to the fabric of the dome or its exhibits. [150922]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) achieved a total sponsorship and donation income, including cash and value-in-kind of £119.7 million. This figure excludes the direct funding by BT and Ford of the costs of their zones and the extra funding for marketing and promotion spent by a number of sponsors over and above the requirements of their contracts. Taken together, the overall sponsorship and donations relevant to the dome is estimated at £150 million—the most ever raised for a single event in the UK. Sponsorship received contributed to the overall budget of the project not just to the exhibits and other structures.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what professional fees were paid to *(a)* lawyers and *(b)* accountants for the dome (i) up to its closure and (ii) since its closure. [150927]

Janet Anderson: The figure provided by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is subject to the company's necessary external audit scrutiny. That work will begin shortly and will inform the content of the company's annual report and financial statements for the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000. The report and statements will be published in due course. NMEC has advised that expenditure on legal firms for a range of professional advice, including contractual and sponsorship issues, was £3.8 million for the period February 1997 to 31 December 2000. Expenditure for the period 1 January 2001 to 16 February 2001 was £576,000 net.

Expenditure on accounting firms for a range of professional advice including tax, audit, IT, management support and accounting was £5.8 million net for the period February 1997 to December 2000. Expenditure for the period 1 January 2001 to 16 February 2001 was £729,000 net. Both the legal and accountancy figures for post-December 2000 represent payments made against invoices received after 31 December 2000. Those invoices cover some work undertaken prior to 31 December. In particular, the expenditure reflects the detailed and comprehensive review of all the contracts undertaken by the NMEC, and also reflects the management and finance support provided to the company's executive. Both of these areas of work are essential to the successful implementation of the company's programme to achieve solvent liquidation.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the total cost of the exhibits in the dome was to NMEC; and what percentage of the costs of exhibits were paid by the sponsors. [150931]

Janet Anderson: The figure provided by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is subject to the company's necessary external audit scrutiny. That work will begin shortly and will inform the content of the company's annual report and financial statements for the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000. The report and statements will be published in due course. NMEC has advised that the total cost of the exhibits was £95 million. This figure excludes the millennium show and exhibit zone foundation and heavy steel works, the costs of which are reflected in dome construction costs. It includes the costs of those staff within the department of NMEC that had responsibility for the exhibits. It is not possible to identify the costs paid by sponsors in the way requested. Sponsorship received contributed to the overall budget of the project, not just to the exhibits and other structures.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the final construction costs of the dome were. [150930]

Janet Anderson: The figure provided by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is subject to the company's necessary external audit scrutiny. That work will begin shortly and will inform the content of the company's annual report and financial statements for the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000. The report and statements will be published in due course. NMEC has advised that the final construction costs of the dome were £332.3 million including infrastructure, planning costs, dome structure, exhibit zone foundations and exhibit zone heavy steel works.

ASHA Project

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the Millennium Commission's funding of the ASHA project. [151927]

Mr. Chris Smith: This is a matter for the Millennium Commission. I will write to the hon. Member in my capacity as chairman of the Commission, and place copies of my reply in the Libraries of both Houses.

BBC

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to his answer of 14 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 133W, if the to-date costs for BBC Choice, BBC Knowledge and BBC News 24 were approved in principle with the BBC. [152364]

Janet Anderson: No. Budgets for individual services are not subject to Government approval.

Television Licences

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will review the guidelines for enforcement by the Television Licensing Authority of television licence payments. [151462]

Janet Anderson: No. Statutory responsibility for the administration and enforcement of the television licensing system rests with the BBC. TV Licensing carries out the day-to-day administration and enforcement as agent for the corporation. It is for the BBC, as licensing authority, to keep under review the guidelines under which TV Licensing operates.

TREASURY

EU Stability and Growth Pact

Mr. Cash: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the Opinion of the Council made under Council Regulation EC No. 1466/97 and Article 99 EC. [151118]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* A copy of the Opinion has been deposited in the Library of the House.

Departmental Policies (Bolton, West)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Bolton, West constituency, the effects on Bolton, West of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150602]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Bolton, West, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the General Election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 439, or 33 per cent, youth unemployment is down by 67 per cent. and long-term unemployment has fallen by 66 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18–24-year-olds had helped 447 young people in Bolton, West constituency gain valuable skills and experience—238 (53 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 1,700 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to developing policies which enable all pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. As a result of the recent Pre-Budget Report, all pensioners, including 14,500 in Bolton, West, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 9,700 in Bolton, West.

Child Care

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will review the types of child care costs taken into consideration in the payment of the Working Families Tax Credit. [150519]

Dawn Primarolo: The child care tax credit in the Working Families Tax Credit supports the National Child Care Strategy not only by making child care more affordable but by ensuring that the help we give goes to those using safe, good quality, child care. By the end of August 2000, 124,000 working families were getting money towards their child care costs through the Working Families Tax Credit. This is far in excess of the 47,000 families who received child care help at the high-water mark of family credit.

Departmental Policies (Hull, North)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Hull, North constituency, the effects on Hull, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150616]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Hull, North along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the General Election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 998, or 22 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 72 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 34 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of November 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 2,434 young people in Hull, North constituency gain valuable skills and experience—1,160 (48 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,800 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to developing policies which enable all pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. As a result of the recent pre-Budget report, all pensioners, including 12,300 in Hull, North, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 8,000 in Hull, North.

Tax and Dividend Income

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the *(a)* mean and *(b)* median taxable income of pensioners was in the most recent year for which information is available; [151639]

(2) if he will estimate the annual cost of exempting non-taxpayers from the abolition of payable tax credits on dividend income; [151642]

(3) what estimate he has made of the gains in income decile of cutting the basic and starting rates of tax on savings and dividends income to zero; and if he will make a statement; [151641]

(4) what estimate he has made of the gains *(a)* in absolute terms and *(b)* as a percentage of income by income decile, of increasing age- related personal allowances for all people aged over 65 years by £2,000; [151637]

(5) what estimate he has made of the *(a)* cost and *(b)* absolute and relative gain by income decile of increasing the amount of income subject to basic rate income tax by £6,000; and if he will make a statement. [151643]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answers 1 March 2001]:* An analysis by range of income decile for increasing tax age-related allowances by £2,000 in 2001–02 is in the table:

Decile of total income	*Gains (£ million)*	*Gain as a percentage of income*
Bottom 7	90	[1]—
8	310	2.6
9	380	2.8
Top	220	0.8
All	1,000	[1]—

[1] It is not possible to provide a breakdown of the bottom deciles as the survey of personal incomes can only provide reliable estimates for the income of taxpayers.

Note:
The estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and consistent with the November 2000 pre-Budget report.

In 2000–01 the mean and median taxable income for people of state retirement pension age are £3,700 and £0 respectively, where taxable income is defined as income above the appropriate personal allowance.

An analysis by range of income decile for cutting the basic and starting rates of tax on savings and dividends income to zero in 2001–02 is in the table:

Decile of total income	*Gains (£ million)*
Bottom 7	490
8	780
9	830
Top	1,010
All	3,000

Note:
The estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and consistent with the November 2000 pre-Budget report. It is not possible to provide a breakdown of the bottom deciles as the survey of personal incomes can only provide reliable estimates for taxpayers.

The cost of exempting non-taxpayers from the abolition of payable tax credits on dividend income is around £50 million in 2001–01 before allowing for behavioural effects.

An analysis by range of income decile for increasing the income tax basic rate limit by £6,000 in 2001–02 is in the table:

Decile of total income	*Gains (£ million)*
Bottom 9	0
Top	2,500
All	2,500

Note:
The estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and consistent with the November 2000 pre-Budget report.

Debt Relief

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with the Italian Government about debt relief discussions at the forthcoming G8 Summit; and if he will make a statement. [152296]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The UK has discussed debt relief and development issues extensively with the Italian Government, who are currently chair of the G7. In particular the UK is working closely with the Italian Government to build on announcements made at an international conference on Child Poverty hosted by the UK on 26 February, aimed at improving the access to drugs and vaccines for the world's poorest children.

Departmental Policies (Vale of Clywd)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Vale of Clwyd constituency, the effects on the Vale of Clwyd of his Department's policies and actions since May 1997. [151932]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Vale of Clwyd, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 504, or 26 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 79 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 57 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 809 young people in the Vale of Clwyd constituency gain valuable skills and experience—393 (49 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,000 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to developing policies which enable all pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. As a result of the recent pre-Budget report, all pensioners, including 15,800 in the Vale of Clwyd, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 10,000 in the Vale of Clwyd.

Pensions

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the effects of the abolition of the advance corporation tax credit on future pensions. [150488]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Our package of corporation tax reforms included measures to boost corporate investment by removing tax distortions. The withdrawal of payable tax credits on dividends was just one part of these measures. Pension funds will share in the long-term

benefits from these changes to corporation tax. The overall effects of these changes on future pensions will vary depending upon many factors, such as: the type of scheme paying the pension; the take-up of private pensions; the level of future pension contributions; and the investment policy adopted by pensions fund managers.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people he estimates will invest in an individual pension account between April 2001 and April 2002. [152439]

Miss Melanie Johnson: No such estimates have been made.

Insurance Industry

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer at what point after 1990 the trend towards lower inflation and lower interest rates was reflected in advice to the insurance industry on the likely implications for guaranteed annuity rate liabilities. [150437]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 15 February 2001]:* The latest professional guidance on guaranteed annuity rate liabilities was issued by the Government Actuary's Department in January 1999 and December 1999.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what steps his Department took, between 1990 and the transfer of the insurance regulatory function to the Financial Services Authority to *(a)* investigate and monitor the reserves kept by insurance companies to satisfy their commitments under their guaranteed annuity rate policies, *(b)* monitor the extent of potential liabilities of insurance companies under guaranteed annuity rate policies and *(c)* ensure that insurance companies had (i) provided for and (ii) fully disclosed their potential liabilities under their guaranteed annuity rate policies within their annual report and accounts; [150438]

(2) on what occasions between 1990 and the transfer of the insurance regulatory function to the Financial Services Association his Department approved of the operation of non-guaranteed annuity rate policies from within the same fund or funds as guaranteed annuity rate policies. [150436]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 15 February 2001]:* The Insurance Companies Act 1982 sets out the requirements on insurance companies to maintain an adequate margin of solvency. The regulator monitors companies on an on-going basis to ensure that regulatory requirements are met.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes were made between 1990 and the transfer of the insurance regulatory function to the Financial Services Authority to the information requests required of insurance companies in respect of potential liabilities; and at whose behest such changes were made. [150439]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information that insurance companies must provide to the regulator is set out in the Insurance Companies Act 1982 and in consequent regulations. The regulator monitors companies on an on-going basis to ensure that regulatory requirements are met.

Homes Bill

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the home packs to be provided by sellers, as proposed in the Homes Bill, will be subject to VAT; and if this will be extended to new-built homes, otherwise exempt from VAT. [150993]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The Homes Bill will allow the seller of a property (or his agent) to charge potential buyers for a copy of the seller's pack, but only for reasonable costs such as photocopying and postage. This will also apply to the sale of new homes. The majority of homes are marketed by estate agents. Where the seller or agent is registered for VAT and makes a charge for the seller's pack, the charge will be subject to VAT.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what year of income is being used as the basis for assessing pupils' entitlement to the children's tax credit. [151449]

Dawn Primarolo: It is the parent rather than the child or pupil who has the entitlement to the children's tax credit.

Gift Aid

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the estimated repayment of tax to charities as a result of the Gift Aid changes implemented in April 2000; and what is the total tax repayable resulting from the Gift Aid scheme to date. [151363]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Repayments to charities of basic rate income tax on donations made under the Gift Aid scheme up to the end of 1999–2000 are available in table 10.3 of Inland Revenue Statistics 2000, a copy of which is in the Library.

Repayments from April 2000 are not comparable with those in earlier years as companies are no longer required to deduct basic rate income tax from their Gift Aid donations. Since company donations are now made gross these no longer have associated tax repayments.

Full year figures for April 2001 will not be available for some time yet and it is not possible, at this stage, to estimate how much of current year repayments is due to last year's changes.

Pensioners (Tax)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many retired people in receipt of the state retirement pension pay income tax at *(a)* the standard rate and *(b)* the higher rate; and if he will make a statement. [151991]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth, North (Mr. Rapson) on 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 518W.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 13 February 2001, *Official*

Report, column 104W, on working families tax credit, what assessment he has made of the findings of the NACB report, "Work in Progress". [151861]

Dawn Primarolo: The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) is a success in making work pay for families on low to middle incomes and tackling child poverty. Over 1.1 million families are receiving it—300,000 more than claimed the predecessor benefit, Family Credit. The WFTC is boosting incomes, paying on average an extra £76.86 a week to families looking after 2.2 million children.

We welcome NACAB's recognition of the contribution made by the WFTC to making work pay and tackling child poverty.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many households are in receipt of the working families tax credit in each English local authority. [152504]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 425W.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the *(a)* average change in absolute net income and *(b)* the percentage of net income per recipient household of working families tax credit if it were tapered away from the higher rate tax payers on a comparable basis with children's tax credit. [151572]

Dawn Primarolo: Such a tapering away would not be possible because, in general, the information needed to establish whether any person in the applicant's family is a higher rate taxpayer for the relevant year cannot be known at the application date.

Jobcentre Vacancies

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will assess the accuracy of the recording of the official data on Jobcentre vacancies following the Low Pay Unit's report. [151769]

Miss Melanie Johnson: This information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Mr. Frank Field, dated 28 February 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question on jobcentre vacancies (151769). I am replying in his absence.

All key outputs of National Statistics, including jobcentre vacancy statistics, are subject to quality assurance reviews at least every five years with the involvement of external expertise. The next review of vacancy statistics has been provisionally scheduled to take place in 2002/03.

Gilt-edged Securities

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what powers he has to withhold issue of payment warrants for interest due upon gilt-edged securities to the name of a security holder known to have died; [151172]

(2) when he made it his policy to withhold issue of payment warrants for interest due upon gilt-edged securities after receipt of notification of the death of the security holder and prior to the receipt of the office copy of the grant of probate or administration; what representations he has received on it; what plans he has to review the policy; how many estates hold Treasury stock in respect of which the Bank of England's Registrar's Department delayed issue of payment warrants in compliance with the policy in 2000; if he will estimate the average period between receipt of notification of death and receipt of an office copy grant by the Bank of England's Registrar's Department in 2000 and the consequential delay in issue of payment warrant once interest had contractually become due; what assessment he has made of the total financial benefit to the Treasury from implementation of this policy in 2000; and if he will make it his policy to make compensatory interest at the statutory rate payable in respect of late issue of payment warrants. [151173]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information sought will take some time to assemble and I will write to the hon. Member separately.

Repossessions

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many repossessions by building societies and other providers of mortgages there were in each of the last 10 years. [152005]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information, as set out in a Council of Mortgage Lenders press release of 31 January 2001, is as follows:

Property repossessions from 1991 to 2000

Period	*Number of properties taken into possession*
1991	75,540
1992	68,540
1993	58,540
1994	49,210
1995	49,410
1996	42,560
1997	32,770
1998	33,820
1999	30,030
2000	22,610

Source:
Council of Mortgage Lenders

Departmental Policies (Ilford, North)

Ms Perham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what initiatives embarked upon since May 1997 have benefited Ilford, North; and if he will make a statement. [152032]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Ilford, North, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 1,071, or 48 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 85 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 75 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 552 young people in Ilford, North constituency gain valuable skills and experience—241 (44 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 600 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to developing policies which enable all pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. As a result of the recent pre-Budget Report, all pensioners, including 16,400 in Ilford, North, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic State Pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 10,600 in Ilford, North.

Banking Facilities

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking, prior to the establishment of the proposed universal bank, to help people on low incomes gain access to banking facilities; and which banks accept benefit books as proof of identity for the purpose of opening an account. [148490]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government are currently consulting on a benchmark standard for basic bank accounts which includes the requirement that they are free to open and run, making them suitable for those people on low or variable incomes.

The British Bankers Association's advice to customers on the subject of proving their identity includes a benefit book on its list of documents frequently requested by banks as evidence of identity.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

"Your Britain, Your Europe"

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent changes there have been to the criteria for selecting "Your Britain, Your Europe" roadshow venues; and if he will make a statement. [151636]

Mr. Vaz: Since the launch of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" information initiative, we have aimed to visit all of the English regions and devolved Administrations. We have not changed these selection criteria.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make available the responses to the "Your Britain, Your Europe" questionnaire. [151653]

Mr. Vaz: Among other things, the questionnaire asked where respondents got their information on the EU. We have not retained copies of the responses.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs from which budget line expenditure on the "Your Britain, Your Europe" roadshow has been drawn; and if he has applied for EC funds. [151635]

Mr. Vaz: All expenditure on "Your Britain, Your Europe" activities is drawn from the programme budget of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's EU Command. We have not applied for funds from alternative sources.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs further to his answer to the right hon. Member for Strangford (Mr. Taylor) of 14 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 226W, what meetings and events were organised in connection with the visit to Northern Ireland of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" roadshow; which political representatives of what political parties he met; what advice he *(a)* sought and *(b)* received concerning the marketing of the Your Britain, Your Europe roadshow among (i) young people and (ii) people whose community origin is not British; what flags and emblems are (A) associated with and (B) on display in conjunction with the roadshow; in what publications the visit of the roadshow was advertised; what the breakdown was of the total cost of the visit of the roadshow; and what further initiatives are planned in Northern Ireland. [150612]

Mr. Vaz: Unfortunately, because of diary pressures we had to postpone this visit.

Conflict Diamonds

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from the United States Government about conflict diamonds; and if he will make a statement. [149990]

Mr. Wilson: We are in regular contact with the Government of the United States of America on the subject of conflict diamonds. Both Governments are playing an active role in the current series of meetings of the Kimberley process, a grouping of all the major participants in the diamond sector, involving Governments, industry and civil society. We hope that the Kimberley process will lead to the adoption by the end of the year of an international certification scheme for rough diamonds, as envisaged in the United Nations resolution adopted by the General Assembly last December. Such a scheme would make an invaluable contribution to preventing illegally mined rough diamonds fuelling civil conflict.

NHS Recruitment

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 585W, concerning representations from other countries about recruitment of staff for the NHS in those countries if he will list the representations to which he refers. [152038]

Mr. Wilson: The international recruitment of medical staff has been raised during our normal discussions—both formal and informal—with other Governments, including those of Antigua and Barbuda, China, Croatia, Georgia,

South Africa, Spain and Vietnam. The Department of Health has of course also received a number of direct representations.

General Affairs Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the outcome was of the General Affairs Council held in Brussels on 26 and 27 February; if he will set out the Government's voting record at the Council; and if he will make a statement. [151993]

Mr. Vaz: The General Affairs Council (GAC) on 26–27 February adopted 29 of the 31 "A" points listed document no. 6378/01 (two items were withdrawn: nos. 23 and 28). It also noted the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament in its sessions of 11–15 December 2000 and 15–18 January 2001 in Strasbourg and 31 January-1 February 2001 in Brussels, listed in document nos. 13762/1/00, 5006/01 and 5009/01 respectively. Copies of these documents have been placed in the House Libraries.

1. Western Balkans

The Council heard a briefing from UN Secretary-General Special Representative (UNSGSR) in Kosovo, Hans Haekkerup. The Council welcomed his proposal to develop a legal framework for provisional institutions of self-government. It also expressed support for his efforts to ensure full implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1244. The Council expressed concern over the situation in south-east Serbia, condemning actions by ethnic Albanian armed groups. The Council supported initiatives by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to find a peaceful outcome and underlined the importance of an increased presence of representatives of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM). The Council welcomed a letter from Javier Solana, the Secretary-General/High Representative. It asked him to present proposals urgently for further EU action concerning the Presevo Valley. The Council endorsed Antoin MacUnfraidh as the new EUMM Head of Mission.

2. MEPP/Aid to Palestinian Authority

Foreign Ministers discussed the MEPP and the Palestinian Authority's economic situation. The Council stressed the need for the EU to play an important role in a concerted international effort aimed at avoiding economic and institutional collapse in the Palestinian territories. To that end, the EU would urge the Palestinian Authority to draw up a revised restrictive budget; press for an international donor meeting under the auspices of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee soon; and make full use of the funds available under the existing cash facility in favour of the Palestinian Authority. The Council called on both sides to refrain from violence and return to the negotiating table and renewed its call on Israel to resume payments to the Palestinian Authority and lift closures.

3. Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

The Council discussed developments in the DRC and agreed conclusions pledging the EU's support for UNCSR 1341 and for the relaunching of the Lusaka peace process.

4. South Caucasus

Following the recent ministerial Troika visit to Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, the Council agreed that the EU should play a more active political role in the region. The EU will support the efforts of international organisations to prevent and resolve conflicts. The EU will also reinforce the bilateral and multilateral political dialogue with the countries in the region and with Russia, Turkey, Iran and the United States. The Council invited its competent bodies to make recommendations for its reinforced EU policy.

5. GSP Regulation: Everything but Arms Proposal for LDC Market Access

The GAC adopted, by qualified majority, amendments to the GSP Regulation extending duty and quota-free access to products from the 48 least developed countries (the everything but arms proposal). It welcomed this regulation as a measure not only of substantive value to least developed countries (LDCs), but as a concrete sign of political goodwill towards the LDC in the context of the next round of WTO negotiations and the 3rd UN Conference on LDCs in May.

The regulation will apply from 5 March 2001. Duty-free and quota-free access will be extended immediately to all LDC products except arms, with transitional periods for the three sensitive products of bananas, rice and sugar. For bananas, tariffs will be reduced by 20 per cent. annually, starting on 1 January 2002. Access will be completely tariff-free by 1 January 2006. For rice and sugar, tariff reductions will be phased in with a 20 per cent. cut in 2006, 50 per cent. in 2007 and 80 per cent. in 2008. In the meantime, duty-free quotas, based on previous best exports to the EU, will be opened for the marketing year 2001–02, and these will increase by 15 per cent. each year until 2009, when all tariffs and quotas will be removed.

The Commission will, in 2005, submit a report to the Council on the implementation of the regulation, and will make appropriate proposals, if necessary, for its amendment.

AOB:

6. El Salvador

The Council invited member states and the Commission to closely co-ordinate their actions in the region and to pursue their assistance to El Salvador. It also emphasised the need for effective co-ordination of international assistance and commended the forthcoming meeting of the consultative group on El Salvador in Madrid on 7 March.

7. Zimbabwe

The Council discussed the worsening political and economic situation in Zimbabwe and agreed on the need for political dialogue with the Zimbabwean Government, as provided for in article 8 of the Cotonou agreement.

8. Voting Record

No formal votes were taken on the points under discussion at the GAC. The UK supported the Commission/ Presidency compromise proposal on everything but arms. This was adopted at the GAC without a formal vote. The presidency concluded after discussions that sufficient votes in favour existed for a qualified majority.

Gafur Rakhimov

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy not to grant an application from Mr. Gafur Rakhimov, a senior official of the International Amateur Boxing Federation, for a visa to travel to Belfast. [151787]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* If Mr. Rakhimov applies for a visa to visit the United Kingdom, his application will be considered under the Immigration Rules and a decision will be made on the evidence available at the time. All applications are considered on the individual merits of the case.

Ministerial Visit (Egypt)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the *(a)* cost to public funds and *(b)* purpose of the visit of the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Cunninghame, North (Mr. Wilson), to Egypt in February. [151688]

Mr. Wilson: The visit cost £8,371.49 for myself and two FCO officials and its purpose was to discuss bilateral and trade relations with Egypt. I had meetings with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister.

Burma

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he is taking to implement the ILO resolution recommending that the organisation's members review the relations they may have with Burma, to ensure that Burma cannot perpetuate or extend the system of forced or compulsory labour. [152158]

Mr. Battle: We share the international abhorrence at the practice of forced labour in Burma. In 1997, the European Community suspended GSP privileges to Burma as a result of this practice. We played an active role in pressing for the ILO resolution on Burma. Since the decision, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment wrote to employers and workers groups in the UK on 18 February, asking them to draw the ILO decision to their members' attention and to consider how to give effect to the ILO resolution. We, too, are actively considering what further steps HMG could take.

Ms Glenda Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he is taking to prevent *(a)* UK investment in Burma and *(b)* UK imports from Burma when they are associated with the use of forced or compulsory labour. [152159]

Mr. Battle: We have given a cautious welcome to recent news that the regime in Burma has begun discussions with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. As a result of these talks, the regime has recently taken steps to decrease pressure on the National League for Democracy (NLD), including the release of 85 youth members. However, senior members of the NLD remain under house arrest. We have called for these restrictions to be lifted, and have made it clear that there will be no softening of our stance until we see real evidence of progress in Burma.

We do not encourage trade or investment with Burma. There is now virtually no new investment into the country. We have asked the biggest British investor in Burma, Premier Oil, to leave. We have drawn the attention of the tourism industry to the views of democratic leaders that tourism to Burma is inappropriate. We are actively considering how best to give effect to the ILO's decision last November to invoke measures against Burma over forced labour. Any action will need to be balanced against the delicate discussions currently taking place between the Burmese regime and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Parliamentary Questions

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will reply substantively to the questions from the hon. Member for Gloucester tabled on 31 January. [152150]

Mr. Wilson: These questions were answered on 1 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 735–36W.

Belize

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make it his policy to refer to the territory of Belize as that defined in the 1859 Boundary Convention whenever he expresses his support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity for the country. [151876]

Mr. Battle: In supporting Belize's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the UK continues to regard the 1859 convention as defining the boundary between Belize and Guatemala.

China

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the UK/China human rights dialogue of 12 to 14 February. [152484]

Mr. Battle: The sixth round of the UK/China human rights dialogue was held in China between 12–14 February. This comprised two days of talks in Peking and a one day mission to Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province.

The formal talks were held with representatives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, National People's Congress Legislative Affairs Commission, United Front Works Department, Supreme People's Court, Prisons Administration Bureau and the State Religious Affairs Bureau. We discussed China's co-operation with international human rights mechanisms; the ratification of the two human rights covenants; Tibet; Xinjiang; Falun Gong; rule of law issues; the use of the death penalty; and freedoms of religion, expression and association. We also called on the Ministry for Civil Affairs to discuss the village democracy programme, and on the All China Federation of Trade Unions.

We also raised 28 individual cases of concern: Chadrel Rinpoche, Chen Gang, Gao Xiaoliang; Gedhun Choekyi Nyima; Kang Yuchun, Liu Jingsheng, Ngawang Choepel, Ngawang Sangdrol, Abidjan Obulkasim, Zha Jianguo, Gao Hongming, Xu Wenli, Wang Youcai, Qin Yongmin, Li Dexian, Jiang Qisheng, Rebiya Kadeer, Wang Ce, Li Chang, Wang Zhiwen, Jelil Turdi, Zhang Shanguang, Jiang Shurang, Bishop Jame Su Zhimin, Huang Qi, Zhao Ming, Wenjiang Liang and Abdulhelil Abdumijit.

During the visit to Wenzhou, the British delegation was able to examine and discuss with the Wenzhou authorities the background to the reports of destruction of churches and temples as part of an urban redevelopment programme.

Foreign Government Representations

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what mechanisms exist for ensuring that representations made by foreign Governments to overseas diplomatic posts are brought to his attention. [151156]

Mr. Robin Cook: All posts overseas report to the FCO in London any formal approach from an overseas Government. This is normally in writing direct to the relevant FCO department. Correspondence on important issues is routinely copied to my private office.

Ministerial Visits

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the Ministers in his Department who visited any of the constituencies which are in the Peterborough unitary authority area between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001, indicating in each case *(a)* the date of the visit, *(b)* the constituencies included in the visit and *(c)* if the local hon. Member met the Minister. [151025]

Mr. Robin Cook *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* To the best of my knowledge, none of the Ministers in my Department visited any of the constituencies in the Peterborough unitary authority area between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001.

Qualified Majority Voting

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 12 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 47W, on qualified majority voting, if he will list each relevant article of Community treaties which moved to qualified majority voting, together with the topics concerned and the relevant competencies. [151602]

Mr. Vaz: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to him on 9 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 511–12W, which sets out a complete list of each article that will move to qualified majority voting when the treaty of Nice comes into force. The list also gives the topic covered by each article.

All of the articles of the EC treaty listed fall within the shared competence of the Community and member states except for articles 111(4), 123(4) and 133(5) of the EC treaty which fall within the Community's exclusive competence. The two articles of the treaty on European Union listed come within the intergovernmental pillars of that treaty where the concept of shared or exclusive competence is not relevant.

National Missile Defence

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his United States counterpart indicated to him in recent discussions that the National Missile Defence Project could be used to provide protection for the United Kingdom. [151599]

Mr. Vaz: No.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Departmental Surveys

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list for *(a)* 1992–93, *(b)* 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95, *(d)* 1995–96, *(e)* 1996–97, *(f)* 1997–98, *(g)* 1998–99, *(h)* 1999–2000 and *(i)* 2000–01, (I) his Department's total spending on quantitative and qualitative surveys of policy issues by focus groups, opinion polling, task forces or other means and (II) the cost of each individual project. [146589]

Ms Quin: The Ministry is committed to listening to those affected by our policies and actions. We always aim to consult our stakeholders on policy developments and proposals at an early stage.

The detailed information requested is not held centrally and comprehensive data could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Costs

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the total gross running costs to his Department of the NDPBs accountable through his Department in the last 12 months. [149147]

Ms Quin: The net cost to MAFF of carrying out our NDPB sponsorship role in the financial year 1999–2000 is shown under "Other Expenditure by the Department" on pages 1–8 of the Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies 2000", which was published on 4 January 2001. Copies are available in the Libraries of the House.

There are two changes to the published figures:

Horticulture Research International—net cost is £0.078 million;

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew—net cost is £0.086 million.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the total gross running costs were to his Department in the last 12 months of *(a)* stationery and *(b)* printing and publishing. [149144]

Ms Quin: From information held centrally, the total gross running costs to the Department in the last 12 months of *(a)* stationery and *(b)* printing and publishing were £1.338 million and £2.685 million respectively.

Beef Exports

Mr. Cox: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the countries to which British beef is exported; and what quantity was exported during the week beginning 1 January. [149379]

Ms Quin: The quantity and destination of exports of British beef from the UK are commercially confidential as only two slaughterhouses are currently approved to export under the date-based export scheme (DBES).

Farming (Leicestershire)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will estimate the total value to Leicestershire farmers of all public funding made available to them for the most recent year for which figures are available. [149988]

Ms Quin: Total subsidies paid to Leicestershire farmers by MAFF during the EU financial year 16 October 1999 to 15 October 2000 are provided in my answer of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 506–07W.

Farmers also have access to other sources of public funding, for which other Government Departments, local authorities and other public bodies are responsible, such as the regional development agencies redundant building grant programme and Working Families Tax Credit. We do not have data on the provision of such funds to Leicestershire farmers.

Agrimonetary Compensation Scheme

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will set out the Government's plans for the application of the £200 million of EU agrimonetary compensation available to UK farmers until 30 April. [150706]

Ms Quin: The Government are notifying the European Commission of their intention to draw down all of the agrimonetary compensation that is currently available for the beef, sheep and dairy sectors. This will total approximately £156 million.

Biofuels

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what financial assistance has been provided to encourage British farmers to produce environmentally sustainable biofuels for road transport. [151564]

Ms Quin: The green fuels challenge invited proposals for the development of alternative environmentally friendly fuels for road transport, and any announcements about the outcome will be made in the Budget.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the potential of crops grown for the production of biodiesel and bioethanol as alternative crops for British agriculture. [152067]

Ms Quin: The alternative crops which appear to have potential for the production of road transport fuels are non-food rapeseed for biodiesel and short rotation coppice and miscanthus for bioethanol.

BSE

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment his Department has made of the implications for health of the decision to move to a policy of rendering carcases killed under the OTMS prior to incineration; and if he will make a statement. [151810]

Ms Quin: Since the outset of the OTMS in 1996, disposal of cattle has been by two means, either by direct incineration of the carcase, or by rendering of the carcase followed by the storage and subsequent incineration of the rendered material. There was then, and remains, insufficient capacity directly to incinerate all of the cattle slaughtered. The majority are, therefore, rendered. All OTMS rendering plants operate under strict controls enforced by the Environment Agency and the relevant local authority to protect both public and environmental health. To assess the safety of OTMS operations, the Environment Agency commissioned a number of studies from independent expert consultations of the risk from BSE to human health via different environmental pathways, based on the precautionary principle. These were produced in consultation with the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) and published in 1997. They showed that the risks are negligible compared to other risks in daily life and endorsed SEAC's advice to the Government in 1996 that the current and proposed methods of dealing with animal waste material from the slaughter of cattle are safe.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much meat and bonemeal has been created as a result of rendering carcases culled under the OTMS. [151781]

Ms Quin: The total quantity of meat and bonemeal created from rendering carcases under OTMS is 588,803 tonnes.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much meat and bonemeal has been disposed of via *(a)* direct incineration and *(b)* rendering followed by incineration in each year since the establishment of the OTMS. [151782]

Ms Quin: The total quality of meat and bonemeal incinerated so far is 157,613 tonnes, with a further 431,190 tonnes in store.

For further information, the following table compares the weight of carcase material directly incinerated with that rendered.

Tonnes

Year	*Direct incineration*	*Rendering*
1996	0	206,627
1997	340	133,429
1998	18,340	376,763
1999	43,897	384,398
2000	43,179	387,049

Stock Disposal

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he is having with the agriculture industry on methods of disposing of dead stock. [151830]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* My right hon. and noble Friend Baroness Hayman met the National Sheep Association in December 2000 to discuss the disposal of dead stock. Officials also have frequent discussions on this subject with representatives of the agriculture industry.

EU Agriculture Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the outcome was of the Agriculture Council

held in Brussels on 26 and 27 February; if he will set out the Government's voting record at the Council; and if he will make a statement. [151992]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Minister of State and I represented the United Kingdom at the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 26 February. Ross Finnie (Minister for Rural Development, Scottish Executive), Brid Rodgers MLA (Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development in the Northern Ireland Executive), and Carwyn Jones (Minister for Rural Affairs, National Assembly for Wales), also attended.

The Council reviewed the main decisions on BSE which it had taken at recent meetings. Member states underlined the importance of effective implementation of those measures, as well as the need to avoid national measures. On scrapie, the Council endorsed the Commission's proposals on testing and surveillance and undertook to keep the science under review.

The Council also considered the Commission's proposed seven-point plan responding to the crisis in the European beef market. A wide range of reactions emerged. The UK supported the need for urgent measures to restore consumer confidence and remove unwanted beef from older animals from the market, while querying the appropriateness of some of the measures designed to rebalance the beef market in the medium term. We expressed particular concern about the proposals to require suckler cow premium claims to include a minimum of 20 per cent. heifers, the introduction of individual quotas for beef special premium and restoration of the 90 head limit on beef special premium claims.

I gave colleagues in the Council details of the foot and mouth disease outbreak in the United Kingdom as well as the measures we are taking to contain the disease and, in collaboration with the Commission, to prevent its spread to other member states. Commissioner Byrne and other Ministers expressed great sympathy for UK farmers and their appreciation of the comprehensive measures we are taking.

Jointly with the Italian delegation, we called for a review of the EU's food labelling policy so that food labels would better satisfy consumers demands for more information, including, for example, about how food is produced and what it contains. This initiative was given strong support by Germany and Austria.

Farmers (Retirement)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what financial packages are available to help farmers with retirement; and if he will make a statement. [152290]

Mr. Morley: There are no financial packages available from MAFF to help farmers with retirement.

Nitrogen

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much nitrogen is *(a)* produced and *(b)* used annually on farms in the UK. [152297]

Mr. Morley: Current research indicates that:

(a) in the past five years an average of 1,060,000 tonnes of nitrogen (N) has been produced annually on farms;

(b) an average total of 2,330,000 tonnes of N has been used annually on farms over the past five years.

Rural Development Regulation Fund

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what revenue funding is available from the rural development regulation fund; and if he will make a statement. [152303]

Mr. Morley: The England rural development programme (ERDP) sets out the funds available for people in farming, forestry and rural businesses under the rural development regulation. Details of planned expenditure under the ERDP were provided in the response to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) on 29 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 662–64W.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of the rural development regulation fund is spent on monitoring farmers; and if he will make a statement. [152302]

Mr. Morley: None.

Farm Diversification

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with local planning authorities regarding farm diversification applications; what guidance he gives to them; and if he will make a statement. [152304]

Mr. Morley: MAFF is consulted on all planning applications which would involve the loss of 20 hectares or more of high quality farmland. MAFF also comments on local development plans to ensure that they encourage farm diversification. The rural White Paper gave an undertaking that planning guidance would be updated to take account of the needs of the living, working countryside.

Veterinarians (Fish)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many registered veterinarians employed within his Department and its agencies *(a)* are engaged in aquaculture and *(b)* hold post-graduate qualifications in fish health; and where they are based. [151922]

Mr. Morley: CEFAS employs three registered veterinarians working in aquaculture, all based at the Weymouth laboratory, one of whom holds a post-graduate qualification in fish health.

HEALTH

Beef Imports

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact of BSE controls in *(a)* Spain and *(b)* Sweden on the safety of beef products imported into the UK. [144312]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* I am advised by the Food Standards Agency that assessments of the implementation of BSE controls in European Union member states are the responsibility of the European Commission. Its Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) carries out inspection missions to all member states to check on the implementation and effectiveness of EU BSE control measures. An additional programme of urgent FVO missions is currently under way. Spain was visited in the week beginning 11 December 2000 and Sweden in the week beginning 29 January 2001. The reports of these missions will be published on the EU Commission website, as is normal practice. In the light of the findings, the EU Commission will consider whether any further protective measures are necessary beyond those already in place or under consideration.

Tuberculosis

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the number of recorded cases of TB *(a)* in the Avon area and *(b)* nationally in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [146107]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* Notification rates of tuberculosis in England and Wales are monitored by the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS).

Data on the notifications of TB for Avon and nationally for the past 10 years are shown in the table.

Year	*Avon health authority*	*England and Wales Total*
1990	44	5,204
1991	48	5,436
1992	52	5,799
1993	53	5,921
1994	47	5,591
1995	54	5,608
1996	66	5,654
1997	61	5,859
1998	60	6,087
1999	60	6,144

The relatively low levels of disease in this country compared with other countries can be maintained only through active TB control. We have taken steps to strengthen the surveillance, prevention and control of TB, including drug-resistant TB, within the United Kingdom. Current provision includes:

specialised chest clinics in every area with doctors experienced in the treatment of TB;

the screening of immigrants from countries with high rates of TB either at ports of entry or locally when they arrive at their destination, or a combination of these;

the publication of guidance from the interdepartmental working group on tuberculosis with recommendations on how local control and prevention of TB (including in homeless people) can be enhanced and for prevention and control of the transmission of HIV-related and drug-resistant, including multiple drug-resistant, tuberculosis'.

In addition to the existing provisions, recent developments include:

the commencement of work on on-going enhanced surveillance of TB to improve monitoring;

the appointment of regional epidemiologists to help towards a more co-ordinated approach to surveillance (including TB);

the strengthening of surveillance of drug and multi-drug-resistant TB through a scheme co-ordinated by the PHLS;

the development—by the PHLS—and availability of more rapid diagnostic and drug susceptibility tests for TB, which can be used where there is a presence of risk factors which might predispose towards multi-drug-resistant TB;

the co-ordination of the PHLS's activities through the new tuberculosis programme;

in London, where TB cases are concentrated, after wide consultation, proposals are being taken forward to improve delivery of TB services.

Waiting Lists

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in East Sussex who had an operation on the NHS waited longer than one year for that operation in each year since 1992. [146699]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is provided in the table.

We are committed to reducing waiting times for out-patient appointments and in-patient treatment. We addressed this in the NHS Plan announced in July 2000 where we pledged that by the end of 2005 the maximum in-patient waiting time would be cut from 18 months now to six months, and the maximum out-patient waiting time would be cut from over six months now to three months. Provided we can recruit the extra staff, and the National Health Service makes the necessary reforms, our eventual objective is to reduce the maximum wait for any stage of treatment to three months by the end of 2008.

Number of people resident in East Sussex, Brighton and Hove HA and England who had waited for more than a year for treatment

	East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	*England*
1992–93	4,413	174,945
1993–94	4,763	180,411
1994–95	4,502	188,125
1995–96	5,571	156,257
1996–97	2,193	117,607
1997–98	3,901	189,371
1998–99	4,255	271,234
1999–2000	3,095	224,841

Note:
Figures for 1992–93 are the sum of Brighton, Eastbourne and Hastings district health authorities
Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics

Departmental Costs

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the total gross running costs to his Department of fees and disbursements paid to consultants in the last 12 months. [149152]

Ms Stuart: Total expenditure on external management consultants by the Department in the period February 2000 to January 2001 was £8,042,525.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what were his Department's total gross running costs for travel, including fares, subsistence, accommodation and any other expenses met from public funds but excluding all such costs for journeys and stays exclusively within the United Kingdom *(a)* since 1 May 1997 and *(b)* in the last 12 months. [149156]

Ms Stuart: The Department's gross running costs for travel and subsistence outside of the United Kingdom has been *(a)* since 1 May 1997, £2,189,074 and, *(b)* in the last 12 months, £569,085.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the total gross running costs to his Department of the NDPBs accountable through his Department in the last 12 months. [149157]

Ms Stuart: The Department estimates that the non-departmental public bodies will have received a total of £176.2 million for their gross running costs at the end of the current financial year 2000–01.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the total gross running cost to his Department in the last 12 months of *(a)* stationery and *(b)* printing and publishing. [149153]

Ms Stuart: The total gross running cost to the Department for January to December 2000 for *(a)* stationery was £1,664,367, and *(b)* printing was £3,721,082.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total gross running cost to his Department was in the last 12 months of alcoholic drinks. [149149]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the total gross running cost to his Department was in the last 12 months of entertaining by Ministers and officials. [149158]

Ms Stuart: The total gross running cost to the Department of the costs of entertaining by Ministers and officials from January to December 2000 was £84,634.

Cancer Care

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what resources were allocated for cancer care for *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99, *(d)* 1999–2000 and *(e)* 2000–01. [149746]

Yvette Cooper: The Department does not collect figures on the cost of national health service services in a way that enables an accurate figure to be calculated for the cost of a particular disease.

It is estimated that cancer services account for 6.3 per cent. (£1,479 million) of national health service hospital expenditure in England. This excludes cancer services not normally provided on an in-patient basis—for example, cancer screening, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and community palliative care services.

£10 million per year extra has been invested directly in breast cancer services since 1997; since 1998 £10 million extra per year has been invested in colorectal cancer services; since 1999 £10 million extra per year has been invested in lung cancer services; and from 1999 £10 million extra per year has been available for waiting times. These sums are included in health authority baselines.

The NHS cancer plan set out funding for cancer services from 2001–02. Some £450 million has been hypothecated within health authority allocations for cancer and coronary heart disease, of which £255 million is specifically to support achievement of the cancer targets and milestones.

There is also £25 million within central budgets, which brings the total funding to £280 million for cancer in 2001–02 as promised. This money will be used to support developments including: the extension of the breast screening programme; the roll out of the cancer services collaborative; the introduction of primary care group/trust lead clinicians through a shared initiative with Macmillan Cancer Relief; and a package of support and training for community nurses in the principles of palliative care provision.

Hospital Beds (Leicestershire)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to increase the number of hospital beds in Leicestershire. [149981]

Yvette Cooper: The NHS plan provides for a total of 7,000 extra beds nationally by 2004, including 2,100 on general and acute wards—the first increase of its kind for 30 years—and around 5,000 extra intermediate care beds. Within this expanded bedstock, there will also be a 30 per cent. increase in adult critical care beds over the next three years.

In 2000, Leicestershire health and social care community received an additional £2.7 million, specifically to help ease winter pressures. As a direct result, Leicestershire now has an additional 21 general and acute beds, 21 more intermediate care beds and four extra critical care beds compared with this time last year.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced in the House on 15 February that Leicestershire's strategic outline case for the reconfiguration of its acute services had been given the go-ahead. This £286 million capital scheme will provide a further 320 beds in Leicestershire by 2009, making a total of 2,545. This figure is in line with recommendations in the national beds inquiry.

Hospital Treatments (Leicestershire)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* in-patients and *(b)* out-patients were treated in Leicestershire in each year between 1992–93 and the most recent year for which figures are available. [149979]

Yvette Cooper: The tables show the total number of finished consultant in-patient episodes (FCEs) for patients treated in Leicestershire health authority for each year between 1992–93 and 1999–2000 and also the total

number of outpatient attendances and first outpatient attendances for patients in Leicestershire health authority for each of the same years.

Table 1

Year	*Total*
1992–93	161,824
1993–94	177,035
1994–95	191,032
1995–96	192,566
1996–97	200,726
1997–98	205,196
1998–99	225,384
1999–2000	233,159

Notes:
1. Figures for 1992–93 to 1996–97 are grossed for coverage.
2. 1997–98 to 1999–2000 figures are ungrossed.
An FCE is defined as a period of patient care under one consultant in one health care provider. The figures do not represent the number of patients, as one person may have several episodes within the year.
Source:
Hospital Episode Statistics (HES), Department of Health

Table 2

Year	*Total attendances*	*Total first attendances*
1992–93	584,426	138,136
1993–94	600,394	152,938
1994–95	616,252	164,717
1995–96	627,634	173,060
1996–97	662,124	185,073
1997–98	686,184	189,419
1998–99	690,263	195,052
1999–2000	684,304	192,227

Source:
Figures are taken from the annual Körner return KH09 'Consultant outpatient attendance activity'

"Outpatients and ward attenders for England", a copy of which is placed in the Library, contains information for individual NHS trusts along with summary tables for England. The returns are made on a financial year basis and the latest year for which data are available is 1999–2000.

Policy and Strategy Units

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when his strategic planning unit was established; which of its reports are placed in the public domain; how many departmental or non-departmental special advisers participate in its work; how many regular *(a)* non-departmental and *(b)* departmental staff participate in its work; and how many of these work for the unit on a full-time basis. [150372]

Ms Stuart: The strategy unit was established in February 2000. It works with Ministers, special advisers and officials to produce internal policy advice. It has six full-time staff, four of whom are permanent civil servants and two who were recruited externally. Special advisers participate in the work of the Department in line with the model contract for special advisers.

Christchurch Health Centre

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 50W, on Christchurch Health Centre, if there was a reserve placed upon the value of the long lease when it was offered at auction; and if he will give instructions for the lease to be sold without reserve. [151517]

Ms Stuart: A reserve price was placed on the property when it was offered for sale by auction.

Due to the nature of the property and the restrictive leasehold terms on which it is held, the professional advisers have recommended that terms should be negotiated for the release of the restrictions and then the property marketed by private treaty rather than by auction.

Children's Hospices

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the Government's commitment of an additional £50 million funding for palliative care by 2004 will include taxpayers' support to children's hospices. [150728]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* An additional £50 million of national health service money is to be invested in adult hospices and specialist palliative care services. Children's hospices will continue to have access to funding through the NHS. In addition, we will shortly announce funding specifically for children's palliative care services, including those provided by children's hospices. This funding will be available through the new opportunities fund.

vCJD-Infected Blood

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what his Department's policy is on informing individuals that they have received blood from a donor infected with vCJD; and what assessment he made of compliance with the Human Rights Act 1998 in formulating his policy; [151309]

(2) what assessment he has made of the dangers to others posed by individuals who have received blood from a donor infected with vCJD, of *(a)* donating blood, *(b)* donating organs and *(c)* undergoing operational procedures. [151310]

Mr. Denham: The Government's CJD clinical incident panel is currently addressing these issues taking into account the Human Rights Act 1998. The panel's guidelines should be made available for public consultation later this year.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the NHS has identified individuals who have received blood from a donor infected with vCJD. [151308]

Mr. Denham: The study which the National Blood Service and the CJD surveillance unit are carrying out has indicated that 23 people have received blood transfusions from donors who went on to develop variant CJD.

Gateshead and South Tyneside Health Authority

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many referrals from the Gateshead and South Tyneside health authority area have been refused by health trusts in the Northern Area in the last year for which figures are available. [151007]

Mr. Hutton: Figures on referrals that are returned by health trusts are not collected centrally. I understand, however, that a small percentage of referrals from the Gateshead and South Tyneside health authority area have been returned by the Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospitals national health service trust. The vast majority of these related to a planned service change in dermatology where, due to the anticipated cessation of a service level agreement on 31 March 2001, the trust would accept no further referrals after 1 January 2001. I further understand that, following discussions between the trust and the health authority, the trust is once again accepting referrals for this service.

Mobile Phones and Health

Mr. Lepper: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the work of the task force led by Sir William Stewart and announced on 8 December 2000 to carry out research into the effects of mobile phone technology on health. [151009]

Yvette Cooper: The new research programme announced on 8 December 2000 was launched at a scientific workshop in London on Friday 9 February 2001, when the first call for proposals was issued. The research will be undertaken under the direction of an independent programme management committee chaired by Sir William Stewart. Details of the membership of the new committee and the call for proposals can be found on the website www.doh.gov.uk/mobilephones

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research is being undertaken to assess the safety of radiation levels from telecommunication masts. [151628]

Yvette Cooper: The Stewart report on mobile phones and health provided a rigorous and comprehensive assessment of existing research and considered the possible effects on health of mobile phones and base stations (masts). The report concluded that the balance of evidence indicates that there is no general risk to health of people living near base stations on the basis that exposures are expected to be small fractions of guidelines. However, in view of the concerns expressed by residents near base stations and the indirect effect on people's health, the report made a number a recommendations aimed at improving the public consultation and the availability of information about the siting of base stations.

In its summary, the Stewart group commented that the upsurge of mobile phone technology should be matched by good quality research. We have responded by setting up a new programme. This joint Government and industry initiative was launched at a scientific workshop in London on Friday 9 February when the first call for proposals was issued.

The Department is also continuing to provide financial support for the World Health Organisation international electromagnetic fields (EMF) project which is comprehensively reviewing EMF effects, including those of radio waves.

In addition to research programmes, the Radiocommunications Agency is currently undertaking an audit of radio emissions from cellular base stations. The results from this audit will be made available on the RA website at "www.radio.gov.uk"

Organophosphates (Prions)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what evidence he has assessed in relation to the possible subverting of healthy prions in mammals to rogue prions by reaction with organophosphates in the presence of manganese; and what implications such a reaction would have for the use of insecticide lotions in school hair lice eradication programmes. [151236]

Yvette Cooper: The hypothesis that organophosphates (OPs) cause BSE in cattle by reacting with prions in normal mammalian cells to produce abnormal prions has been assessed by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee. This is an independent expert committee established by Government to advise on all matters relating to spongiform encephalopathies. The committee concluded that none of the available scientific evidence indicates that the BSE epidemic is related to the use of OPs. This hypothesis was not consistent with the available epidemiological evidence. For example it does not explain the high incidence of BSE in Great Britain alone when such compounds are used throughout the world. Nor does it account for the fact that the BSE epidemic in Northern Ireland lagged behind that in Great Britain by some 2 years, despite the fact that OPs were used earlier, and at higher concentrations, in Northern Ireland.

Since the evidence does not support the hypothesis, there are no current implications for hair lice treatments containing OPs. Such products are licensed by the Medicines Control Agency in the United Kingdom; it has to be satisfied regarding safety, quality and efficacy before such licenses are issued.

Registered Authorised Persons (Sterilisers) Panel

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the criteria for selecting members of the Registered Authorised Persons (Sterilisers) Panel. [R] [150677]

Mr. Denham: The Institute of Healthcare Engineering and Estate Management (IHEEM) has delegated authority, on behalf of the Department, to manage and direct all aspects of the professional duties of authorised persons (sterilisers) (AP(S)). This function is performed by the AP(S) Registration Panel on behalf of the IHEEM pursuant to its terms of reference. Criteria for selection are set out in the terms of reference. A copy has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what training is given to members of the Registered Authorised Persons (Sterilisers) panel; and if members are required to declare relevant interests. [R] [150678]

Mr. Denham: The members of the Authorised Persons (Sterilisers) (AP(S)) panel are expert professional persons recognised by their peers. They are nominated to become members by their respective national professional bodies, societies etc. The full details of panel membership are included in the terms of reference, which have been placed in the Library.

Members are expected to abide by their relevant professional bodies' codes of conduct, which include training and continuous professional development requirements as appropriate.

Under the current arrangements, the members are not required to declare relevant interests. However, with regard to the role of the AP(S) the code of conduct is very specific on issues of potential conflicts of interest. This is applied consistently to the members of the registration panel.

Harefield Hospital

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what account was taken of the provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998 in the selection of Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority to lead the public consultation into the proposed transfer of services and facilities from Harefield hospital, Middlesex to a new hospital in Paddington. [151260]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* At the meeting of the west London partnership forum on 23 May 2000, it was confirmed that the consultation process would be led by Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster health authority although all health authorities in west London would be active partners in the process. As with other public authorities, health authorities have a duty under the Human Rights Act 1998 not to act in any way which is incompatible with a right under the European Convention on Human Rights. It is for the health authorities concerned to ensure that they consider, and seek appropriate advice on, whether their acts or decisions are compatible.

National Service Framework for Children

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when a national service framework for children will be developed by the NHS. [151375]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 27 February 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on 17 February that a national service framework for children is now under development.

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which NHS trusts outside the 20 participating trusts in the modernising National Health Service hearing aid service project meet the service criteria for accessing the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency contract for digital hearing aids; and what steps his Department is taking to provide funding for equipment and staff training to enable more trusts to meet the service criteria. [151761]

Mr. Hutton: Pending the outcome of the modernising national health service hearing aid services project, other hospitals with the appropriate staff, training, equipment and experience are able to access the NHS purchasing and supply agency contract for digital hearing aids.

The Department will spend £10.75 million over the two years 2000–01 and 2001–02, and if successful, a further £25 million to roll out the project to the rest of England.

Elderly and Disabled (Care)

Mr. Best: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will announce a detailed definition of nursing care for the purpose of funding care for the elderly and disabled. [151905]

Mr. Hutton: In the Health and Social Care Bill, currently before Parliament, nursing care which cannot be provided by local councils is defined as care provided by a registered nurse, and involving either the provision of care or the planning, supervision or delegation of the provision of care.

The Department is currently developing a tool to evaluate people's nursing care needs as part of work on the single health and social care assessment. National health service staff will be trained in the use of the tool in order to ensure that people receive the care they need from registered nurses, arranged through the NHS. Detailed guidance will be issued to the NHS in May.

Appointments (Electronic Booking)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the IT contract for an electronic booking system for appointments will be implemented on time. [151842]

Ms Stuart: The project timetable will achieve the objectives in this area set out in the NHS plan, published in July 2000.

Drug Rehabilitation

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of expenditure on drug rehabilitation work in *(a)* Somerset and *(b)* England and Wales for each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [151582]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 01 March 2001]:* The information requested is not collected centrally. Information from drug action team template returns indicate that £151.8 million was spent on drug treatment in England in 1999–2000 by all agencies, although this is likely to be an underestimate due to incomplete data, as some drug action teams were unable to provide data either in time or in the format required. Somerset health authority received a drug misuse special allocation of £405,000 in 1999–2000.

Spending Review 2000 provides for a major gearing up of adult and young people's treatment services, and will raise total expenditure on treatment to over £400 million in 2003–04. Although its final remit is yet to be finally decided, the proposed National Treatment Agency is likely to oversee performance management and development of local agencies, including approval of the treatment plans of drug action teams.

Drug Addicts (Somerset)

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his estimate is of the number of *(a)* heroin users and *(b)* registered heroin addicts in (i) Yeovil constituency, (ii) South Somerset and (iii) Somerset in each of the last 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [151581]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* Information is not available in the form requested.

Information on the number of addicts in the Avon and Somerset police area notified by doctors to the Home Office as addicted to heroin during the years 1989 to 1996 is given in table 1. The index was closed from April 1997.

The regional drug misuse databases (RDMDs), which report to the Department of Health, are now the main source of information on persons presenting to drug treatment services with a drug misuse problem. The number of users presenting to drug misuse agencies (including both doctors and other agencies) in the Avon and Somerset health authority areas with heroin as their main drug of misuse in each of the six-month periods ending 30 September 1996 to 31 March 2000 is given in table 2.

The two sources of information are not directly comparable.

Table 1: Number of new drug addicts notified and number of addicts renotified to the Home Office as addicted to heroin during the year by police force area of addict, Avon and Somerset, 1989 to 1996

Year	Number of new drug addicts	Number of renotified drug addicts	Total
1989	84	153	237
1990	122	149	271
1991	131	141	272
1992	210	155	365
1993	336	195	531
1994	514	359	873
1995	583	544	1,127
1996	745	688	1,433

Source:
Statistics of drug addicts notified to the Home Office, United Kingdom, 1996 Area Tables (Tables A5 and A6)

Table 2: Number of users presenting for treatment at drug misuse agencies in Avon and Somerset with heroin as their main drug of misuse during the six-month periods ending 30 September 1996 to 31 March 2000

Six-month period ending	Avon	Somerset	Total
September 1996	720	120	840
March 1997	747	142	889
September 1997	671	96	767
March 1998	624	99	723
September 1998	711	154	865
March 1999	997	79	1,076
September 1999	943	63	1,006
March 2000	1,118	73	1,191

Source:
Statistics from the regional drug misuse databases, Department of Health

Tackling drug misuse is a national priority for the NHS and its partners. Ambitious targets have been set and fully backed with additional new resources to prevent drug misuse and to enable those with drug problems to overcome them. Heroin is targeted in our anti-drugs strategy as one of the drugs which causes the most harm.

Social Services (East Sussex)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in East Sussex are not in receipt of care from social services following assessment, despite being entitled to such care; and if he will make a statement. [151785]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available centrally.

NHS Care (Private Hospitals)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the volume of health care being purchased by the NHS from private hospitals broken down by health district and health specialism. [151875]

Ms Stuart: The concordat signed between the National Health Service and the Independent Healthcare Association sets out a framework by which the NHS is best able to utilise the resources of the private, independent and voluntary healthcare sector locally to deliver better services for patients. That framework provides for local agreement in planning how and when to make use of these independent sector facilities and for monitoring the arrangements.

Any patient treated making use of the private or voluntary sector under the terms of the concordat remains an NHS patient and their treatment remains NHS treatment. Such patients remain the responsibility of the NHS.

Organisation-specific and condition-specific data are not collected centrally. However, the total amount of NHS funds spent on the provision of hospital and community services for NHS patients treated outside the NHS for the years 1996–97 to 1998–99 are as follows:

Year	Total (£ billion)	Percentage of NHS expenditure on hospital and community services
1998–99	1.25	4.8
1997–98	1.08	4.6
1996–97	0.87	3.8

Source:
Common Information Core, Outturn 1996–97, 1997–98 and 1998–99

Teenage Pregnancies

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the top decile of wards by rate of teenage pregnancy, giving the rate in each case. [151920]

Yvette Cooper: Information is collected nationally about numbers of teenage pregnancies by ward. However, it is not possible to calculate ward rates as denominators for the relevant population are not available

Pressure Sores

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment the National Institute for Clinical Excellence have made of the savings that could be made by more effective management of pressure sores; [R] [152310]

(2) if he has asked NICE to consider targets for reducing pressure sores as part of its current study. [R] [152311]

Mr. Denham: The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has not yet published a guideline on pressure ulcers, but it is intending to do so. We have not asked NICE to set targets for the national health service, but it will develop methods of clinical audit for the review of patient care.

Intercountry Adoption

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to introduce regulations under the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999. [152312]

Mr. Hutton: Section 13 of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999, in so far as it inserts a new subsection (3A) after subsection (3) of section 72 of the Adoption Act 1976, came into force on 31 January 2000. This makes it clear that only local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies approved by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State may carry out an assessment of the suitability of an individual to be an adoptive parent.

Section 14 of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999 makes it a criminal offence for a person habitually resident in the British Islands to bring to the United Kingdom for the purpose of adoption a child who is habitually resident outside those islands, unless they comply with requirements to be prescribed by regulations. We intend to implement section 14 in April, and will be laying regulations before the House shortly.

We are continuing to develop regulations under the rest of the Act and will be consulting on these as soon as possible. We will lay the regulations in time to meet our commitment to ratify the 1993 Hague convention on the protection of children and co-operation in respect of intercountry adoption by 1 January 2002.

Drug Tariff

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what target times have been set for *(a)* new and *(b)* similar products to be given approval for placement on the drug tariff; [R] [152308]

(2) what the waiting time is for *(a)* new and *(b)* similar products to be given approval for placement on the drug tariff. [R] [152309]

Ms Stuart: Applications for listing of appliances in part IX of the drug tariff take different lengths of time to consider depending on the complexity of any issues raised. Processing times are around a month in very simple cases but can be over a year in the more difficult cases. Types of product which are new to part IX tend to raise more complex issues and hence do take longer, but this is not invariably the case. Target times have not been set, but our constant aim is to deal with applications in the minimum time consistent with full consideration.

Food Labelling

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which imported products are required to be labelled with the country of origin; and if he will make a statement. [152329]

Ms Stuart: United Kingdom and European Union law requires country of origin labelling on certain specified foods and on all foods in cases where its omission might mislead consumers as to the true origin of the food. We are actively pressing for these rules to be amended to require compulsory origin labelling on a wider range of foods, particularly meat products.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will ensure that food imported into the United Kingdom is labelled so as to indicate the country of origin. [151690]

Ms Stuart: Origin labelling rules are harmonised at European level. We are actively pressing for these rules to be amended to require compulsory origin labelling on a wider range of foods, particularly meat products, and for clear rules on the use of terms like "produce of".

Visually Impaired People (Eastbourne)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proportion of the Government's additional funding allocated for community equipment services will be available for low vision equipment in Eastbourne; and what plans he has to appoint a visually impaired representative on the advisory group that will issue guidance to the NHS and Social Services. [152165]

Mr. Hutton: Additional funding for community equipment services has been included in allocations to health authorities 2001–02, with provision also made in the personal social services settlement. It is for health authorities and local councils to determine local funding priorities. The Royal National Institute for the Blind has a representative on the community equipment services external reference group, which has been advising on the planned guidance.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to answer the question of 15 January, [Ref. 146107] tabled by the hon. Member for Northavon on TB in Avon. [151924]

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member's question was answered today, *Official Report*, column 107-08W.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 6 March 2001

HOME DEPARTMENT

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the representations to him from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mr. Mohammed Rafiq. [152452]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 1 March.

Immigration Advisers

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress he has made in establishing the scheme of regulation for immigration advisers and service providers; and if he will make a statement. [152674]

Mrs. Roche: The Office of The Immigration Services Commissioner published a Code of Standards, Guidance to Advisers on Competencies, The Commissioner's Rules and a Complaints Scheme in October 2000. An office has been established at 6th floor, Fleetbank House, 2–6 Salisbury Square, London EC4Y 8JX. Application packs for registration and exemption have also been sent to advisers and organisations known to the Commissioner's office. The Commissioner is about to start a publicity campaign designed to ensure that those who are required to make an application to him know of the need to do so.

I am pleased to announce that, following discussion with the Commissioner, I propose to bring the remaining provisions of Part V of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 into force on 30 April 2001.

The Commissioner has, however, made representations to me about a large number of voluntary organisations which provide immigration advice and services and are committed to applying for the Community Legal Services Quality Mark. Organisations which have gained this Quality Mark are regarded as having met some of the Immigration Services Commissioner's requirements as set out in the Code of Standards. The Government have no wish to impose unnecessary regulatory demands on voluntary organisations which are already committed to a recognised quality programme and we propose to make an order under section 84(4)(d) of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. As a result of this order, voluntary bodies which commit themselves to the Community Legal Services Quality Mark before 30 April 2001 will not breach the general prohibition on providing immigration advice or services which will come into force on that date. The protection for qualifying voluntary bodies will cease to have effect on 31 January 2002. The understanding will be that, by this date, the voluntary bodies will have applied to the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner for exemption from the regulatory scheme and that successful applicants will be included in the Commissioner's list of exemptions.

Other candidates for inclusion in a section 84(4)(d) order remain under consideration.

Training Police

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what average sum of money is allocated per serving police officer for training within the Metropolitan police force in the current financial year. [151614]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that as training is provided on the basis of need, it is not possible to provide an average sum of money allocated per serving officer for training. The Metropolitan police service has allocated £99.5 million for training both police officers and civilian staff for the current year.

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what training police staff are required to undertake prior to being involved in child abuse inquiries. [151615]

Mr. Charles Clarke: All child abuse inquiries are undertaken by specially trained officers. Training in each force is a matter for the chief officer concerned but would generally entail a minimum of five days of joint training with social workers.

Football-related Offences

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many football-related offences there were in each of the last six years. [151626]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The data requested are not available. However, information on the number of arrests in connection with football-related offences for the last six seasons is set out in the table:

Data on football-related arrests between seasons 1994–95 and 2000–01[1]

Season/year	*Total arrests*
2000–01[2]	1,834
1999–2000	3,137
1998–99	3,341
1997–98	3,307
1996–97	3,577
1995–96	3,441
1994–95	3,850

[1] Provided by the National Criminal Intelligence Service and the Football Banning Orders Authority
[2] As at 26 February 2001

Special Constables

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many special constables applied *(a)* successfully and *(b)* unsuccessfully to become full-time police officers in the last 12 months for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [151757]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not collected centrally. However, my hon. Friend may like to know that some Home Office funded research completed

in May 2000 on wastage in the special constabulary in five forces found that of the 293 former specials questioned, 18.8 per cent. (55 people) had left the Specials in order to join the regular force.

Suicide (Prisons)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many self-inflicted deaths there were in each year since 1992 in *(a)* all prisons, *(b)* young offender institutions, *(c)* male prisons and *(d)* female prisons; and if he will make a statement. [151747]

Mr. Boateng: The figures requested are given in the table. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced on 5 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 441W, a suicide prevention strategy to be implemented progressively from April 2001. The strategy will invest most resources where the risks are highest and aim for year on year reductions in prisoner suicide and self-harm.

Self-inflicted deaths in Her Majesty's Prison establishments in England and Wales, by establishment type, 1992–2001[1]

Year	*Total*
(a) All prisons	
1992	41
1993	47
1994	62
1995	59
1996	64
1997	68
1998	82
1999	91
2000	81
2001	'10
Total	'605
(b) Young offender institutions	
1992	4
1993	1
1994	1
1995	2
1996	7
1997	7
1998	2
1999	8
2000	6
2001	'2
Total	'40
(c) Male prisons	
1992	35
1993	45
1994	60
1995	55
1996	55
1997	58
1998	67
1999	78
2000	67
2001	'8
Total	'538
(d) Female prisons	
1992	2
1993	1
1994	1
1995	2
1996	2
1997	3
1998	3
1999	5
2000	8
2001	'0
Total	'27

[1] As at 27 February 2001

Office of Surveillance Commissioners

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what system is in place to ensure democratic accountability of the Office of Surveillance Commissioners. [152122]

Mr. Straw: The Chief Surveillance Commissioner appointed under the Police Act 1997 has a statutory responsibility to make an annual report to the Prime Minister on the exercise of his functions under the 1997 Act, and since 25 September 2000, of his additional functions as described in section 62 of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA). This report must be laid before Parliament. A copy of the Chief Surveillance Commissioner's most recent report is available in the Library. (Police Act 1997 Chapter 50 Report of the Chief Surveillance Commissioner for 1999–2000—Cm 4816).

The responsibility for appointing the Chief Surveillance Commissioner rests with the Prime Minister who is also responsible for appointing such Surveillance Commissioners and Assistant Surveillance Commissioners as he thinks fit.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the annual budget is of the Office of Surveillance Commissioners. [152124]

Mr. Straw: The Office of Surveillance Commissioners (OSC) was allocated £405,000 for the financial year 2000–01. The regional offices of the OSC were allocated £84,000 by the Northern Ireland Office and £41,000 by the Scottish Executive for the year 2000–01.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have been employed by the Office of Surveillance Commissioners in each year since its inception. [152123]

Mr. Straw: The Office of Surveillance Commissioners was set up in 1998. It currently has four support staff in the Central Office in London, a part-time member of staff in Northern Ireland, and a part-time member of staff in Scotland. The staff joined between November 1998 and February 1999.

A Chief Surveillance Commissioner was appointed in July 1998. He is supported by six part-time Surveillance Commissioners appointed in November 1998. One Commissioner resigned in April 2000 and was replaced in February 2001.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the *(a)* aims and *(b)* work programme are of the Office of Surveillance Commissioners. [152125]

Mr. Straw: The aims and present work programme of the Office of Surveillance Commissioners (OSC) are twofold:

First, for the Chief Commissioner to keep under review the performance of functions under Part III of the Police Act 1997 and, so far as they are not required to be kept under review by the Interception of Communications Commissioner, the Intelligence Services Commissioner or the Investigatory Powers Commissioners for Northern Ireland, the exercise and performance, by persons on whom they are conferred or imposed, of the powers and duties conferred or imposed by Part II of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA), and the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Act 2000 (RIP(S)).

Secondly, for the Surveillance Commissioners to carry out their statutory functions of (a) scrutinising and considering whether to give their prior approval to decisions to grant or renew grants of authorisations for property interference and intrusive surveillance and (b) scrutinising decisions to cancel authorisation for property interference and intrusive surveillance.

The work programme is currently being reviewed to incorporate oversight of directed surveillance and the use of covert human intelligence sources by the public authorities listed in Schedule 1 to RIPA and section 8 of RIP(S). A team of Assistant Commissioners and inspectors is to be recruited to assist with this.

Elections (Postponement)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps would need to be taken to postpone the elections scheduled for 3 May; and when an announcement would be made to the House. [152609]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: We have no current plans to postpone the local elections scheduled for 3 May. To do so would require changes to the current law.

Departmental Policies (Stroud)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Stroud constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152401]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. 'Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000' and 'Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000' can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Stroud constituency or the immediate locality:

Two Intervention Schemes and two Bail Supervision Schemes are being funded by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) in Gloucestershire that includes coverage of Stroud.

Intervention Schemes

(a) Gloucestershire Mentoring Scheme.

This is a mentoring project which is targeting 14–16 year olds causing concern to partner agencies by way of offending behaviour and disaffection with the education system. The objectives include supporting and re-focusing the young people through the provision of adult mentors and to re-engage these young people in education and training through intervention.

The YJB contribution is approximately £76,000 (September 1999 to March 2002).

(b) Developing Skills Accredited Community Service (Education, Training and Employment)

This project provides support to parents of young people who are offending so that they may help their child reduce offending.

The YJB contribution is approximately £357,000 (September 1999 to March 2002).

Two Bail Support Schemes

(a) South Gloucestershire Bail Supervision and Support Scheme

The main objectives of the project are to reduce the incidence of custodial/secure remands and/or to reduce to a minimum the length of time young people spend on such remands.

The YJB contribution is approximately £59,000 (April 1999 to March 2002).

(b) Gloucestershire Secure in the Community Scheme

This project aims to identify young people who meet the criteria for remand to secure accommodation. Then to provide robust and acceptable alternatives to Magistrates that will ensure that these young people remain in the community in appropriately supervised accommodation.

The YJB contribution is approximately £123,000 (April 1999 to March 2002).

Youth Offending Teams (YOT)

In conjunction with Police and Courts, Gloucestershire YOT, which includes Stroud, is reducing the time from arrest to sentence for all Persistent Young Offenders.

Having now established the interagency YOT model, developments in 2000 have established the beginnings of a working model between the YOT and local District Crime and Disorder strategies. Using the Data Protection legislation, information is shared on Young Offenders and local Peer Group with a view to jointly reduce local crime and target key indicators to prevent the development of criminal behaviour in younger children subject to delinquent influences.

The application of the Final Warning Scheme is demonstrating a 10 per cent. reduction so far in the number of repeat offences by young people. This compares with the previous application of re-offending when looking at the use of Cautions in 1998–9.

With the application of Reparation Orders and Action Plan Orders, written evidence from victims and local commercial sector indicates improved satisfaction.

The re-organisation of the local Attendance Centre by the YOT has reduced re-offending rates from 73 per cent. in 1999 to 51 per cent. by November 2000.

Gloucestershire YOT is assisting local police in the preparation, and in some cases the prevention, of Anti Social Behaviour Orders. This is achieved by closer liaison and examination of public complaints into anti-social behaviour by young people. A joint plan of prevention and enforcement is then initiated, which via the police is fed back to the general public.

Gloucestershire YOT has commissioned the support of Parent Line Plus to provide training for the parents of teenage offenders. We are targeting up to 100 parents. There is growing evidence of satisfaction both by the courts and parents as a result of this initiative.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Stroud to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000;

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website. (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

Masonic Membership

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he has decided to make registration of Masonic membership compulsory for police officers; and if he will make a statement. [152451]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will make a decision when he has completed his consideration of certain issues raised during consultation with the police service. In particular he wishes to give further consideration to whether compulsory registration would be compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make extra funds available to the police in order to meet the extra demand on police resources following the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [152612]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government are concerned to ensure that all relevant bodies who face additional work as a result of undertaking their responsibilities to cope with the outbreak of foot and mouth disease are able to discharge those responsibilities comprehensively. We will be keeping under review all aspects of this, including funding.

Departmental Policies (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Warrington, North constituency, the effects on Warrington, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152319]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, "Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000", is available in the Library. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Warrington, North constituency or the immediate locality:

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

One scheme, "Warrington Action Toward Community Harmony", was awarded approximately £32,000 under the first round of the CCTV Initiative, for a mobile scheme covering areas of Warrington, North and Warrington, South. The system is a mobile unmarked vehicle that will be used to address a variety of problems, including; car park or neighbourhood hotspots for car crime, for use in surveillance operations where there is suspected drug dealing and to record incidents of anti-social behaviour.

There is one Intervention Scheme and one Bail Supervision Scheme being funded by the Youth Justice Board (YJB) within the Warrington area.

Intervention schemes

(a) Facing Up (Restorative Justice Project)

The project will use three different but interlinked approaches to reducing offending:

1. Enabling young offenders to face up to the consequences of their behaviour by making amends to their victims
2. Involving young peoples' supporters in making plans to reduce their offending behaviour
3. Providing additional support and supervision to the most vulnerable young offenders

The YJB contribution is approximately £203,000 (September 1999 to March 2002).

Bail Support Scheme

The bail placement support project provides accommodation, care, support and guidance to young people who have been remanded by the courts in connection with criminal offences. The projects main objective is to reduce the incidence of custodial remands for 10 to 17-year-olds.

The YJB contribution is approximately £110,000 (April 1999 to March 2002).

Youth Offending Teams (YOT)

The following information is taken from Halton and Warrington's Youth Offending Team Youth Justice Plan for April 2001–02.

The YOT is now fully staffed, including representatives from Education, Health, Police, Probation and Social Services.

Priority developments include Connexions, Teenage conception and health issues, substance misuse, youth nuisance and fear of crime. The time from arrest to sentence for persistent young offenders in the Warrington Youth Court averages 89 days. In Halton, the average is 127 days. The YOT manager is represented on the Cheshire Youth Justice working group which is especially addressing this issue, and YOT pre-sentence reports for persistent young offenders are prepared within 10 days in order to speed up the process.

A survey conducted in both Halton and Warrington courts sought views on the quality of pre-sentence reports being submitted. In all cases, magistrates stated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall quality of the reports. In all but two of the reports, they were described as clear and concise in all aspects, with risk assessments and victim impact particularly well covered.

Early results from the ASSET assessment process show improved scores in relation to education, cognitive skills, attitudes and motivation.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Warrington, North to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

Racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

The asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website. (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

Terrorist Organisations

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 28 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 708–09W, on terrorist organisations, which of the organisations listed is primarily active *(a)* against a democratically elected Government, *(b)* to achieve secession from a UN member state and *(c)* in resisting illegal occupation by a foreign power; if he will list his criteria for selecting the organisations listed; and if he will indicate for each organisation which of these criteria are met. [152630]

Mr. Straw: I refer my hon. Friend to the letter and accompanying paper which I sent to all Parliamentary colleagues on 28 February at the same time as I announced that a draft Order had been laid listing organisations intended for addition to Schedule 2 of the Terrorism Act 2000. Copies of this letter and paper were also placed in the Vote office and in the Library.

Sex Offenders

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce public notification of sex offenders being released into the community. [151871]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have no plans to introduce measures which would require the police automatically to inform the public of the identities and addresses of sex offenders. We do not believe that this would enhance our ability to protect children. The police already have powers to inform any individual or organisation about the presence of a dangerous person in the vicinity, if they believe it would be in the interests of the public to do so.

We have, however, introduced a package of measures to improve public protection in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2001. Those measures build upon arrangements which were already in place and include, among other matters, a specific duty on the police and the probation service to establish local arrangements for assessing and managing the risks posed by sexual and violent offenders and powers to issue guidance to those agencies about the information which they should publish about the arrangements.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ensure the availability and use of sex offender treatment programmes for offenders convicted of offences relating to the viewing and distributing of child pornography including via the internet; and if he will make a statement. [151622]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the Crime Reduction Programme, the Probation Service in England and Wales has been developing three programmes for sex offenders based on evidence of what is known to be effective (the What Works Initiative). The three sex offender programmes will be developed to the standard set by the Joint Prison and Probation Accreditation Panel. Once accredited, they will be rolled out across the Probation Service nationally. The quality of delivery will be audited by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation on behalf of the Accreditation Panel. Implementation of the first programmes to be accredited will begin this summer.

The three sex offender programmes aim to reduce the risk of re-offending by men who have committed any type of sexual offence such as rape, child abuse, viewing and distributing child pornography including via the internet. The programmes take between nine months and two years to complete and accept men on Probation Orders and post-custodial licences, providing the licence is sufficiently long to enable the programme to be completed.

In addition, the Prison Service Sex Offender Treatment Programme is available to men serving a prison sentence for a sexual offence or any offence with a sexual element. Similar treatment methods are used in both the prison and community programmes.

Police Manpower

Paddy Ashdown: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* police officers, *(b)* civilians and *(c)* special constables were available to each police force in England and Wales for each quarter from 1992 to 2001; and if he will make a statement. [150417]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 15 February 2001]:* Information on police strength is collected twice a year (March and September). Copies of tables showing police officer and civilian strength on a force by force basis for six monthly intervals from March 1992 to September 2000 will be placed in the Library.

Officer numbers are for those available to each force for normal duty. Secondments to central and other duties are excluded.

Statistics of the strength of the Special Constabulary have only been collected twice yearly since 1995. Before 1995, figures were collected annually. The figures for 1992 and 1993 were compiled at the end of the calendar year, the next collection was at the end of the 1994–95 financial year in March 1995. Copies of tables showing Special Constable strength from December 1992 to September 2000 will be placed in the Library.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the IT projects currently undertaken in his Department; and if he will state the *(a)* expected completion date and *(b)* cost of each project. [151515]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* I refer my right hon. Friend to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*,

column 165W. The reply contained a list, in table format, of the current major Information Technology (IT) projects within my Department and its Agencies (excluding non-departmental public bodies). This has been placed in the Library.

Further information on the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) casework programme was given in a parliamentary reply to my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) on 6 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 497W.

The following provides an update on the details contained in the list on the Asylum Support project. The National Asylum Support Service (NASS) is developing the Asylum Support IT by taking a step by step approach, building on the minimal "day one" system implemented in time for the start of the National Asylum Support Service on 4 April 2000. One possible area for enhancement is in the use of software to develop document scanning and workflow techniques allowing case data to be passed electronically.

Police Houses

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police houses were sold in the periods *(a)* 1 May 1994 to 30 April 1995, *(b)* 1 May 1995 to 30 April 1996, *(c)* 1 May 1996 to 30 April 1997, *(d)* 1 May 1997 to 30 April 1998, *(e)* 1 May 1998 to 30 April 1999, *(f)* 1 May 1999 to 30 April 2000 and *(g)* since 1 May 2000, (i) in England and Wales, (ii) by Surrey police force, (iii) by Kent county constabulary, (iv) by Thames Valley police force, (v) by Hertfordshire constabulary, (vi) by Essex police force, (vii) by Hampshire constabulary and (viii) by Sussex police force. [151116]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested in respect of the individual police forces has been supplied by those forces. It is as follows:

Police force	*1 May 1994 to 30 April 1995*	*1 May 1995 to 30 April 1996*	*1 May 1996 to 30 April 1997*	*1 May 1997 to 30 April 1998*	*1 May 1998 to 30 April 1999*	*1 May 1999 to 30 April 2000*	*Since 1 May 2000*[1]
Essex	1	2	4	41	19	34	31
Hampshire	55	17	28	36	14	33	8
Hertfordshire	15	11	0	0	106	141	34
Kent	35	61	64	44	25	32	13
Surrey	0	0	42	34	30	16	12
Sussex	0	93	151	97	35	56	15
Thames Valley	0	94	127	19	46	33	21

[1] As at 16 February 2001

Information relating to the other forces in England and Wales is currently being obtained from them. I shall write to my hon. Friend when the information is available.

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review his policy on the sale of police housing. [151121]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The disposal or redevelopment of police dwellings is a matter for Police Authorities. Individual Authorities take various factors into account when developing policies in this area. These include the age and suitability of the buildings forming part of the police estate. And, following its recent launch, the Government's Starter Homes Initiative which aims to help 10,000 key workers including police officers buy their own homes in urban and rural areas where high prices would otherwise prevent them from living in or near the community they serve.

Prison Education

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will give the *(a)* education service budget and *(b)* the budget for education materials for (1) Ford, (2) Altcourse, (3) Brixton, (4) Wormwood Scrubs and (5) Walton prisons expressed as (i) total figures and (ii) expenditure per head for each year from 1997 to 2001. [151928]

Mr. Boateng *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The information available is set out in the table and how the spend on *(a)* education and library service providers and *(b)* the purchase of education materials for the years 1997–98 to 1999–2000 and forecast spend for 2000–01. The figures for 1999–2000 and 2000–01 are on a different accounting basis to earlier years in that they do not include Value Added Tax refunds. The information for Altcourse is only available for the 2000 calendar year.

The expenditure per head has been calculated by dividing the costs by the average annual population but because not all prisoners are engaged in education, particularly in the four local prisons which hold large numbers of prisoners on remand, this will not give a realistic indication of the average education spend per prisoner.

	[1]1997–98	*[1]1998–99*	*[1]1999–2000*	*[2]2000–01*
Ford				
Education and library services (£)	248,350	237,268	247,731	236,296
Education materials (£)	26,887	22,805	27,827	11,397
Average population	448	422	371	378
Average cost of services per head (£)	554	562	668	625
Average cost of materials per head (£)	60	54	75	30
Brixton				
Education and library services (£)	410,479	297,719	491,919	396,850
Education materials (£)	28,804	14,861	10,233	11,143
Average population	598	659	785	776

	[1]1997–98	[1]1998–99	[1]1999–2000	[2]2000–01
Average cost of services per head (£)	686	452	627	511
Average cost of materials per head (£)	48	23	13	14
Liverpool (Walton)				
Education and library services (£)	310,118	341,823	416,214	423,867
Education materials (£)	22,364	24,047	36,242	65,500
Average population	1,460	1,447	1,420	1,252
Average cost of services per head (£)	212	236	293	339
Average cost of materials per head (£)	15	17	26	52
Wormwood Scrubs				
Education and library services (£)	274,137	264,243	353,023	425,994
Education materials (£)	15,393	16,709	26,552	18,547
Average population	1,333	1,122	725	794
Average cost of services per head (£)	206	236	487	537
Average cost of materials per head (£)	12	15	37	23

[1] Spend
[2] Forecast
Note:
1999–2000 and 2000–01 services spend includes VAT payments but not refunds.

Altcourse

	£
Main education contract	453,000
Materials budget	28,000
Librarians	46,000
Books and other publications	20,000
Security supervision	48,700
Total	[1]595,700

[1] For the period 1 January to 31 December 2000. There were no VAT payments and no refunds.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Mongolia

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations her Department has received from Mongolia for assistance arising from the impact of severe winter conditions; what response has been made; and if she will make a statement. [152265]

Mr. Mullin: Mongolia has been hit by two consecutive winter disasters or 'dzuds' (1999–2000 and 2000–01) caused by severe and widespread drought in the summer, unusually cold temperatures in the autumn and heavy snow fall in winter. These conditions are seriously affecting both animal and human welfare. Last year's dzud affected 450,000 herders and killed approximately three million livestock. Compared with the same period last year the current situation is much more severe in terms of the impact of the disaster on people and livestock and on the national capacity to respond. Over 300,000 herders are affected in 20 out of 21 provinces and 600,000 livestock have already died.

The Government of Mongolia have been active in disaster preparedness and relief assistance in dzud affected areas. However the two consecutive dzud have overstretched national capacity. The Government have therefore requested international relief assistance following a needs assessment, in which my Department was involved. An appeal for $11.8 million has been launched by the Government of Mongolia through the United Nations.

The appeal aims to target vulnerable groups in the most severely affected provinces and seeks to fulfil unmet relief needs. It focuses on building the disaster management of the Mongolian State Emergency Commission and other relevant national partners to enhance preparedness and future response.

We have offered US $1 million for the provision of emergency relief under the framework of the UN appeal to be channelled through humanitarian agencies working in Mongolia.

Tuberculosis

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the outcome of the WHO Bellagio meeting on tuberculosis and the launch of a global TB drug facility. [152188]

Mr. Mullin: The first meeting of the co-ordinating board of the Stop TB Partnership took place in Bellagio, Italy from 21–22 February. There was wide representation, including from high burden countries.

The meeting was a success and reached agreement on the mission, priorities and mechanisms for governance for STOP TB and the Global TB Drug Facility (GDF). The GDF will be formally launched on World TB Day (24 March 2001). The outcome of the meeting lays the foundation to accelerate the collective and co-ordinated response to the Amsterdam Declaration, to build on the commitment of existing partners and encourage others to join this global movement to stop TB.

Aid Projects

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid projects were supported by her Department, and what financial help has been given to, *(a)* India, *(b)* Pakistan, *(c)* Sri Lanka and *(d)* Kenya, during each of the last three years. [151869]

Mr. Mullin: We have given Kenya debt relief and financed projects targeted on poverty reduction, in natural resources; rural and urban development; private sector and trade development; economic governance including public sector and law reform, and the fight against corruption; political empowerment and legal rights; education; health and population; and for relief of the

country's worst drought in 40 years. We have also part-financed the development of Kenya's Poverty Reduction Strategy, and given budgetary assistance in support of the reform programme agreed with the World bank and the IMF.

Our assistance to India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Kenya over the last three years has been:

£ million

	1997–98	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
India	81.0	90.0	106.0
Pakistan	27.9	24.3	22.7
Sri Lanka	4.8	6.0	6.1
Kenya	29.4	33.1	27.1

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Retail Petrol Industry

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on recent changes in the degree of competition *(a)* nationally and *(b)* locally in the retail petrol industry. [152102]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition legislation, the Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for monitoring markets and considering allegations of anti-competitive behaviour.

The Director General has investigated the petrol retail industry a number of times in recent years and has found it to be competitive. He has said that he will continue to monitor this market very closely.

NERC Studentships

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proportion of NERC studentship awards went to *(a)* the less prosperous UK regions, *(b)* North-East England, *(c)* North-West England, *(d)* East Kent, *(e)* Humberside and *(f)* South West England. [151912]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The information is as follows:

	Percentage
North-East England	21
North-West England	17
Humberside	0
East Kent	0
South West England	15

This includes PhDs, MSc and MRes.

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how NERC have met the Government's requirements for transparent decision making in awarding its recent round of studentships. [151908]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The vast majority of our students are allocated via an algorithm, which takes into account research funding (through grants, staff and fellowships) provided by NERC to all university departments with an RAE (research assessment exercise) score of 3 and above. We have been using essentially the same algorithm for six years and it is therefore well known to the departments. Not only do we provide the heads of department with a letter each year outlining the algorithm and any minor changes that have taken place since the previous year, but we publish it on the internet. During the summer months we provide the departments with the information that will be used to generate their allocation. They are asked to check that they agree with the information. We also allow them to challenge any decisions once they have been publicised.

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many of NERC's recent awards of studentships were awarded for work on contamination and land remediation. [151914]

Mr. Alan Johnson: It is for the universities to decide in what areas the students conduct their research.

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proportion of MSc studentships awarded by NERC go to new universities. [151913]

Mr. Alan Johnson: There are no NERC MSc studentships at "new" universities.

Miners' Compensation (Erewash)

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many former miners in Erewash have *(a)* claimed and *(b)* received payments in compensation for (i) chronic bronchitis and emphysema and (ii) vibration white finger. [151651]

Mr. Hain: In the area of South Derbyshire, as defined by the postcodes DE7, DE72, NG9 and NG10, which encompasses the Erewash constituency, IRISC, the Department's claims handlers, have registered 551 claims in respect of compensation for respiratory disease and 391 claims in relation to vibration white finger—VWF. To date, there have been 113 individual payments totalling £599,702 in respect of respiratory disease and 97 individual payments in respect of VWF amounting to £502,933.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the value of sales of depleted uranium materials by BNFL was in each year since 1990. [151042]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* I understand from BNFL that prior to 1992, it made sales of machined components made from depleted uranium to the Ministry of Defence. BNFL has also, since 1990, made sales of depleted uranium to a number of industrial customers and universities for a variety of research and commercial purposes. Details of individual contracts are a commercial matter between BNFL and its customers.

Objective 1 Funds

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much in *(a)* European regional development funds, *(b)* European Social Fund, *(c)* European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund and *(d)* other relevant European structural funds has been (i) committed to and (ii) received by projects in each of the EU objective 1 regions. [152014]

Mr. Caborn: The figures in the table show the latest commitments and payments made under each of the EU structural funds for the three objective 1 areas of

England. Payments under these programmes lag behind commitments because the fund regulations require ERDF expenditure to be defrayed before it is claimed. ESF projects may receive an advance payment at the beginning of the project but subsequent ESF payments take place after expenditure has been defrayed.

Objective 1 programmes in England

£000

Programme	ERDF	ESF	EAGGF	FIFG	Total
Commitments to projects					
Cornwall and the Scilly Isles	9,000	16,900	400	0	26,300
Merseyside	15,581	32,062	0	0	47,643
South Yorkshire	16,000	8,000	0	0	24,000
Total	40,581	56,962	400	0	97,943
Payments to projects					
Cornwall and the Scilly Isles	0	800	0	0	800
Merseyside	711	7,028	0	0	7,739
South Yorkshire	0	0	0	0	0
Total	711	7,928	0	0	8,539

Note:
Responsibility for the implementation of the West Wales and the Valleys objective 1 programme rests with the National Assembly for Wales.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much regional selective assistance is available for objective 1 projects in Cornwall for *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02. [152011]

Mr. Caborn: In principle, the whole of the RSA spend in Cornwall is available for match funding of objective 1 projects. Because spend on the scheme is demand led, the Department has recommended that the local partners plan on the basis of the average spend over the previous three years.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what recent assessment he has made of the number of public match funds available to applicants for EU objective 1 funds; and if he will list those funds allocated by *(a)* Government Departments and *(b)* other sources; [152012]

(2) if he will indicate the level of funds available for this and each of the next two financial years in each of the public match funds available to applicants for EU objective 1 funds in the areas of *(a)* Merseyside, *(b)* South Yorkshire, *(c)* Cornwall and *(d)* West Wales and the Valleys. [152013]

Mr. Caborn: In October 2000 the Government published a revised list of potential central Government sources of match funding in England. It is available at www.dti.gov.uk/europe/mf1.htm on the internet. Copies of the document have also been placed in the Libraries of the House.

The Government are unable to quantify the amount of match funding available in particular English regions or objective 1 areas because many sources are national programmes which are not regionally allocated but respond to demand. Moreover, the Government do not have information on match funding provided by local authorities and other non-central Government public bodies.

Administration of the structural funds in Wales is a matter for the National Assembly for Wales.

BNFL

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 15 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 281W, on BNFL, how many *(a)* non-management employees, *(b)* managers, *(c)* senior managers and *(d)* directors were (i) dismissed and (ii) disciplined by BNFL as a result of the MDF data falsification at Sellafield. [151663]

Mr. Hain: The detail of the changes made and actions taken by BNFL in response to the MOX data falsification issue is a matter for the company. The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) report on the MDF data falsification incident, published on 18 February 2000, included 15 recommendations which BNFL had to address to HSE's satisfaction. A number of the HSE recommendations related to identifying and dealing with specific workforce problems and improving management arrangements. A copy of the HSE report is in the Library of the House. A copy of BNFL's response to the HSE report, which was published on 18 April 2000, is also in the Library of the House. That response set out details of the programme of work through which BNFL planned to address HSE's recommendations. On 18 December 2000, HSE closed out its 15 recommendations, since they had been satisfactorily addressed by BNFL. On 22 February 2001, HSE published a further report updating the progress made by BNFL in responding to the three HSE reports published in February 2000. A copy of this report is also in the Library of the House.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 15 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 281W, on BNFL, when he was first informed that the quality control worker who discovered the falsification of data at the Sellafield MDF plant was a non-BNFL employee; and for what reason this information was not included in the Health and Safety Executive's report published on 18 February 2000. [151664]

Mr. Hain: I first received information about this matter when receiving advice on how to respond to the hon. Gentleman's previous question on the same subject, which I answered on 15 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 281W.

The question of whether to record in the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) report, published on 18 February 2000, the fact that the member of BNFL's Quality Control Team at MDF to whom you refer was, at that time, employed as a contractor to BNFL through the Employment Agency NRL, is a matter for HSE. I understand that HSE will be writing to the hon. Member shortly on this matter in response to his recent letter to it.

Glass Industry

Mr. Illsley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many applications for regional selective assistance grants for the glass industry were received by his Department during February. [152447]

Mr. Caborn: No applications for regional selective assistance grants for the glass industry were received by this Department during February.

However, an application was received in January, though rules on commercial confidentiality prevent my identifying the names of applicants without first obtaining their approval for disclosure.

Mr. Illsley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish the review of the British glass industry being undertaken by his Department. [152445]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry hopes to release the results of new market research commissioned by the Department into the glass packaging industry later this month.

Mr. Illsley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria have been included in the review of the British glass industry being undertaken by his Department. [152446]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The review concerns only the UK glass packaging industry and is focused on the market prospects for the industry.

Rural Petrol Stations

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many rural filling stations closed in 2000; and what action he is taking to ensure the viability of rural petrol stations. [152363]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The Institute of Petroleum's (IP) UK Retail Marketing Survey (last published in March 2000) shows that the total number of petrol retail outlets in the UK in 1999 was 13,716, a reduction of 42 compared to 1998. The IP survey for 2001 will be published shortly.

On 1 March, the Government announced their implementation plan for the Rural White Paper "A Fair Deal for Rural England". In the plan, the Government stated that they intended to extend the village shop rate relief scheme to certain food shops, pubs and garages in small rural settlements as soon as parliamentary time allowed. This would give many petrol retail outlets mandatory rate relief of 50 per cent. provided their rateable value was less than £6,000.

Departmental Policies (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Warrington, North constituency, the effects on Warrington, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152321]

Mr. Caborn: My Department does not maintain statistical information at constituency level.

My hon. Friend's constituents, like many others throughout Warrington, will have benefited from our employment rights policies, which include the national minimum wage, the working time directive, part-time working regulations and improved maternity leave.

In addition, the ward of Burtonwood is eligible for regional selective assistance and the enterprise grant scheme.

In the north-west region, my Department's policies have contributed to growth in employment by 107,000 and a fall in unemployment by 63,000, and to reductions in youth unemployment by 75 per cent. and long-term unemployment by 54 per cent.

Fireworks

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many commercial fireworks were imported into the United Kingdom in the last 12 months for which figures are available; what controls apply as to their end use; and if he will make a statement. [152369]

Dr. Howells: The overseas trade statistics do not separately identify commercial fireworks or provide numbers imported. The value and weight of fireworks imported into the United Kingdom during the 12 months from December 1999 to November 2000 are £22.4 million and 12,575 metric tons respectively.

The Fireworks (Safety) Regulations 1997 introduced comprehensive controls on the types and sizes of fireworks which can be sold to the public.

Provincial Newspapers

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what investigations he has undertaken into monopolies in provincial newspapers; and if he will make a statement. [152292]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Under UK competition legislation, the Director General of Fair Trading is responsible for monitoring markets and considering allegations of anti-competitive behaviour including abuse of monopoly position. Any evidence of abuse or anti-competitive behaviour should be passed to the Director General of Fair Trading.

E-mail Procedures

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry in what way his Department is revising its internal guidance to staff for writing and distributing e-mails; for what reasons his Department is revising this guidance; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the current internal guidance on e-mail procedures. [151903]

Dr. Howells: My Department regularly reviews its internal guidance on e-mail procedures. This is to ensure that e-mail is used effectively to meet the business needs of the Department and its customers including the need to keep accurate records and to take account of advances in technology and best practice in the private and public sector.

I have arranged for a copy of the current internal guidance on e-mail procedures to be placed in the Library of the House.

PetroChina

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the recent discussions held with his Chinese counterparts concerning BP's stake in PetroChina. [151594]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 1 March 2001]*: HM Government have had no recent discussions with the Government of the People's Republic of China about BP's stake in PetroChina. However, during his recent visit to China, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade emphasised to his counterparts the importance of incorporating the best modern environmental and social standards into the development of major projects in China. He also pointed out that the best British companies operate to those standards.

Community Finance Initiative

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out *(a)* the timetable and *(b)* the criteria for the introduction of funding to support businesses in deprived areas under the Community Finance Initiative; and if he will make a statement. [152147]

Ms Hewitt: I am pleased to be able to report that the chief executive of the Small Business Service announced on 1 March 2001 that 15 organisations have been successful in securing awards from the first round of Phoenix Fund support for Community Finance Initiatives (CFIs). These awards amount to £5.5 million over the next three years.

CFI support from the Phoenix Fund is allocated on a competitive challenge basis. The assessment process has two elements being, (i) review by SBS against key criteria stated in the bidding guidance, (ii) an independent assessment panel to advise the SBS Chief Executive on the final award of Phoenix Fund support. In reviewing the bids the panel was concerned with the soundness of each proposal, its impact on entrepreneurship in areas of disadvantage, impact on the growth of the CFI sector in the UK and development of appropriate models and good practice.

Bidding guidance for the first round of Phoenix Fund support for CFIs was issued in June 2000 and copies are held in the Library of the House.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much certified timber has been purchased over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152044]

Ms Hewitt: The Department of Trade and Industry has an environmental management system in place accredited to BSEN ISO 14001. Within that system DTI has "opted in" to include the procurement of timber and timber products to ensure that such items are procured in accordance with the Government's commitment on buying from sustainable and legal sources.

The interdepartmental timber working group is working to develop a common reporting template which will form the basis for future reporting by all Departments on timber procurement. However, that system is not yet in place, and DTI is unable to provide data on the proportion of certified timber purchased over the last six months without incurring disproportionate costs.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152046]

Ms Hewitt: No. The DTI will report through the next Green Ministers Annual Report, which is expected to be published in November 2001.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Road Schemes

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if it is his policy that alternative options should be considered in undertaking an appraisal under the Government's new approach to appraisal for major road schemes; [150897]

(2) how many of the bids for major schemes submitted by local authorities in their full local transport plans contained appraisal summary tables for each of the alternative options which had been considered. [150898]

Mr. Hill: Consideration of alternative options is part of the New Approach to Appraisal.

Authorities (including the Highways Agency) submitting proposals for all major road schemes as part of their plans were required to follow the Guidance on the New Approach to Appraisal (GNATA). The GNATA appraisal summary table (AST) includes a box for a statement of other options considered when putting forward a road proposal.

Where major public transport schemes formed part of plans, authorities were asked to include an appropriate assessment of the proposed scheme against alternative options, including an AST for each. However, production of separate ASTs was not considered necessary where the choice between options was clear-cut or the scheme was in relative terms small, so in practice ASTs for alternative options were prepared for about half of the major public transport schemes given full or provisional approval in the local transport settlement.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many staff are employed by regional development agencies in offices outside the United Kingdom; at which locations; and at what cost; [149505]

(2) which non-UK based regional development agency maintained offices share facilities with *(a)* each other and *(b)* other Government agencies or local authority offices. [149506]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 26 February 2001]*: The table sets out the offices currently maintained by the regional development agencies outside England, with details of how many staff are employed by regional development agencies in offices outside the United Kingdom; where; and at what cost and where facilities are shared with each other and other Government agencies or local authority offices.

The table has been updated since the answer given by my right hon Friend the Minister for Local Government and Regions on 25 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 667–70W. Yorkshire Forward has opened an

office in Brussels since the original question was answered. In addition, the information given for North West Development Agency and One NorthEast in the previous answer was not complete and this has been corrected in the table.

A condition of funding for 2001–02 will be that ministerial prior approval will be required for any proposal to extend or create new RDA overseas offices involved in inward investment or trade promotion activities.

RDA/Office location	*Opened*	*Number of employees*	*Annual cost to RDAs (£)*	*Other comments*
Yorkshire Forward				
Asia Pacific				
Japan	1983	2 full-time	130,000	
Europe				
Brussels	February 2001	3 full-time	30,000	Yorkshire Forward contributes to costs. Office is run and staff are employed by Regional Assembly
North West Development Agency				
Asia Pacific				
Japan	Late 1980s	2 part-time	50,000	Also have Marketing Agents since 1993 operating in Taiwan (£20,000)
Europe	July 2000	1 full-time	45,000	Co-funded by the Regional Assembly in an office co-habited by Sub Regional Officers (Lancashire, Cheshire, Manchester, Merseyside)
Advantage West Midlands				
Europe				
Brussels	November 2000	6 full-time	170,000	The West Midlands in Europe Office is a joint office with the West Midlands Local Government Association, Higher Education, the CBI, NEC Group, Engineering Employers Federation, Chambers of Commerce, Voluntary Sector, Further Education and has close links with Eversheds and PWC. The total cost is £500,000 of which the RDA contributes £170,000 One rep in Germany since September 2000, that incurs salary costs only of £80,000. One part-time rep in Taiwan since April 1998, incurring salary costs only of £40,000 Two part-time agents in Korea since April 1996, incurring salary costs of only £20,000 From January 2001 six month contract for one rep in Australia incurring salary costs of £65,000
East of England Development Agency				
Europe				Contribute 4 per cent. of total cost of office to East of England European Partnership Office in Brussels. The office is sponsored by local authorities and the seven TECS in the region. EEDA's contribution is £12,000
North America				East of England Investment Agency, who carry out inward investment on behalf of EEDA, have a number of strategic alliances overseas, but at negligible cost. There is one part-time marketing agent in the USA at an annual cost of £5,000
East Midlands Development Agency				
Europe				
(Germany)		2 part-time agents	28,000	
Asia Pacific		1 part-time agent 2 part-time agents	50,000	
South East of England Development Agency				
Europe				
Brussels	September 2000	1 full-time[1]	79,000	Collaborative office with South East Local Authorities and Regional Assembly
South West of England Regional Development Agency				
Asia Pacific				
Japan	1990	3 full-time	174,000[2]	
North America				Also have five staff working from their homes in Sonoma California, Chicago, and Boston The total cost of American and Japanese operations is £565,000 (£391,000 from public and private sector partners)

RDA/Office location	Opened	Number of employees	Annual cost to RDAs (£)	Other comments
One NorthEast				
Asia Pacific				
Japan	1974	2 full-time	200,000	
Korea	1990	1 x 0.5	30,000	
Taiwan	1989	1 full-time	45,000	
			275,000	
Europe				
Brussels	September 1992		43,000[3]	The Agency makes a financial contribution towards the running costs, including staff costs of the North of England Office in Brussels, which is a partnership for the region
			50,000[4]	The office also receives funding from the North East Regional Assembly
North of England Collaborative Office				
North America				
(Chicago, Boston[5], Atlanta[5], West Coast)	October 2000	15 full-time[6]	500,000	Joint operations between; One NorthEast, North West Development Agency and Yorkshire Forward Official Launch February 2001 Total cost of the Collaborative Office is £1 million. 50 per cent. of costs come from other public and private sector funding Balance met equally between the three RDAs
Midlands Collaborative US Office				
North America				
Chicago	October 2000	2 full-time	448,000[7]	Pre-September 2000 EMDA had office in Virginia at annual cost of £90,000
San Diego	October 2000	2 full-time reps		Joint operation between East and West Midlands
Pittsburgh	May 1992			Cost is shared between each RDA
Midlands Collaborative Japanese Office				
Asia Pacific				
Japan	1997	2 full-time 1 part-time	200,000	As above
London First Centre				
Asia Pacific				Please note that London First Centre are a private company limited by guarantee, and they carry out inward investment promotion on behalf of London Development Agency.
North America				No overseas offices, however do use consultants/agents in selected locations 0.5 of two people in Taiwan since 1998, cost £22,500 0.5 of one person in Korea since 1998, cost £7,500 Two agents in USA since 1996, cost £165,000

[1] Regional Assembly contributes 50 per cent. to salary of full-time officer.
[2] Combined cost of American and Japanese operations.
[3] 2000–01
[4] 2001–02
[5] Operations in Boston and Atlanta predate the establishment of the Collaborative Office
[6] Projected
[7] Includes UK seconded staff costs

Housing (Repairs)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact of changes in the regulations governing the major repairs allowance for local authorities on the ability of local authorities to provide accommodation through housing associations. [152047]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Council housing is a major public asset which needs to be maintained and modernised. The introduction of the Major Repairs Allowance will provide local authorities with the resources they need to meet the on-going capital costs of maintaining their housing stock. This and the virtual tripling of resources provided to authorities for housing investment between May 1997 and 2003–04, are central to delivering our commitment to bring all social housing up to a decent standard by 2010.

The provision of additional affordable housing in areas of high demand is also a priority. Within the same period, we are nearly doubling resources for the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme.

Housing Health and Safety Rating System

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will consult on his proposals to replace the housing fitness standard with the new rating system. [152676]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department has today published a consultation paper setting out a framework of legislation and guidance within which local authorities would use the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) as the basis for action against unacceptable housing conditions.

We published a report on the development of the rating system in July. The system will bring a modern, risk-based approach to health and safety in the home and will underpin our commitment to improving the housing conditions of the most vulnerable people.

The HHSRS illustrates our recognition of the close relationship between housing and health. Considerable steps have already been taken to familiarise local authorities with the new system and we now want to hear their views, as well as those of landlords' and tenants' organisations, on the enforcement proposals. The system will also underpin our licensing scheme proposals for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO).

Legislation to allow authorities to use the rating system as a basis for their enforcement decisions will be introduced as soon as the opportunity arises.

Copies of the consultation paper have been placed in the Library of the House.

Habitats Directive

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with his counterparts in European Union maritime member states to establish the scientific basis on which these states have excluded navigational channels and working port areas from designation under the European Union habitats directive. [151998]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Most member states have yet to complete the assessment and selection of possible sites to be designated. All should be using the same guidance offered by the European Commission's Interpretation Manual. Opportunity for collective consideration of the outcomes will occur at the next moderation meeting for the Atlantic biogeographic region, scheduled for September in Amsterdam.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to ensure that English Nature has acted under the terms of the European Union habitats directive regarding the protection of estuarial features under the terms of the European Union habitats directive where their action leads to the designation of an entire estuary; and if he will make a statement. [151989]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: English Nature were asked by Government to identify sites hosting habitats listed in Annex I of the habitats directive; estuaries are one of the listed habitats. In considering such sites English Nature has used the European Commission's own Interpretation Manual for guidance. The nature conservation agencies' advice is that estuaries are complex ecosystems containing many interdependent components within which other Annex I listed habitats are represented. Consequently, boundaries have been drawn to protect the form and function of the entire estuarine ecosystem necessary for its long-term maintenance.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he last met the chairman and chief executive of English Nature to discuss its interpretation of its designation requirements under the European Union habitats directive and that of other member states; what steps he is taking to ensure that there is consistency of interpretation of the habitats directive across all member states; and if he will make a statement. [151997]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: No meeting has taken place. English Nature is following the European Commission's own guidelines pertaining to the interpretation of the habitats directive. It is for the European Commission and member states collectively to ensure that there has been a consistent scientific approach adopted by all member states in the selection and designation of Natura 2000 sites. Opportunity to do so will occur at the next moderation meeting for the Atlantic biogeographic region, scheduled for September in Amsterdam. The UK will question any instances where there appears to have been inconsistency of approach.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what criteria have been applied by English Nature in evaluating those sites which it has recommended for designation as special areas of conservation under the European Union habitats directive programme; what steps he takes to ensure that its evaluations are scientific; and if he will make a statement. [151987]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: In advising Government, the statutory nature conservation agencies, including English Nature, must apply the criteria set out in Article 4 and Annex III of the habitats directive, and that given additionally at EU moderation meetings. In this process they may only use relevant scientific information to identify sites eligible for selection as Special Areas of Conservation. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) acts with the other statutory nature conservation agencies in collating information, moderating and providing quality assurance on recommended sites before providing formal advice to Government.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make available the list of European Union member states that have complied with the requirements of the European Union habitats directive in designating navigational channels and working port areas as being outside environmental designations. [151901]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Member states are still in the process of revising and submitting new designated sites. No lists have yet to be circulated and there has not, therefore, been any opportunity to examine final designations. Site details proposed by member states in the Atlantic Biogeographical Region will be circulated by the European Commission in advance of the next moderation meeting for that region, scheduled for September in Amsterdam.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps English Nature has been asked to take to ensure that the basis of their scientific evaluation of sites for designation under the European Union's Natura 2000 programme is consistent with the evaluations of other member states; and if he will make a statement. [151988]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: It is for the European Commission and member states collectively to ensure that there has been a consistent scientific approach adopted by all member states in the selection and designation of Natura 2000 sites under the Habitats Directive. English Nature's role, through the Joint Nature Conservation Committee, is to advise Government on the scientific merits of sites in England they consider meet the criteria in Article 4 and Annexe III of the Habitats Directive.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the extent to which the recommendations of English Nature concerning the designation of sites as special areas of conservation under the European Union's Natura 2000 programme is consistent with the Government's sustainable development guidelines; and if he will make a statement. [151990]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: In May 1999 the Government published "A better quality of life; a strategy for sustainable development for the UK". One of the four main objectives that together underpin the Government's view of sustainable development is

"effective protection of the environment".

The Natura 2000 programme contributes in part to the achievement of that goal.

Planning (Sites and Monuments)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to require planning authorities to include data from their sites and monuments record to be incorporated into their development plans. [151866]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We advise local planning authorities in Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 "Archaeology and Planning" to incorporate in their development plans policies for the protection, enhancement and preservation of sites of archaeological interest and of their settings. The proposals map should define the areas and sites to which the development plan policies and proposals apply. It is for individual authorities to determine the extent to which they draw upon their sites and monuments records in preparing their development plan policies.

E-mail Procedures

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what way his Department is revising its internal guidance to staff for writing and distributing e-mails; for what reasons his Department is revising this guidance; and if he will place in the Library a copy of the current internal guidance on e-mail procedures. [151902]

Ms Beverley Hughes: General advice to staff on the use of e-mail is contained within the Staff Handbook, in particular rules governing inappropriate use of Departmental resources, and is supported by guidance. It is being reviewed to ensure it remains appropriate and conforms to recent legislation on human rights, data protection and regulation of investigatory powers. When the review is completed the resulting policy, procedures and guidance will all be placed in the Staff Handbook.

Concern about the effects of information overload on the work of the Department has led to some simple 'golden rules' that help everyone to handle e-mail efficiently. An expanded set is to be considered by the Departmental Board for issue shortly.

I am arranging to place a copy of this material in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Bolton, West)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Bolton, West constituency, the effects on Bolton, West of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150606]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The principal kinds of funding which this Department has allocated to Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council in 1997–88 to 2001–02 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowings approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much money has been spent on Bolton, West. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are invested.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Revenue support grant	100.7	109.0	112.6	111.1	117.5
Income from national non-domestic rates	57.9	60.4	65.6	74.5	72.7
Housing investment programme	6.5	6.0	7.0	15.9	17.9
Capital receipts initiative	—	3.3	3.8	—	—
SRB funding (see note 1)	4.2	3.4	3.5	—	—
Neighbourhood renewal fund	—	—	—	—	2.7
ERDF funding (see note 2)	—	0.4	1.4	1.6	—
Transport supplementary grant	0.3	1.6	1.6	—	—
Transport annual capital guideline	0.1	0.7	1.8	—	—
Transport block supplementary credit approval	1.5	0.6	0.8	2.9	6.5

Notes

1. Derby, Daubhill and Dean, Bolton

A four-year scheme from the local authority-led partnership. A holistic approach to regeneration in an area with a significant proportion of ethnic residents.

SRB total is £11.8 million.

Scheme total £80 million.

2. European Funding

The Bolton partnership received approvals between March 1998 and November 1999 for five action plans and one free standing project with a total grant of £9.6 million against a total eligible expenditure of £31.6 million. To date they have claimed £3.4 million, but are expected to claim the remainder by the end of the programme in December 2001.

Building Regulations

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects Part L of the building regulations to come into force. [152172]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning to my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt) on 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 60–61W, in which he announced the intention to amend Part L of the Building Regulations in August this year. These amendments should come into force six months later, in February 2002.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what the average consumption is of energy in kilowatt hours per square metre of new homes built to existing building regulations in *(a)* England and Wales, *(b)* Sweden, *(c)* Germany, *(d)* Denmark and *(e)* the Netherlands; and what will happen in England and Wales following the proposed changes to Part L of the building regulations; [152170]

(2) if he will make a statement on the most recent changes to energy conservation standards in building regulations in each EU member state. [152171]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department does not systematically collect data on the development of energy efficient building regulations in all member states. However, in 1998, a study of the standards in Denmark, Germany, Holland and Sweden was commissioned as a preliminary to the current review of energy conservation standards in England and Wales. The results of these investigations were published in January 1999. Our proposals for improving standards published in last summer's consultation document took these results into account, and would keep us broadly in line with NW Europe while remaining proportionate in our national efforts to control carbon emissions from buildings without running excessive risks of construction defects.

We do not have data on the average consumption of energy in kilowatt hours per square metre of new homes built to existing building regulations in Sweden, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands. With regard to England and Wales, and in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Mr. Plaskitt) on 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 60–61W, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning indicated the fabric insulation performance standard we propose to introduce as a result of the review of Part L of the Building Regulations. The table gives an indication of the average energy consumption of an indicative new home in the UK built to the current Building Regulations, and of one built to the proposed new standards.

For a new semi-detached dwelling in England and Wales having a floor area of 80 m^2 and gas fired central heating

Requirements	*Average annual delivered energy consumption per square metre of floor area for heating and hot water kWh/m^2 pa*
Current (1995)	136.6
As announced on 5 March as intended to come into effect in February 2002	103.4

Hydropower

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he is examining to extend the length of the licence period for hydro schemes. [152176]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Environment Agency has recently announced that time limits for abstraction licences will generally be for 12 years, striking a fair balance between environmental protection and abstractors' needs for stability. There will be a presumption of renewal of licences, so that where sufficient water resources are available licences will be renewed.

Time limits longer than 12 years may be given in particular circumstances, such as for infrastructure investments, subject to detailed economic and environmental appraisal. The Agency works closely with abstractors to take into account their particular circumstances, and will implement the new arrangements in a way which minimises the disruption to business.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to change the powers of the Environment Agency so that it can actively promote hydropower schemes. [152174]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The British Hydropower Association has made the same proposal. Officials from my Department are meeting representatives of the association on 8 March to discuss the proposition.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the British Hydropower Association concerning the draft Water Bill. [152173]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: At the request of the British Hydropower Association, officials from my Department are due to meet representatives of the association on 8 March to discuss among other issues the draft Water Bill.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to end the requirement for low-head hydro schemes across existing weirs to have to apply for an abstraction licence. [152175]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Low-head hydro schemes, while they do not consume water, can affect river flows and other river users. We therefore have no plans to end the requirement for low-head hydro schemes across existing weirs to have an abstraction licence. Each case needs to be considered on its merits.

Sewerage Charges

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the legislation under which community residents who rely upon septic tanks for the removal of sewerage still have to pay the same increase in charges as those on main sewers. [152169]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The charges made for the removal, transport or disposal of septic tank waste or cesspit waste are a commercial matter between the customer and the sewerage undertaker or other firm employed to undertake these services. It is not within the scope of the price regulation administered by the Office of Water Services (Ofwat).

The suggestion has been made, in response to the public consultation on the draft Water Bill, that Ofwat should be able to regulate these prices. This suggestion will be considered alongside other comments on the draft Water Bill before its is introduced.

Local Government Ombudsman

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to change the powers of the local government ombudsman with regard to complaints of maladministration, and to ensure more rapid response to complaints. [152177]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have now completed our consultation on the organisation and operation of the public sector ombudsmen in England, including the Local Government Ombudsman. This consultation was announced to the House on 15 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 722–23W by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, and we expect to announce our conclusions shortly on how best to improve public access to the ombudsmen and their efficiency in dealing with complaints.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make extra funds available to local authorities in order to meet the extra demands on resources following the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [152613]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Government are concerned to ensure that all relevant bodies who face additional work as a result of undertaking their responsibilities to cope with the outbreak of foot and mouth disease are able to discharge those responsibilities comprehensively. We will be keeping under review all aspects of this, including funding.

TREASURY

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the census is to be postponed as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak. [151885]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Gordon Prentice, dated March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the possible postponement of the census due to the foot and mouth outbreak (151885).

I am continuing to monitor the impact of the foot and mouth outbreak, and the possible implications for the Census in England and Wales.

No one can ignore the foot and mouth outbreak. Census activities will be in accordance with whatever else is happening in the areas affected by the outbreak, including restrictions on travel and contact.

Delivery of forms to individual households is not due to start until April 9. It is not currently possible to assess what the situation in rural areas will be at that time. I will monitor the situation on a daily basis, but I recognise that it may be necessary to alter some aspects of the practical operation in rural areas, possibly at very short notice.

High quality enumeration is crucial to the Census. The Census rests on the goodwill and trust of the people across all communities. In the past the rural population has been well motivated to complete their forms. To enable them to do so on this occasion I will be looking at any practical options including, for example, whether the enumeration period around Census day (April 29) should be extended. I will continue to discuss what changes and precautions for staff may be necessary with the relevant agencies, including the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and other interested parties.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate how many earners receive working families tax credit in each unitary metropolitan authority and county of the North East region; and if he will estimate the proportion of earners in the region who are *(a)* in part-time work and *(b)* also in receipt of the childcare supplement. [152056]

Dawn Primarolo: For estimates of the number of families in each local authority in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 425W.

There is no single definition of what comprises full-time work. The table shows an analysis by hours worked of families in the North East region receiving WFTC at August 2000, split also between those families whose awards include the childcare tax credit and other families.

Thousand

Hours normally worked per week by main earner	*Families whose awards include the childcare tax credit*	*Other families*	*Total*
16 less than 20	0.8	15.2	16.0
20 less than 24	0.8	7.5	8.3
24 less than 30	—	4.3	4.6

Thousand

Hours normally worked per week by main earner	*Families whose awards include the childcare tax credit*	*Other families*	*Total*
30 less than 36	0.9	8.4	9.3
36 less than 40	1.4	13.9	15.3
40 and over	[1]—	12.0	12.3
All cases	4.5	61.3	65.8

[1] Estimates based on less than 25 sample cases.

Note:

Estimates based on 5 per cent. sample of awards, and therefore subject to sampling error. Estimates based on less than 25 sample cases.

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer in how many firms paying working families tax credit to their employees the payment of credits exceeds the amount they collect in national insurance and income tax; and how many employees in these companies receive the working families tax credit. [149858]

Dawn Primarolo: Employers whose prospective payments of tax credits in any period (up to six months) exceed the PAYE tax and national insurance contributions that they expect to deduct can apply to Inland Revenue for the additional funding required over that period. One sixth of employers paying tax credits at 31 August 2000 received funding for payment periods that spanned that date. Fur such employers, the average number of employees with awards which include payment via the employer is about 1.5.

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many employers *(a)* are administering the Working Families Tax Credit and *(b)* will be administering the employment credit. [152513]

Dawn Primarolo: At the end of August 2000 about 120,000 employers were paying Working Families Tax Credit or Disabled Person's Tax Credit to their employees.

The numbers of employers involved in payment of the employment tax credit will depend on its detailed design.

Children's Tax Credit

Helen Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many families in Warrington, North constituency he expects to receive the children's tax credit. [151946]

Dawn Primarolo: An estimate of the number of families in the Warrington, North constituency who will be eligible to claim the children's tax credit (CTC) is unavailable, but an estimate of the number of families in the North West region of England who will be eligible to claim CTC is 625,000.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 10 January 2001 to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb), *Official Report*, column 568W, on children's tax credit, how many taxpayers would be affected by changing the tapers in each of the options. [151017]

Dawn Primarolo: The estimated number of taxpayers affected by reducing the annual threshold at which the Children's Tax Credit (CTC) begins to be tapered away for 2001–02 is given in the table:

Reduction to CTC threshold	*Estimated number of taxpayers affected*
£1,000	500,000
£2,000	600,000
£3,000	700,000
£4,000	800,000
£5,000	900,000

Imports (Israel)

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when, in response to the communication of April 2000 from the EU Commission, Her Majesty's Customs and Excise requested certificates of origin from the Israeli authorities for *(a)* Ahava cosmetics, *(b)* dates, *(c)* carpets from Barkan, *(d)* wines and *(e)* any other items; how many such requests were made for each item; how many responses have been received; and if he will list those products on which the European Commission requested a posteriori verification of certificates of origin with the Israeli authorities. [151134]

Dawn Primarolo: UK Customs has initiated the following verification inquiries:

(a) Ahava Cosmetics—13 certificates of preferential origin were returned to Israel for verification on 11 August 2000.

(b) Dates—72 certificates were returned for verification on 31 October 2000.

(c) Carpets from Barkan—nine certificates were returned on 17 August 2000.

(d) Wines—18 certificates were returned between 1 September and 13 November 2000.

(e) Other items—between 22 June and 20 November 2000: 1 certificate was returned for brandy and liqueurs; eight certificates were returned for pencils; 58 for plastic household items; 22 for key blanks and locks; three for electrical products; and seven for other bath and skincare products.

To date, no responses have been received to these inquiries.

In addition to the products listed above the EC Commission has requested that the customs authorities initiate inquiries in respect of biscuits and Soda Stream drinks makers, where the products have been imported from Israel into the member state concerned.

NIRS2 Computer

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the cost to public funds of the NIRS2 computer problem; and when the backlog of payments arising from this will be cleared. [150502]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The compensation payments made by Inland Revenue and DSS to pension providers and benefit recipients, was £62.6 million to 31 January 2001.

The arrears of work in both DSS and Inland Revenue caused by the delay continue to be cleared as quickly as possible.

Income Tax

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the average change in annual gross income tax paid in absolute terms about a 1 per cent. change in the basic rate of income tax in 2000–01 by income tax payers with taxable incomes *(a)* exceeding £1,520 and lower than £28,400, *(b)* exceeding £28,400 and lower than £100,000 and *(c)* exceeding £100,000 a year. [151632]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The full year income tax effects in 2001–02 of making the change is set out in the table.

Change in 200–01	*Average change in gross income tax paid in absolute terms from a 1 per cent. change in income tax (£)*
For taxpayers with taxable income exceeding £1,520 and lower than £28,400	90
For taxpayers with taxable income exceeding £28,400 and lower than £100,000	260
For taxpayers with taxable income exceeding £100,000	265

The estimates are based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and consistent with the November 2000 pre-Budget report.

Heavy Goods Vehicles

Mr. Steen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the revenue lost to the Exchequer from United Kingdom-based heavy goods vehicles being licensed abroad in each of the last three years. [151883]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* No such estimate is available.

Departmental Policies (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Warrington, North constituency, the effects on Warrington, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152322]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Warrington, North, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the General Election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 638, or 29 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 60 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 63 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 836 young people in the Warrington, North constituency gain valuable skills and experience—382 (46 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,400 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to developing policies which enable all pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. As a result of the recent pre-Budget report, all pensioners, including 14,400 in Warrington, North, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 per week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 9,400 in Warrington, North.

Unemployment Costs

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 31 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 213W, on unemployment costs, what the cost is to the Exchequer per unemployed person per year in terms of all forgone taxes where the calculation assumes *(a)* the person to have been on average earnings and *(b)* the person to have been on average earnings for the manufacturing sector. [152468]

Mr. Andrew Smith: As the extent to which unemployment affects Government revenues depends on a number of assumptions, in particular the extent to which unemployment reflects permanent changes in output growth, no estimates of the effects of unemployment on taxes forgone are available.

Invest to Save Budget

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress is being made on the Government's Invest to Save Budget. [152739]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I am pleased to announce that 123 bids from across the public sector have been successful in Round 3 of the Invest to Save Budget, at a cost of £37.0 million in 2001–02, including consequential funding for the devolved Administrations, and £68.4 million in total over the three years to 2003–04. The table describes the winners of this round:

Lead partner	*Title*
Central Government-led projects	
Cabinet Office	e-learning for the voluntary sector
Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)	British Library—Citizenship in Schools
DCMS	Sport via the internet
Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR)	Waterways license database
DETR	Air Quality Forecasts for Health
DETR	National Height Model
DETR	Net based Control of Hazards
DETR	Chemical Control for Health and Safety

Lead partner	*Title*
DETR	Rent Service e-applications
Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)	Testing for dyslexia
DfEE	Time for citizenship
DfEE	Internet Service Provider
DfEE	Electronic Marking pilots for QCA
DfEE	Interactive Learning Authority
DfEE	Tameside Passport to Learning
Department of Social Security	Appeals Service on Video
Department of Social Security	Document Scanning and e-mail
Department of Social Security	Internet benefit advice
Department of Social Security	Digital TV/E-mail Benefit advice
Department of Trade and Industry	Official Receivers Office video link with the Courts
Department of Trade and Industry	Debt Advice Pilots
Department of Trade and Industry	Biotechnology portal
Department of Trade and Industry	Export licensing on-line
Department of Trade and Industry	Metrology Connect
HM Customs and Excise	Drug Detection Pilot
Home Office	National Internet Portal for the Police
Home Office	Policing Online in Avon and Somerset
Home Office	Arson reduction initiative
Home Office	Equality Response
Home Office	Criminal Case Review e-links
Home Office	Data fraud and personal information
Home Office	Distraction and Bogus Official Burglaries
Home Office	Tackling anti-social behaviour
Home Office	Alcohol and Community Safety Proposal
Home Office	Truancy-Causes-Impact-Cure
Home Office	Mobile Rural Contact Facility
Home Office	Internet Police Services in Northumbria
Home Office	Targeting vulnerable groups using GIS
Home Office	Tracking identity through the CJS
Home Office	Short Term Offenders Programme
Home Office	Net Drug Training
Home Office	Video Conferencing Facilities
Home Office	Restorative justice for schoolkids
Home Office	Newham Domestic Violence
Inland Revenue	Tracing NINO information and preventing fraud
Lord Chancellor's Department	Just Ask Consultancy
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF)	Use and discharge of chemicals in off-shore industry
MAFF	e-Navigation for Fishermen
MAFF	Joint Marine Regulation
MAFF	Electronic Pesticide Regulation
Ministry of Defence	NHS Forecasting Model
Ministry of Defence	Skill Force youth initiative
Ministry of Defence	Disposal sales
Office of Fair Trading	Competition Act pilot website
Office of Fair Trading	Shared Information on Consumer Regulations
Ordnance Survey	Data Integration for Coastal Mapping
Other public authority-led projects	
Ashfield Primary Care Group	Interlinked teams for older people
Association of London Government Transport and Environment Committee	e-Parking and Traffic Appeals
Barking and Havering Health Authority	Electronic register of young people who harm
Barnet Health Authority	Joined up advice for medical and social problems
Birmingham City Council	Foster Carers
Bradford City Council	Consumer focused database
Brent and Harrow Health Authority	On-line drug and alcohol service
Brighton and Hove Council	City Wide Portal
Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council	Multi lingual community information system
Cambridgeshire County Council	Piloting e-government
Cambridgeshire Health Authority	National advice service for relatives of prisoners
Cheltenham Borough Council	Gateway to Public Services in Gloucestershire
Coventry City Council	Performance Management Database in Coventry
Croydon Health Authority	Safety.net
Dartford Borough Council	On Line licensing process
Department of Health	Pilot tool for communications to deaf-blind
Devon County Council	Career Portal
Doncaster Health Authority	Primary Care as a Community Resource
Dudley Health Authority	Pilot arrest scheme for offenders
East Riding of Yorkshire Council	Web Portal for Young People's views
Essex County Council	Live Community Networks
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council	Seamless process for Discharge of Patients
Isle of Wight Council	Autistic Children
Kennet District Council	BITE IT—Tidworth

Lead partner	*Title*
Kent and Medway Drug Action Team	IT network for drug misuse
Kent County Council	Child/Youth Oriented
Kirklees Metropolitan Council	Trialling information to citizens via cable TV
Legal Services Commission for Merseyside	Community Legal Service Provision
Leicester City Council	E-facilities for Consultation
Leicestershire County Council	E-delivery for people with disabilities
Lincolnshire County Council	Road Safety Project
Liverpool City Council	The Children's Network Online Service
London Borough of Barnet	Barnet web portal for local community access
London Borough of Camden	Portal for Advice
London Borough of Croydon	Ambassador One-Stop
London Borough of Hackney	Anti-fraud computer
London Borough of Newham	Smart Card for identity and access to services
Drug and Alcohol Action Teams Kingston and Richmond	ABC Project to minimise substance misuse
London Borough of Southwark	Engage Young People in services
London Borough of Sutton	e-delivery to socially excluded groups
Manchester City Council	e-delivery for maintenance services
North Norfolk District Council	Extension of Council website
North Nottinghamshire Health Authority	Multi-agency teams for children with disabilities
North Primary Care Group	Demand Responsive Transport Services
Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council	Independent living for older people
Reading Borough Council	e-database for property of all tenures
Rotherham Health Authority	Community services for older people
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough	Health/advice for Rotherham Youngsters
Royal Borough of Kingston	Single Public Access
Somerset County Council	Multi Agency call centres
South Norfolk Council	Communication between district and parish council
South Staffs Health Authority	Reducing risks of unplanned teenage pregnancy
Southern Derbyshire Health Authority	Drug Market Response Group
Substance Misuse Advisory Service	Advisory service for primary care drug treatment
Surrey County Council	Work/training for the disabled
Swale Borough Council	One Stop for Police Services
Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council	e-delivery for vulnerable people
Tees Health Authority	Shared system on substance misuse
Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council	Dedicated peripatetic home
Wakefield Health Authority	Wakefield e-Health
Wakefield Health Authority	Immediate Support at Home Service
Wakefield Health Authority	Electronic care planning
Warwickshire County Council	Information service for the Aged
West Devon Borough Council	Link social exclusion to community work
Wiltshire County Council	Quality of Life in Wiltshire
Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council	Single contact for vulnerable adults at risk of abuse
Worcestershire County Council	Data Sharing Portal

Coroners' Certificates (Drugs)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many deaths recorded on coroners' certificates in the past 10 years mentioned *(a)* heroin, *(b)* methadone, *(c)* cocaine, *(d)* ecstasy, *(e)* anti-depressants, *(f)* painkillers and *(g)* anti-inflammatories. [151773]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Paul Flynn, dated February 2001:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question asking for the most recent estimate of the total number of deaths recorded or coroners' certificates in the past 10 years in which heroin, methadone, cocaine, ecstasy, anti-depressants, painkillers and anti-inflammatories were mentioned (151773).

The information requested is only available on a comparable basis from 1993, when text from death certificates was first stored electronically. This enables named drugs to be identified. The most recently available figures are for 1999.

The figures in the table show the numbers of deaths where specific substances were mentioned on death certificates.

Number of deaths due to poisoning by selected substances in England and Wales 1993–1999

Drug	*Number of deaths*
Heroin and/or morphine[1]	3,131
Methadone	2,259
Cocaine	263
Ecstasy	113
Antidepressants	3,502
Painkillers[2]	10,771
Non-opioid analgesics	4,067
Opioid analgesics	7,130
Anti-inflammatory drugs[3]	366

[1] Deaths mentioning heroin and/or morphine, as opposed to heroin alone, are given. This is because heroin breaks down in the body into morphine, and it is the latter which may be detected at post mortem.
[2] Painkillers comprise substances identified in Chapter 4.7 of the British National Formulary (BNF). Opioids and non-opioids are given separately because heroin and morphine are opioids.
[3] Anti-inflammatories comprise substances identified in Chapter 10.1.1 of the BNF.

Note:
According to the BNF, aspirin is both a painkiller and an anti-inflammatory as it appears in both Chapters 4.7 and 10.1.1.

ECOFIN

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood), on 29 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 42–43W, on ECOFIN, if he will place a copy of the compromise proposal on the excise duties and mineral oils in the Library. [150061]

Mr. Timms *[holding answer 12 February 2001]:* Yes. Copies of Presidency proposal SN 1272/01 will be deposited in the House of Commons Library today.

Ofgem

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 8 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 682W, if he will provide a breakdown of the expected merger expenditure of £14 million broken down between *(a)* redundancy, *(b)* refurbishment costs, *(c)* dilapidation and *(d)* other. [150187]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Of Ofgem's forecast merger expenditure of, £14 million it is estimated that *(a)* £4.4 million will be spent on redundancy and severance, *(b)* £4.7 million on refurbishment, *(c)* nil on dilapidations and *(d)*, £4.9 million on other costs.

Chester Street Insurance Holdings

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the distribution of post-and pre-1990 cases is between Chester Street Insurance Holdings and Iron Trades Holdings Ltd; and which company has responsibility for pre-1972 cases; [150323]

(2) what the *(a)* estimated asset value and *(b)* estimated liabilities are of Chester Street Insurance Holdings; and how they are divided between post and pre-1972 cases. [150322]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The provisional liquidators are currently assessing the information available about existing and potential claims.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to ensure that pre-1972 cases held by Chester Street Insurance Holdings Limited are protected; and if he will make a statement. [150324]

Miss Melanie Johnson: It is important to remember that it is the employer who holds the policy with Chester Street Insurance Holdings Limited not the employee, and the employer remains liable for claims made against them by their employees or former employees. The Government are aware of the issue raised by pre-1972 cases and are considering this issue carefully.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the value was of the bonuses paid to the directors of Chester Street Insurance Holdings Limited in each of the last three years. [150325]

Miss Melanie Johnson: This is a matter for the management of Chester Street Insurance Holdings Limited, but I understand that this concern has already been brought to the attention of the provisional liquidator, who will look into such issues as part of the job in winding-up the affairs of the company.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about Chester Street Holdings Ltd., formerly known as Iron Trades Holding Ltd.; and if he will make a statement. [150320]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have received a number of representations from hon. Members and others on behalf of those suffering asbestos-related disease as a consequence of the employment in firms whose employers' liability insurance is provided by Chester Street Insurance Holdings.

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the reasons underlying the economic failure of Chester Street Insurance Holdings Ltd.; and if he will make a statement. [150321]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Under the scheme of arrangement, the provisional liquidators are required to conduct a review of the affairs of the company, and the actions of both the directors and other parties.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

First Estates Commissioner

Mr. Baker: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what assessment he has made of the work of the First Estates Commissioner; and if he will make a statement in respect of the role he anticipates him undertaking in future. [151855]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The role of the First Church Estates Commissioner is to chair the Church Commissioner's Assets Committee which, subject to any general rules made by its Board of Governors, has an exclusive power and duty to act in all matters relating to the management of the Commissioners' assets. No change in that role is envisaged.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Higher Education

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much funding was given to the higher education sector in each year since 1990 *(a)* in total and *(b)* per student. [151001]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 28 February 2001]:* The information is in the tables:

Table 1: Higher education publicly planned funding in England

	£ million
1990–01	3,266
1991–92	3,679
1992–93	3,976
1993–94	4,291
1994–95	4,559
1995–96	4,718
1996–97	4,627
1997–98	4,686
1998–99	4,834
1999–2000	5,153
2000–01	5,414
2001–02	5,826
2002–03	6,094
2003–04	6,392

Table 2: Publicly planned funding per full-time equivalent higher education student in England at constant 1999–2000 prices

	£[1]
1990–91	6,935
1991–92	6,585
1992–93	6,090
1993–94	5,745
1994–95	5,585
1995–96	5,335
1996–97	4,980
1997–98	4,845
1998–99	4,820
1999–2000	4,785
2000–01	4,750

[1] Unit funding per student is rounded to the nearest £5.

Between 1989 and 1997, publicly planned funding per full-time equivalent higher education student fell by over 36 per cent. from just under £7,600 to just over £4,800. As a result, Lord Dearing's National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education concluded in 1997 that higher education institutions could not absorb a further reduction of over 6 per cent. in funding which was planned for 1998–99 and 1999–2000.

The Government accepted the recommendation of the Inquiry. Higher education institutions were asked to deliver no more than a 1 per cent. reduction in unit funding in both 1998–99 and 1999–2000. This was later extended for a further year.

The Government announced last November cash increases in publicly planned funding of £412 million, £268 million and £298 million over the three years to 2003–04. Coupled with planned increases in student numbers this implies estimated annual increases in publicly planned unit funding of 3.2 per cent., 2.5 per cent. and 2.9 per cent. which themselves imply estimated real-terms increases in funding per full-time equivalent student of 0.7 per cent., 0 per cent. and 0.4 per cent. over the next three years.

Learning and Skills Councils

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much local discretionary funding was allocated to each of the Learning and Skills Councils for 2001–02; and what proportion of total funding allocated to each Learning and Skills Council this amount represents. [151667]

Mr. Wicks: There is no single definition of local discretionary funding. After the current transition period, local LSCs will have the decisive role in the allocation to providers of the vast bulk of the LSC's mainstream budgets, including those for further education and work-based training (although prices paid per individual learner will be determined by a national formula).

For a range of other activities which total 10 per cent. to 15 per cent. of LSC overall funds, and for which there will be no national formula, local LSCs will determine both the allocations and the prices paid. One element within that 10 per cent. to 15 per cent. category is the Local Initiatives Fund (LIF), offering maximum flexibility for the local LSC to support local projects which would not otherwise be funded through mainstream programme budgets. The total LIF budget for 2001–02 is £90.3 million, of which almost 90 per cent. has so far been allocated. The table shows initial LIF allocations to local LSCs for 2001–02.

Decisions about the allocation of LSC overall funding to each local LSC have yet to be made by the national LSC. When they have been made, I shall write to my hon. Friend.

Local Initiatives Fund: LLSC initial allocation (December 2000)

	£
LLSC	*2001–02*
East Midlands	
Derbyshire	1,538,498
Nottinghamshire	1,848,478
Lincolnshire and Rutland	858,230
Leicestershire	1,383,212
Northamptonshire	890,796
Eastern	
Norfolk	1,157,665
Cambridgeshire	949,765
Suffolk	894,042
Bedfordshire	815,356
Hertfordshire	1,288,419
Essex	2,057,655
London	
London North	1,875,419
London West	2,279,819
London Central	4,257,799
London East	4,268,075
London South	1,718,457
North East	
Northumberland	520,986
Tyne and Wear	2,387,779
County Durham	801,459
Tees Valley	1,518,689
North West	
Cumbria	748,602
Lancashire	2,032,225
Greater Merseyside	3,433,319
Greater Manchester	4,276,348
Cheshire and Warrington	1,161,393
South East	
Oxford, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire	1,637,128
Bracknell Forest/West Berkshire	1,070,636
Hampshire and Isle of Wight	2,324,637
Surrey	1,143,987
Sussex	1,992,704
Kent and Medway	2,163,569
South West	
Devon and Cornwall	2,151,591
Somerset	605,899
Dorset	823,870
Avon	1,365,864
Wiltshire	743,296
Gloucestershire	764,412
West Midlands	
Shropshire	602,964
Staffordshire	1,572,865
Black Country	2,335,377
Birmingham and Solihull	2,990,819
Herefordshire and Worcestershire	935,019
Coventry and Warwickshire	1,246,575
Yorks and the Humber	
North Yorkshire	929,946
West Yorkshire	3,857,355
South Yorkshire	2,385,990
Humberside	1,693,012

Student Debt

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the reviews his Department is conducting of *(a)* tuition fees and *(b)* student debt; and what the average estimated level of debt per student was in each of the last 10 years. [151831]

Mr. Wicks *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* We are not currently conducting any such reviews. The student support arrangements we have introduced are working well and share the costs of higher education fairly between students, parents and the taxpayer and we are monitoring the impact of the new arrangements. From September this year, because we have raised the income contribution thresholds, around 50 per cent. of all English and Welsh higher education students liable for fees under the Education (Student Support) Regulations will not have to make any contribution to their tuition fees. In 2001–02 new additional targeted support, in particular opportunity bursaries and a child care grant based on actual costs, will help students with dependants and those from poorer backgrounds. Annual figures on student finances are not collected. However, the average level of student debt was £840 in 1995–96 and £2,530 in 1998–99 for full-time students in higher education in the UK after their savings had been taken into account, according to data from the Department's periodic Student Income and Expenditure Survey.

Early-years Inspectors (Homeworking)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what discussions he has had with Ofsted on the decision to organise the Early Years Inspectorate on the basis of homeworking by inspectors; what representations he has received on this decision; and if he will make a statement; [151937]

(2) what risk assessments have been undertaken of members of the Early Years Inspectorate who will work from home; [151938]

(3) what procedures will be put in place to ensure that *(a)* early years inspectors working from home have (i) ready access to their line managers and (ii) adequate means of liaison with other child care professionals and *(b)* proper child protection procedures are adhered to. [151939]

Ms Hodge: The organisation of Ofsted's Early Years Inspectorate is a matter for Ofsted. I have, therefore, asked HM Chief Inspector of Schools, Mike Tomlinson, to write to my hon. Friend and to place a copy of his letter in the Library.

SOCIAL SECURITY

NIRS2 Computer

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claims outstanding resulting from failures in the NIRS2 computer system remain to be processed; and what his estimate is of the time scales within which these will receive attention and payments be made. [151147]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* As at 31 January 2001, Benefits Agency offices had less than 3 per cent. of the total number of cases they had received from NIRS2 waiting to be reviewed

The outstanding cases will be processed as quickly as possible.

Income Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of families with dependent children who have been in receipt of Income Support for one year or more. [152010]

Mr. Bayley: As at November 2000 there were 896,000 families with dependent children who had been receiving Income Support for one year or more.

Notes:

1. Dependent children are defined as aged 0–15 years.
2. Figure is based on a 5 per cent. sample and is therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
3. Figure is rounded to the nearest thousand.
4. Claimants may have more than one dependent child.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, November 2000

Benefit Fraud (Liverpool)

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of Liverpool city council. [152672]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of Liverpool city council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the authority address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

Overall, inspectors found a number of weaknesses and poor standards of performance in benefit administration and counter fraud work that needed immediate attention. Inconsistent and ineffective work practices were found and there were substantial backlogs of work affecting over 30,000 benefit claims which had led to lengthy delays in claims processing.

The BFI reports the authority's lack of effective performance standards and targets, inadequate management information, weaknesses in checks and controls, poor management and recovery of benefit overpayments and no formal assessment of the risks of benefit fraud.

The report notes that although there is some good counter fraud work, it is not focused and significant effort is being wasted. Where management checking exists it is largely ineffective and provides little assurance.

The report concludes that BFI has serious concerns about Liverpool's recent performance in managing and delivering a secure benefits service. More positively, however, the report notes that the authority has recognised the significant challenges it faces and is strongly committed to a significant change programme that will involve overhauling its systems, structures and processes.

While BFI recognises the size of the task and that the necessary changes will be difficult, inspectors are encouraged by the authority's commitment to tackle these issues.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the authority for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Bilateral Concordat (Northern Ireland)

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the bilateral concordat between the Department of Social Security and the Northern Ireland Department for Social Development. [152673]

Mr. Darling: The Northern Ireland Minister for Social Development and I have agreed the text of the concordat between the Department of Social Security and the Department for Social Development. Copies of the concordat have been placed in the Library and the text will be available on the internet at www.dss.gov.uk.

Departmental Policies (Stroud)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Stroud constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152399]

Angela Eagle: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000), sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Stroud since May 1997.

Measures in our first four Budgets will lift over 1 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive child benefit, and in Stroud 11,870 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Stroud the number has reduced from 1,400 to 1,100. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally; in Stroud the number has increased from 900 to 1,000.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty, so we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Over 20,500 older people in Stroud have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 20,200 pensioners in Stroud will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s of whom we estimate there are about 9,000 in Stroud. 2,500 pensioner families in Stroud are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Warrington, North constituency, the effects on Warrington, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152318]

Angela Eagle: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual Opportunity for all reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (Cm 4865, September 2000), sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Warrington, North since May 1997.

Measures in our first four Budgets will lift over one million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about seven million families receive Child Benefit, and in Warrington, North 12,778 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Warrington, North the number has reduced from 2,000 to 1,700. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Warrington, North from 1,700 to 1,300.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 16,300 older people in Warrington, North have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 14,400 pensioners in Warrington, North will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s of whom we estimate there are about 5,700 in Warrington, North. 2,500 pensioner families in Warrington, North are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what progress is being made to speed up the decision-making process on CSA departures. [152397]

Mr. Bayley: A parent may apply for a departure where they feel they have exceptional circumstances that should be taken into account in their maintenance assessment. The process by which the Child Support Agency deals with these exceptional cases includes gathering information from one or more sources. Details of the application are then sent to the other party, giving them the opportunity to comment. Complex cases may be referred to the Appeals Service for determination. This process can often be time consuming especially when the information required is difficult to obtain.

The reformed child support scheme, which we plan to introduce for new cases by April 2002, will not include any provision for departures. However, either parent will be able to apply for the child support rates to be varied in specified, exceptional cases. The decision-making process for variations will be streamlined. Applications for a variation will be accepted before the maintenance calculation has been made, thus enabling the system to operate more quickly.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what changes will be made to the Child Support Agency's procedures on disclosure following the proposed changes to the Child Support Agency to be introduced after April 2002; [152182]

(2) if he will make a statement on Child Support Agency procedures for the disclosure of information on one partner to another; [152180]

(3) what advice he has taken since the coming into force of the Human Rights Act 1998 on the Child Support Agency's approach to disclosure of information. [152181]

Mr. Bayley: The Child Support Agency treats the protection of personal information very seriously. A parent's details will not normally be disclosed by the Agency to anyone unless that parent consents. However, where a court makes an order requiring child support information to be disclosed, the Agency must comply with that order. The Agency also has the power to give any information it holds to a court or tribunal when child support cases are being considered, or to the appropriate authority for the calculation of Housing or Council Tax Benefits.

Regulation 10 of the Maintenance Assessment (Procedure) Regulations 1992 sets out the information which the Agency is required to provide when telling parents about a new maintenance assessment, or a revision or supersession of an existing assessment. This information includes the net and assessable income of both parents, and the non-resident parent's housing and travel costs allowed in the assessment. This information will not include details of addresses unless permission is given.

In the event that a parent appeals against a decision, they have the opportunity to opt into a confidentiality agreement so that any information which might lead to their whereabouts is not passed to the other parent.

In the new scheme, less information will be required to make a maintenance calculation and consequently, less information will be communicated in explaining that calculation. Regulation 23 of the Maintenance Calculation and Procedure Regulations 2000 provides that the notification of a maintenance calculation will set out a limited range of information, including the non-resident's net weekly income.

Provisions for the disclosure of information are entirely compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

"Your Britain, Your Europe"

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the constituencies *(a)* visited and *(b)* to be visited as part of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" roadshow. [151654]

Mr. Vaz: Since the launch of the "Your Britain, Your Europe" initiative in November 1999, I have visited over 30 towns and cities comprising the following constituencies: Norwich, South; Norwich, North; Edinburgh, North and Leith; Glasgow, Govan; Glasgow, Shettleston; Kirkcaldy; Cardiff, Central; Cardiff, South and Penarth; Islwyn; Reading, East; Swindon, North; Swindon, South; Oxford, East; Henley; Leeds, Central; Leeds, North-East; Elmet; Southampton, Itchen; Southampton, Test; Liverpool, Garston; Liverpool, Wavertree; Liverpool, Walton; Brent, North; Regent's Part and Kensington, North; Leicester, South; Northampton, North; Northampton, South; Birmingham, Ladywood; Wolverhampton, South-West; Poplar and Canning Town; Bethnal Green and Bow; Middlesbrough; Sunderland, North; Newcastle, Central; Gateshead, East and Washington, West; Houghton and Washington, East; Rotherham; Bath; Nuneaton; Hull, North; Manchester, Blackley, and Manchester, Central.

I plan to visit Cambridge, Bedford, Brighton, Hove, Hastings and Twickenham later this month. We have not yet confirmed my appointments in each venue.

China

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 16 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 172W, if the issue of freedom of religious belief was discussed at the UK/China Human Rights Dialogue in Beijing on 12 to 14 February; and if he will make a statement. [151823]

Mr. Battle: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr (Ms Osborne) on 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 100W. Freedom of religious belief was an important part of the discussions at the sixth round of the UK/China Human Rights Dialogue on 12–14 February, which included a visit to Wenzhou to investigate reports of the destruction of churches and temples there.

UK/India Round Table

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the work programme of the UK/India Round Table. [151852]

Mr. Wilson: The UK/India Round Table was established by the Foreign Secretary and the Indian Minister for External Affairs in April 2000. It has met twice so far (April 2000 in India, October 2000 in the UK), and is due to meet again in India in April. The Round Table has produced a series of constructive recommendations for enhancing the bilateral relationship between the UK and India.

Guinea

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his UN and EU counterparts on the refugee situation in Guinea. [152189]

Mr. Wilson: We are in close contact with the UN and EU on the refugee situation in Guinea. Our UN Permanent Representative in Geneva discussed the issue with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees on 23 February. The UK has committed £12 million in humanitarian assistance to Guinea and the region since December 2000. We have also sent a career diplomat to Conakry to strengthen the bilateral relationship and to ensure that our response to the refugee crisis is effective and well-targeted.

Compensation Claims

Mr. Alan Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if the Foreign Office assessment of claims for compensation prior to the transmission of such claims to the United Nations Compensation Commission was taken with the approval of the United Nations Compensation Commission. [151907]

Mr. Wilson: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has not assessed and does not assess claims prior to their transmission to the UN Compensation Commission. However, as the FCO was aware that the Commission had set a number of basic conditions that had to be met before claims could be accepted, claims were checked prior to dispatch to ensure that they met the known conditions.

Northern Cyprus

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to meet mayors from the occupied towns in Northern Cyprus during his visit to Cyprus in March; and if he will make a statement. [151870]

Mr. Vaz: The programme for my visit to Cyprus on 14 March is already extremely full. I regret therefore that on this occasion I will not be able to meet any of the mayors in Cyprus. I have written to my hon. Friend about the programme for my visit.

COREPER

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he received the document SN1247 of 30 January made available by COREPER; and when his Department placed it in the Public Paper and Vote Offices of each House. [152040]

Mr. Vaz: Document SN1247 containing the text of the Treaty of Nice was received by the Department on 30 January. On 6 February it was sent to the Libraries of each House and made available to Members, as were previous and subsequent revisions of the text. All up-to-date versions of the Treaty text have also been available on the Website www.europa.eu.int.

Nice Treaty

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when and where his Department received the final text of the treaty of Nice. [152039]

Mr. Vaz: The final text of the treaty of Nice (document CONFER 4820/00), as signed in Nice on 26 February, was received by this Department on 23 February. This version is identical to document SN1247/01 in all but layout.

On 26 February it was sent to the Libraries of each House and made available to hon. Members.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the IT projects currently undertaken in his Department; and if he will state the *(a)* expected completion date and *(b)* cost of each project. [151500]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The following IT projects are currently underway:

Firecrest

We are continuing the deployment of Windows-based Office Automation to all FCO Posts and Departments. The expected completion date is spring 2002. The total cost is £80 million.

FTN

The provision of a global data and voice network, through a 10-year PFI contract to spring 2010. The roll out is due for completion in spring 2002. The contract value is £165 million.

Prism

The change programme to deliver improved management of finances and staff resources, through new integrated personnel, finance, payroll and procurement processes. The expected completion date is autumn 2003. We are currently in the procurement phase—financial information is therefore commercially sensitive.

Internet project

The aim is to provide a new UK portal website, and kiosks overseas, linked to the portal, and upgraded FCO site and Posts' websites. The expected completion date is spring 2003. The present contract value is £6.4 million. There is support from our Capital Modernisation Fund towards full project costs up to £12 million.

Entry Clearance system

This is to provide a standard entry clearance management system at all entry clearance Posts. We expect this to be completed by autumn 2001. The estimated cost is £1.4 million.

Digital Passports system

Providing the 12 busiest passport-issuing Posts with machine readable passport equipment and software to enable the production of digital passports. The estimated completion date is summer 2001, at a cost of £2.8 million.

Global Consular Database system

Providing a global database to meet the rising demand for improved consular services to the public. We expect to complete this by summer 2002. We are currently at the procurement phase—financial information is therefore commercially sensitive.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the IT projects his Department plans to undertake in the next year; and if he will state in each case the *(a)* expected date of commencement and completion and *(b)* cost. [151477]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The following projects are being planned:

Confidential Firecrest

A confidential version of the FCO's Windows Office system. Starting Spring 2001. Completion planned end 2002.

High-classification networks

A separate network to handle material classified higher than Confidential, where possible making appropriate use of the FCO's FIRECREST/FTN infrastructure. Starting Summer 2001. Completion anticipated Spring 2002.

Firecrest future options

Technology refresh and new support arrangements for the FCO's Window Office system. Detailed project planning starting Spring 2002. Contract anticipated from late 2001-early 2003.

Entry Clearance Modernisation

The Joint Entry Clearance Unit has applied for Capital Modernisation Funding for the modernisation of entry clearance at Posts and links to the Home Office's systems. Completion anticipated in 2004.

Visa Warnings Index

The current warnings index system at overseas Posts is reaching the end of its supportable life. Options are being explored. Starting Spring 2001. Completion spring 2002.

Digital Passports

The delivery of digital passport systems to other passport issuing Posts, beyond the top 12 which are being equipped by an existing project. Beginning Summer 2001. Completion Summer 2004.

Consular Contact Centre

An out-of-hours contact facility for British nationals overseas. No firm time-scales yet.

No firm commitment has been made by the FCO to proceed with the above projects yet. Timings represent current projections only.

DEFENCE

US-UK Strategic Defence Initiative Memorandum of Understanding

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the titles of the Letters of Offer and Acceptance agreed under the auspices of the 1985 US-UK Strategic Defence Initiative Memorandum of Understanding since 1 May 1997, specifying when each one was signed and the name of the United States Government agency involved in each case. [152051]

Mr. Hoon: Five Letters of Offer and Acceptance have been agreed since May 1997. All have been signed on behalf of the US Ballistic Missile Defence Organisation. US Federal Acquisition Regulations do not now require titles but contract numbers only. The five Letters of Offer and Acceptance were signed on 1 September 1998, 12 December 1998, 30 June 1999, 5 December 2000 and 1 May 2000.

Dartmore Training Area

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he has taken to find alternative sites for dry military training on Dartmoor when the present licence expires. [151691]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Dartmoor Training Area covers an area of approximately 30,000 acres, of which 3,442 are the freehold property of the Ministry of Defence. The remainder is licensed from three landlords: the Duchy of Cornwall, the Maristowe Estate and South West Water. The Duchy and Maristowe licences do not expire until 2012 and we have not yet, therefore, begun exploring the possibility of alternative

sites. The licence for the land on Cramber Tor and Combshead owned by South West Water does, however, expire later this year but the training currently conducted in this area could not be absorbed elsewhere within the Dartmoor Training Area, nor on other land in the vicinity. The Ministry of Defence has work in hand to extend its rights to train on this land.

Explosions (Foulness Island)

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the effect of the noise, shockwaves and vibration caused by the detonation of high explosives at Foulness Island upon those living in Herne Bay suffering from terminal cancer. [152134]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Two vibration assessments have been carried out between 30 January and 28 February 2000 and between 5 October and 5 November 2000.

Both studies concluded that at no time during the survey period did any of the vibration levels, ground or airborne, approach those levels necessary for the possible onset of the most cosmetic of damage. The reports also highlighted that there seemed to be no correlation between events at Shoeburyness, recordable vibration levels and complains, and that passing traffic produced greater vibration levels.

The reports did not cover the impact of noise and vibration levels on specific susceptible individuals; nor have any other assessments been made of effects on cancer sufferers.

Veterans' Assessment Centre

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to establish a veterans' assessment centre. [151689]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* There is already a Ministry of Defence Medical Assessment Programme for Gulf Veterans and Porton Down Volunteers. The possible requirement for a Veterans' Assessment Centre to deal with health concerns that arise from time to time is addressed in the consultation document entitled "Introduction of a Voluntary Screening Programme Following Health Concerns in Respect of Depleted Uranium", published on 13 February. We will consider the merits of a veterans' assessment centre as part of our evaluation of the responses received.

Departmental Estate (Plymouth)

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) which of his Department's properties and lands *(a)* are in the process of being sold in Plymouth and *(b)* are being considered for sell off; and what their value is; [152539]

(2) which of his Department's properties and lands have been sold in Plymouth since 1997; and what their value was. [152538]

Dr. Moonie: Properties and lands sold by my Department since 1997 are provided in list 1. The value of each sale remains commercially confidential and is therefore withheld under exemption 13 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, unless the purchaser provides agreement to its disclosure. However, the total receipts from these sites were over £10 million. The properties and lands in the process of being sold in Plymouth and being considered for sell off are provided in list 2. Disclosing the valuations of such sites in disposal would not assist my Department in securing the best value for the taxpayer from the market.

List 1—Sites sold in Plymouth

1997–98

Former Dockyard School, Devonport
Royal Naval Engineering College Manadon (Part)
Royal Navy Supply Depot, Crapstone, Roborough
37, 39 and 49 Poole Park Road, St. Budeaux
Harrowbear Storage Depot, Roborough
Royal Marines Coypool Depot, Plympton
Bowden Park, Eggbuckland
16 Garages, Leatfield Drive, Looseleigh
34 Highclere Gardens, Widewell

1998–99

Goschen Centre, Devonport
Mount Wise Slopes, Devonport
Royal Naval Engineering College Manadon
Royal Marines Barracks Seaton
100 Granby Street, Devonport

1999–2000

Oil Fuel Depot Radford Woods, Plymstock
Barcote Walk, Eggbuckland
Land at Weston Mill, Devonport
Poole Farm, Estover

2000–01

Old Boiler House, Devonport
Brickfields, Devonport

List 2—Properties in the process of being sold in Plymouth

Coleridge Training Area, Estover
Ernesettle Lane, Ernesettle
Oil Fuel Depot Turnchapel, Plymstock
Alexandra House, St. Budeaux
Furniture Store, St. Budeaux
Mount Wise, Devonport
Agricultural Land, Coleridge
Agricultural Land, Coleridge
Agricultural Land, Coleridge
Sennen Place Car Park
52 Married Quarters, St. Budeaux
Millbay Park, Millbay
Land at Mutton Monster, Devonport
South Yard Sites, Devonport
Land at Foulston Avenue, St. Budeaux

Sites being considered for sell-off

Bull Point Barracks, St. Budeaux.

Defence Bills Agency

Mr. John Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Defence Bills Agency for the financial year 2001–02. [152675]

Dr. Moonie: Targets have been set for the Defence Bills Agency for the financial year 2001–02 in accordance with the Agency's Service Level Agreement with the Ministry of Defence. The key targets build on the already high standards of service provided by the Agency since its formation in January 1996 and are as follows:

(a) By the end of the financial year 2001–02 to reduce transaction costs by a further 6 per cent. for bills and a further 7 per cent. for invoices over the targets set in 2000–01.

(b) Produce financial and accounting information to the ISO 9001/03 quality standard and to the times set out in the Service Level Agreement.

(c) Pay 100 per cent. of correctly presented bills within 11 calendar days of receipt.

(d) Raise 95 per cent. of invoices within four working days of receipt of a correctly presented claimable document.

(e) Within the permitted tolerances, meet the performance targets prescribed in the Service Level Agreement.

(f) Achieve during 2001–02 an improvement of at least one percentage point in the overall level of customer satisfaction compared with 2000–01.

Depleted Uranium (Iraq)

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many weapons dropped by the RAF on Iraqi installations since the UK began patrolling the no-fly zone have had depleted uranium tips; and what the total estimated amount of radioactive dust generated was; [152079]

(2) pursuant to his oral statement of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 620–21, if the two weapons dropped by the RAF were tipped with depleted uranium. [152078]

Mr. Hoon: None of the weapons dropped by the RAF on Iraqi installations since the UK began patrolling the no-fly zone have had depleted uranium tips.

Devonport Dockyard

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for the demolition of part of Devonport Dockyard wall; and if he will make a statement. [152540]

Dr. Moonie: Preliminary plans have been drawn up to build a new single distribution facility, which will then enable the South Yard Wall of HM Naval Base Devonport to be realigned and thus some of the peripheral land to be given back to the local community.

While no funds have yet been allocated for this project, and it must be judged against other pressing requirements, a number of potential funding routes are being explored.

Beef Purchases (South Africa)

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what tonnage of beef from South Africa was purchased in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000 for consumption by the armed forces; at which ports and airports it was landed; at which bases the beef was consumed; and how the swill was disposed of, and at which locations. [152614]

Dr. Moonie: No beef was purchased by "3663", the Ministry of Defence food supply contractor, from South Africa during 1998–99, or 1999–2000. There is a remote possibility that a Royal Navy/Royal Fleet Auxiliary Ship may have purchased a small amount of beef while visiting a South African port. However, in the unlikely event that any such beef remained, it would be disposed of in accordance with the directives of the relevant Local Authority Environmental Health Officer on return to a UK port.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the special advisers working for him will relinquish their posts when the next general election is called. [149323]

Mr. Nick Brown: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 13 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 130W.

Fur Farming

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the European Court of Justice ruling on the requirement of public morality in each member state as it applies to fur farming. [150415]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 14 February 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given on 22 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 300–01W.

Over-30-months Scheme

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proportion of the cost of the dispersal of *(a)* cattle from the over-30-months scheme and *(b)* the rendered material is recovered from the EU; and at what stage of the dispersal process the Government are entitled to the money. [152069]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The EU regulation governing the OTMS provides for compensation to be paid to producers on the basis of the weight of their cattle and for the UK to be reimbursed on the basis of a flat rate per head of cattle purchased and subsequently destroyed.

No contribution is made towards the subsequent disposal costs.

Animals which are consigned directly to incineration after purchase attract the full 100 per cent. of the amount claimable, currently 291 euros for cows and 328 euros for other cattle. The Government are entitled to claim reimbursement from the EU in respect of the payment made to the producer for the animal when the carcase has been incinerated.

Animals which are consigned to rendering after purchase initially attract an 80 per cent. advance of the full amount claimable. The Government are entitled to claim reimbursement from the EU in respect of the payment made to the producer for the animal when its carcase has been rendered. The balance of 20 per cent. is

claimable by the Government once the meat and bonemeal and tallow produced from the rendering process has been incinerated.

Small Abattoirs

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will provide financial assistance to small abattoirs; and if he will make a statement. [152295]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* As announced in the Rural White Paper published on 28 November 2000, Agriculture Departments in England, Scotland and Wales have agreed to transfer £8.7 million to the Food Standards Agency for the three financial years 2001–02 to 2003–04; this will enable the Food Standards Agency to implement the principal recommendation of the Task Force chaired by Colin Maclean, to revise the method of charging for Meat Hygiene Service inspections in abattoirs and cutting plants. The Food Standards Agency has consulted the industry on its proposals. Implementation of the Maclean recommendation will significantly reduce inspection charges levied on many small and medium-sized meat plants and thus be of considerable benefit to the rural economy.

Farm Produce Retailers

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to introduce a code of practice for retailers of farm produce; and if he will make a statement. [152301]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The Ministry has no plans to introduce a code of practice for retailers of farm produce. However, last October my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry asked the Director General of Fair Trading to seek the agreement of the major supermarkets to a binding Code of Practice that addressed the specific concerns identified by the Competition Commission in their report on the supply of groceries from multiple stores. These concerns dealt with the relationship between the supermarkets and their suppliers, including farmers. The Office of Fair Trading is taking this forward and has recently sent a draft Code to representatives of suppliers for comment.

BSE

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with EU ministers about preventing the export of meat from other EU countries with recorded BSE; and if he will make a statement. [152286]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The Agriculture Council takes advice on BSE from the Scientific Steering Committee (SSC). On 29 November 2000 the SSC published its opinion on the scientific basis for import bans proposed by three member states with regard to BSE risks in France and the Republic of Ireland. The SSC advised that BSE incidence figures, at that time, did not require modification of the BSE risk of France and Ireland. However the SSC is reviewing this position regularly in the light of BSE surveillance results.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the potential impact on human health of burning in the open air the carcases of animals carrying BSE in response to the outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [151683]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The key arrangements for dealing with BSE and scrapie suspects have not changed as a consequence of the recent outbreak of foot and mouth disease. Carcases of animals slaughtered because of suspicion of BSE or scrapie will continue to be destroyed at incinerators. The movement of such carcases for disposal is exempt from the movement restrictions we have introduced in the response to the foot and mouth disease outbreak.

For non-BSE or scrapie suspects, pyres are being designed in a way to maximise good combustion, which will help to minimise air emissions and minimise incomplete burn-out and therefore potentially contaminated residues.

We are currently assessing the implications of the possibility that small numbers of cattle affected by the FMD outbreak may be in the pre-clinical stage of BSE and may harbour some of the BSE agent. A previous independent risk assessment undertaken for the Environment Agency in 1997 indicated that any such risk was very low and the incidence of BSE is now considerably lower than in 1997. Nevertheless, we are revisiting these conclusions in the light of the current circumstances, and hope to receive a preliminary independent assessment shortly.

Farm Investment

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the level of investment on farms in the last four years. [152300]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Statistics on the level of farm investment for the period 1995 to 1998 are presented in the table. Figures for 1999 and any revisions of previous years' figures will be published on 15 March 2001. Figures for 2000 will not be available until next year.

Annual level of investment (gross capital formation) in the agricultural and horticultural sector: United Kingdom 1995–98

£ million

Year	*Investment*
1995	2,620
1996	2,557
1997	2,544
1998	2,037

Source:
Agriculture in the United Kingdom 1999

Suckler Cows

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what payments from public funds are currently being made to farmers with suckler cows; and if he will make a statement. [152163]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The payments directed specifically at farmers with suckler cows are suckler cow premiums and related agrimonetary compensation payments. Farmers who keep suckler cows in the less-favoured areas are also eligible for Hill Farm Allowances. We are currently paying advance payments of premium to farmers whose claims are submitted toward the end of the 2000 application period. We intend to pay Hill Farm Allowances later this month and suckler cow premium balance payments early next month.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many suckler cows there are in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* Gloucestershire. [152289]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The information is as follows:

Number of suckler cows at June 2000 on main holdings

	Number
UK	1,829,464
Gloucestershire	15,388

Notes:
1. Gloucestershire excludes South Gloucestershire Unitary Authority (formerly part of Avon)
2. Suckler cows are all cows and heifers in the beef herd that have calved

Source:
June agricultural and horticultural censes

Farm Diversification

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what business rate relief is available to farmers who diversify their businesses; and if he will make a statement. [152305]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* As part of their programme to assist farming and help the agricultural industry, the Government have recently consulted on introducing rate relief for new non-agricultural business on farms. Legislation will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows.

HEALTH

BCG Vaccine

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to target BCG vaccine towards areas with a particularly high incidence of TB when the vaccine is in short supply. [146326]

Yvette Cooper: It is our policy to direct BCG supply to those most at risk.

BCG vaccine against tuberculosis is currently available for those individuals at higher risk of tuberculosis. Routine immunisation of all school children at age 10–14 was suspended in September 1999 following manufacturing problems encountered by the sole United Kingdom licensed source, Celltech Medeva. By the autumn school term last year sufficient supplies were available to allow health authorities to restart school immunisations in the London region, as the area with the highest rates and number of tuberculosis cases.

Although stocks are now being delivered, we need to be assured that we have sufficient amounts to restart and support the routine schools programme in all parts of the country without further interruption.

We are currently in the process of writing to all district immunisation co-ordinators to identify how much vaccine will be needed to restart the schools programme. Once this information is known, we will be able to make a judgment on when the programme can resume, and make an announcement.

Beef

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice he has sought on the statistical risks involved in eating *(a)* French beef products and *(b)* beef-on-the-bone in the period leading up to the ban on beef-on-the-bone. [146402]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* Responsibility for the provision of advice on food safety matters rests with the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

The FSA commissioned Dr. Christl Donnelly to research the risks associated with French beef and her paper was published in *Nature* on 14 December 2000, as was a letter from the FSA Chairman Sir John Krebs. Dr. Donnelly estimated that the risk from imported French beef from cattle aged no more than 30 months old at slaughter is essentially zero (no cattle within 12 months of developing clinical BSE). If the Over-30-Month-Rule is not fully enforced, the risk rises in proportion to the frequency of the breach. Dr. Donnelly estimated that if compliance with the Rule is 75 per cent., which Sir John Krebs considered to be reasonable on the basis of informal indications to the FSA from local authorities, the risk from French imports would be of the same order of magnitude as the current estimate for Britain's domestic beef.

The FSA estimated that comparable if not greater risks to United Kingdom consumers could arise from imported meat products that contain French beef.

The risk that applied in the period leading up to the UK's ban on beef-on-the-bone was estimated by the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) at its 2 December 1997 meeting. At that meeting, SEAC considered the experimental finding in BSE infected cattle that dorsal root ganglia (DRG) became infective in the pre-clinical phase of the disease and that in one experiment bone marrow appeared to be infective. SEAC reviewed a risk assessment which estimated that 24 per cent. of the total infected DRG were attributable to bone-in beef. The remaining DRG related to infectivity arises from the ganglia that cannot be removed from cuts of joints of meat in the normal boning out process. The Committee estimated the risk to people from DRG in food to be "very small", and commented that

> "there was a 95 per cent. chance of no case of nvCJD arising as a result of this exposure and a 5 per cent. chance of one case arising".

However, the Committee also noted that given the major uncertainties about many aspects of the transmission of the disease in cattle to humans the actual figure could be anywhere between 0 and 10 nvCJD cases being induced by eating infected DRG.

The risk from UK beef has declined since 1997. In July 1999 the Chief Medical Officer assessed the additional risk of lifting the UK's bone-in beef ban as

"tiny and unquantifiable in any meaningful way".

Consultants and Advisers

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department spent on external consultants and advisers in each year since 1979. [150479]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 15 February 2001]:* Departmental expenditure on external consultants and advisers, by financial year since 1992–93 is in the table.

£ million

Financial year	*Expenditure*
1992–93	21.936
1993–94	19.097
1994–95	20.766
1995–96	20.564
1996–97	15.789
1997–98	13.480
1998–99	7.181
1999–2000	8.717
2000–01	[1]4.428

[1] This figure covers the period April 2000 through January 2001

Figures for the period 1979 to 1992 are no longer held locally and retrieving the figures from central archives would incur delay and disproportionate cost.

The trend for the Department is downward but part of the explanation for the decreasing trend in departmental expenditure is the adoption of a new definition of consultancy, agreed by Ministers during 1997–98 and implemented in-year. This definition removed confusion between contracted services and consultancy proper; the figures for earlier years are therefore artificially inflated by including some doubtful categories. The significant reduction in 1998–99 is explained by being the first full year in which this distinction had been made.

Resuscitation Policies

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will (1) instruct the National Care Standards Commission to inspect all establishments for which it is responsible to ensure that *(a)* resuscitation policies which respect the rights of clients for whom they are responsible are in place, *(b)* such policies are understood by relevant staff and accessible to them and *(c)* such policies are subject to robust audit and monitoring arrangements; [151465]

(2) extend the remit of the requirement outlined in National Health Service Circular 2000/028, to require social services departments and private and voluntary providers to ensure that *(a)* all appropriate resuscitation policies which respect the rights of clients for whom they are responsible are in place, *(b)* such policies are understood by relevant staff and accessible to them and *(c)* such policies are subject to robust audit and monitoring arrangements. [151464]

Mr. Hutton: The National Care Standards Commission will regulate a wide range of social care and independent healthcare providers. Regulations and national minimum standards are being developed to reflect the different nature of each of the services to be regulated. Depending on the nature of the service being provided, a resuscitation policy will be required for some providers but not others. For example we will require independent healthcare providers to have a resuscitation policy in which patients' rights are central, which is readily available to staff, patient's relatives and carers, and of which staff are informed. These policies will have to be kept under review to ensure their continued effectiveness.

We published the national minimum standards for "Care Homes for Older People" on 2 March. These require care home providers to discuss with service users their wishes concerning terminal care. The standards also require them to provide staff with first aid training or employ nurses who will have basic life support training.

There will, however, be providers for whom a resuscitation policy will not be necessary, such as fostering agencies or voluntary adoption agencies.

It will not be necessary to extend the requirements in National Health Service Circular 2000–028 to local authority social services departments as the providers they contract with will have to be registered by the commission and therefore required to meet the relevant standards. This new regulatory framework will also require local authority owned care homes to be registered for the first time and these too will be required to meet the national minimum standards.

Ministerial Visits (Peterborough)

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the Ministers in his Department who visited any of the constituencies which are in the Peterborough Unitary Authority area between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001, indicating in each case *(a)* the date of the visit, *(b)* the constituencies included in the visit and *(c)* if the local Member met the Minister. [151026]

Ms Stuart: *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The available information is given in the table:

Date of visit	*Minister*	*Visit*	*Hon. Member met*
14 March 2000	Mr. Denham Minister of State	North Peterborough Primary Care Trust Peterborough Walk in Centre	Helen Brinton
14 March 2000	Mr. Denham Minister of State	South Peterborough PCT	None
1 August 2000	Lord Hunt of King's Heath Parliamentary Under-Secretary	Peterborough Hospital	None

Pigmeat

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress there has been on enforcing accurate labelling of pigmeat products. [151671]

Ms Stuart: Legislation on false and misleading labelling is enforced by local authorities. We have issued guidelines to help enforcement officers tackle misleading origin labelling. We have also appointed a pigmeat verification officer to investigate misuse of 'British' labels on pork and pigmeat products. He has dealt with over 20 cases considered to be misleading to the consumer; in almost all cases the retailer and processor have either removed the product from the shelves or changed their labelling policy in line with Government guidelines.

Abattoir Closures

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the proportion of abattoirs which have closed since 1 May 1997 due to costs of meat inspection. [151815]

Ms Stuart: No such estimate has been made. However, the Meat Inspection Charges Task Force says that it appeared to them that the main reason for small and medium-sized abattoirs going out of business at that time was the level of meat inspection charges.

The level of meat inspection charges has not been the only reason for business closures. Other factors, such as market changes, would be a more likely explanation for the long-term decline in the number of red meat abattoirs (which in England and Wales fell from 1,056 in 1979 to 410 in 1997 and 351 at the end of last year).

Runaway Children

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that the needs of runaway children are provided for; and if he will make a statement. [152020]

Mr. Hutton: We will, jointly with the Home Office, shortly be issuing guidance to local authorities with social services functions and to the police, aimed at ensuring that services for children and young people who run away from home or care are developed and provided on a multi-agency basis.

NHS/Social Services Care

Mr. Best: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the further guidance on the joint NHS/social services funding for respite care, nursing care and long-term care of the elderly will be issued to health authorities. [151906]

Mr. Hutton: Revised guidance for National Health Service responsibilities on continuing health care will be issued shortly. Guidance on NHS responsibilities for nursing care in nursing homes will be issued shortly. Relevant aspects of respite care will be covered in these two pieces of guidance.

Health and Social Services Recruitment

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to publish *(a)* a code of practice for health authorities on the recruitment of nursing and medical staff from overseas and *(b)* guidance for local authorities on the recruitment of trained social workers from overseas. [151788]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The Department issued guidance on international nurse recruitment in November 1999. A further code for international recruitment will be published shortly. The code will apply to the recruitment of doctors and dentists, nurses and midwives, allied health professions and scientists and technicians.

We have not issued any guidance to local authorities about the overseas recruitment of social workers. We have, however, advised the two local authorities who approached the Department for advice about the recruitment of social workers from abroad to adopt the principles of the National Health Service guidance.

Infant Mortality

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the risk to children and babies of parents sharing the same bed as their children; and what guidance he issues on this matter. [151897]

Yvette Cooper: My Department provided funds for the "Sudden Unexpected Deaths in Infancy" study. A copy of the ensuing report has been placed in the Library. The study evaluated risk factors associated with bed-sharing, the broad conclusions of which are reflected in our leaflet "Reduce the Risk of Cot Death". This advises against adults bed-sharing with a baby if one or both are smokers, take any form of drugs or medication which makes them sleep more heavily, have recently taken alcohol or are extremely tired.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps he is taking to develop an agreed protocol for the review of child deaths; [151940]

(2) what steps he is taking to ensure that the deaths of children which do not result from a clear organic cause are adequately reviewed. [151941]

Yvette Cooper: The Department provided funding for the "Sudden Unexpected Deaths in Infancy" study published last year. This report advocated a protocol for the review of child deaths, including those for which there is no clear organic cause for death. We are exploring the implementation of recommendations arising from this source together with those aspects of the recently available advice from the Chief Medical Officer's review of the approach to post-mortem examination, "The Removal, Retention and Use of Human Organs and Tissue from Post-mortem Examination", where this advice has a bearing on the review of death in childhood. Copies of both these documents are available in the Library.

Child Abuse

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action the social service inspectorate is taking in response to accusations of child abuse at the National Children's Home at Bourne Place and the home at Betts Way run by Bromley council and the Ravensbourne NHS trust; if the inspectorate is taking action in respect of officials employed by Bromley council; and if he will make a statement. [151996]

Mr. Hutton: We are aware of the two separate investigations into allegations of child abuse, at Bourne Place and Betts Way. The investigation into the allegations at Bourne Place School is continuing. The Betts Way investigation is drawing to a close. We will take the appropriate action when the investigations are completed.

Porton Down

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department made an assessment of the report produced by the US Institute of Medicine in 1993 entitled, "Veterans at Risk-the health effects of mustard gas and lewisite", while compiling the published message (CEM/CMO/2000/15) on the Porton Down's medical assessment programme from his Department's deputy chief medical officer on 21 November 2000. [152001]

Yvette Cooper: No assessment was made of the report from the United States Institute of Medicine (1993).

The Department's message was aimed at providing general practitioners and health professionals with urgent information on the medical assessment programme, since those seeking to use these facilities would need to be referred by their general practitioners. It was based on recent authoritative reviews, but it was not intended to provide a comprehensive review of the international literature. The names of two consultants in clinical toxicology were given as a source of direct specialist advice for health professions.

Universal Neonatal Hearing Screening

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when universal neonatal hearing screening will be piloted; in which health authorities it will be piloted; and how long it will be piloted before the Government announce the timetable for the national implementation of UNHS. [151925]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Universal neonatal hearing screening is due to be piloted, initially in 20 health authorities. This phase will start in March 2001 and will be staged over 12 months. An announcement will be made early next year about a timetable for national implementation taking account of the initial findings of the pilot. The first 20 health authorities are:

Avon HA
Bradford HA
Buckinghamshire HA
Calderdale & Kirklees HA
Camden & Islington HA
East London HA
East Sussex, Brighton & Hove HA
Manchester HA
Norfolk HA
North Cheshire HA
North Staffordshire HA
North Trent Consortia (including: Barnsley, North Derbyshire & Sheffield HAs)
Northumberland HA
Nottingham HA
Oxfordshire HA
Redbridge & Waltham Forest HA
Shropshire HA
Southampton & South West Hampshire HA
Stockport HA
Wiltshire HA.

Hearing Aids

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when Coventry will be included in the Modernising NHS Hearing Aid Services Project. [152323]

Mr. Hutton: The Department will study the results of the "Modernising National Health Service hearing aid services" project at the 20 participating NHS trusts to determine how changes to hearing aid services should be rolled out to the NHS. Pending the outcome of the project, other hospitals with the appropriate staff, training, equipment and experience are already able to access the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency contract for digital hearing aids.

Physical Activity Promotion

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made by health authorities in developing policies for promoting physical activity as required by the National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease. [152528]

Yvette Cooper: Policies for promoting physical activity are being developed locally. The National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease requires that by April 2001 all National Health Service bodies, working closely with local authorities, will have agreed and be contributing to the local programme of effective policies on increasing physical activity. The Department will assess progress after April.

Children on Adult Wards

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of children in each health authority area who are currently being nursed on adult wards. [151943]

Yvette Cooper: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Heart Disease

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what targets he has set to reduce heart disease over the next 10 years. [152624]

Yvette Cooper: We have set a target to reduce the death rate from coronary heart disease and stroke and related diseases in people under 75 by at least two fifths by 2010. The National Service Framework for coronary heart disease sets out a 10-year programme to transform the prevention and diagnosis of heart disease and the care and treatment of patients.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list in descending order the health authorities with the highest incidence of heart disease; and if he will include the budget allocated for reducing the number of heart attacks in each of these authorities. [152623]

Yvette Cooper: Information on the incidence of heart disease is not routinely available. Data are available showing admissions for heart disease and these provide some indication of levels of heart disease in the population. The health authorities which show the greatest number of hospital admissions for heart disease are shown in the table.

It is for health authorities in partnership with primary care groups/trusts and other local stakeholders to determine how best to use their funds to meet national and local priorities for improving health, tackling health inequalities and modernising services. In addition to existing resources in unified allocations, extra funding made available in 2000–01 includes £100 million for heart disease.

Finished consultant episodes (FCEs) where ischaemic heart disease is the main diagnosis (ICD10 codes I20-I25), by HA of residence NHS hospitals, England 1999–2000

Health authority of residence	*FCEs*
QD9 Birmingham HA	7,210
QET Norfolk	7,027
QD8 Avon	6,716
QCL Leicestershire	6,297
QAM East Sussex Brighton and Hove	6,015
QCM Lincolnshire	6,015
QDP Tees	5,965
QAX North Essex	5,938
QDE County Durham	5,925
QDH Leeds	5,677
QER Cambridge	5,630
QAF West Kent	5,598
QDW Dorset	5,401
QC2 Liverpool	5,336
QAY South Essex	5,003
QDV Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	4,921
QAN West Sussex	4,903
QDR North Yorkshire	4,876
QDT Calderdale and Kirklees	4,873
QCF Suffolk	4,816
QCP Nottingham	4,750
QDA Wigan and Bolton	4,724
QCJ South Derbyshire	4,709
QAW East London and The City	4,704
QD6 South and West Devon	4,532
QCW South Cheshire	4,527
QAE East Kent	4,487
QCX East Lancashire	4,457
QC5 St. Helens and Knowsley	4,375
QDF East Riding	4,363
QAV Ealing Hammersmith and Hounslow	4,266
QDJ Newcastle and North Tyneside	4,234
QCR Sheffield	4,207
QCC Northamptonshire	4,135
QD3 Southampton and South West Hampshire	4,036
QCY North West Lancashire	3,953
QDX North and East Devon	3,936
QEJ South Staffordshire	3,891
QC6 Salford and Trafford	3,872
QC9 West Pennine	3,822
QA8 Buckinghamshire	3,765
QDG Gateshead and South Tyneside	3,702
QCN North Nottinghamshire	3,691
QA7 Berkshire	3,655
QD5 Somerset	3,627
QD7 Wiltshire	3,594
QAL West Surrey	3,561
QC3 Manchester	3,524
QD2 Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	3,500
QAH Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	3,427
QA5 Redbridge and Waltham Forest	3,413
QCT Bury and Rochdale	3,410
QEL Warwickshire	3,401
QDY Gloucestershire	3,398
QAJ Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	3,384
QDD Bradford	3,361
QEH North Staffordshire	3,361
QEQ West Hertfordshire	3,314
QEN Worcestershire	3,262
QAR Brent and Harrow	3,258
QEP East and North Hertfordshire	3,219
QDC Wirral	3,097
QD1 North and Mid Hampshire	3,091
QCE Oxfordshire	3,077
QCG Barnsley	2,989
QCK Doncaster	2,941
QA6 Bedfordshire	2,886
QEA Coventry	2,847
QDQ Wakefield	2,842
QCH North Derbyshire	2,817
QDM Northumberland	2,811
QDN Sunderland	2,718
QAA Bexley and Greenwich	2,671
QDL South Humber	2,642
QCV North Cheshire	2,614
QC1 South Lancashire	2,550
QA4 Enfield & Haringey	2,524
QDK North Cumbria	2,468
QEF Shropshire	2,464
QAP Barking and Havering	2,438
QC7 Sefton	2,341
QEE Sandwell	2,268
QC4 Morecambe Bay	2,173
QEK Walsall	2,125
QC8 Stockport	2,116
QEC Dudley	2,062
QCQ Rotherham	2,051
QAQ Barnet	1,906
QAD Croydon	1,901
QAK East Surrey	1,878
QA3 Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	1,870
QAT Camden and Islington	1,851
QEM Wolverhampton	1,823
QAC Bromley	1,755
QAG Kingston and Richmond	1,561
QA2 Hillingdon	1,450
QEG Solihull	1,388
QED Herefordshire	889
QD4 Isle of Wight	808
Scotland	254
Wales	2,396
Not known	1,812
Northern Ireland	55
Total	364,168

Notes:

An FCE is defined as a period of patient care under one consultant in one health care provider.

The figures do not represent the number of patients, as one person may have several episodes within the year.

The main diagnosis is the first of seven diagnosis fields in the HES data set, and provides the main reason why the patient was in hospital.

Figures in this table are provisional (version 2) and have not yet been adjusted for shortfalls in data.

Source:

Hospital Episode Statistics (HES), Department of Health

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list in descending order the 100 council wards with *(a)* the highest rate of heart disease and *(b)* the highest rates of death due to heart disease. [152622]

Yvette Cooper: Information on the incidence of heart disease is not routinely available. We recognise the importance of better information, not least to ensure that we are able to identify and treat those with heart disease. That is why one of the early priorities for the National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease (CHD) is the systematic development and maintenance of practice-based CHD registers.

Data for the 25 health authorities with the highest rates of mortality from all circulatory disease, which includes all forms of heart disease, for men and women, are shown in the table. Information at council ward level on rates of death from specific causes is not collected.

Last week my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced new national health inequalities targets to reduce the health gap between children in different social classes and to reduce the difference in life expectancy between areas with the lowest life expectancy and the national average. This is not a short-term process, but it is only by tackling inequalities now that we can impact on the incidence of disease in the future.

Standardised Mortality Ratio (SMR) for all circulatory disease (ICD9 390–459), 1997–99: 25 health authorities with highest (worst) mortality rates

Health authority	*SMR*
Men	
West Pennine	130
Manchester	128
Rotherham	128
Liverpool	125
Sandwell	124
Wigan and Bolton	122
St. Helens and Knowsley	122
East Lancashire	121
County Durham	119
Bury and Rochdale	118
Northumberland	118
Barnsley	117
Wolverhampton	116
Tees	116
Gateshead and South Tyneside	114
North Staffordshire	114
Doncaster	113
Salford and Trafford	113
Sunderland	113
Birmingham	112
East London and the City	112
Bradford	111
Coventry	110
Wakefield	110
North Cheshire	110
Women	
West Pennine	128
East Lancashire	126
Bury and Rochdale	123
County Durham	123
Northumberland	122
Doncaster	121
Wigan and Bolton	120
Rotherham	119
Manchester	119
North Cumbria	119
St. Helens and Knowsley	116
Gateshead and South Tyneside	116
North Cheshire	116
Tees	114
North Derbyshire	113
Sunderland	113

Standardised Mortality Ratio (SMR) for all circulatory disease (ICD9 390–459), 1997–99: 25 health authorities with highest (worst) mortality rates

Health authority	*SMR*
Sandwell	112
Barnsley	112
Morecambe Bay	111
Coventry	111
South Lancashire	111
North Staffordshire	111
South Staffordshire	110
Liverpool	110
Dudley	110

Source:
Data from Department of Health Compendium of Clinical and Health Indicators 2000

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made in reducing avoidable heart disease for under-65s; and if he will make statement. [152616]

Yvette Cooper: The number of deaths from coronary heart disease for the under-65s in England has decreased from 17,140 in 1995 to 14,158 in 1999 (the latest year for which figures are available). Advances in technology, new investment and an increased focus on prevention should reduce this number still further.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to use the findings of the genome project to identify and reduce the risks of heart disease. [152621]

Yvette Cooper: As indicated in the NHS Plan, the Department, in association with the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust, is planning to establish a prospective survey to investigate genetic and environmental influences on the development of the commoner diseases of adult life, including heart disease.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of familial and hereditary factors in the occurrence of heart disease; and what measures he intends to introduce to reduce these factors. [152618]

Yvette Cooper: The Department, in association with the Medical Research Council and the Wellcome Trust, is planning to establish a prospective survey to investigate genetic and environmental influences on the development of the commoner diseases of adult life, including heart disease.

Heart disease risk is cumulative. The risk of heart disease can be significantly reduced, even for those individuals with a family history of heart disease, by stopping smoking, eating a low fat, low cholesterol diet and exercising regularly.

Many of the factors which influence the occurrence of heart disease are linked back to inequalities. Last week my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced new national health inequalities targets to reduce the health gap between children in different social classes and to reduce the difference in life expectancy between areas with the lowest life expectancy and the national average. This is not a short-term process—but it is only by tackling inequalities now that we can impact on familial and hereditary factors in the future.

SCOTLAND

Manufacturing Industry

7. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans she has to meet representatives of the Engineering Employers Federation in Scotland to discuss manufacturing industry. [150740]

Mrs. Liddell: I shall be meeting representatives of Scottish Engineering, the Engineering Employers Federation in Scotland, on 16 March.

23. **Mr. Ernie Ross:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when she last met representatives of business and trade unions to discuss manufacturing in Scotland; and if she will make a statement. [150757]

Mrs. Liddell: I have frequent meetings with representatives of business and trade unions to discuss issues of relevance to manufacturing and other sectors of the Scottish economy. We shall continue to provide the sound economic foundation to provide the best environment for Scottish business.

Chester Street Insurance Holdings

8. **Mr. David Marshall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on her discussions with the Clydeside Action on Asbestos Campaign concerning the firm, Chester Street. [150741]

Mrs. Liddell: I had a very useful meeting with Clydeside Action on Asbestos, the Scottish Trades Union Congress and Thompsons, solicitors, on 12 February. Thompsons have now provided detailed information on the number of claims that might be affected by the liquidation of Chester Street.

Tourism

9. **Mr. Tom Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when she next plans to meet the British Tourist Authority to discuss the promotion of Scotland overseas. [150743]

Mr. Foulkes: I shall be meeting the Chairman, his Deputy and the Chief Executive of the British Tourist Authority tomorrow to discuss a range of issues, including the promotion of Scotland overseas.

Drugs

10. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland, pursuant to her answer of 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 155W, on anti-drugs strategy, if she will make a statement on the progress made with matters raised in her meetings with the First Minister. [150744]

Mr. Foulkes: Progress has been made on a range of topics in my right hon. Friend's meetings with the First Minister.

Effective co-operation between the Government and the Scottish Executive is vital to tackle the scourge of illegal drugs. Quarterly meetings of the relevant Ministers with the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator now take place, most recently on 19 February in Edinburgh, to review progress within the framework of objectives and priorities set out in the White Paper "Tackling Drugs to build a Better Britain" and the Scottish Executive's report "Tackling Drugs in Scotland: Action in Partnership".

Single Currency

11. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent advice she has received from the European Commission regarding the impact of a single European currency on the Scottish economy. [150745]

14. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment she has made of the impact of future UK membership of the single European currency on manufacturing industry in Scotland. [150748]

Mrs. Liddell: The determining factor underpinning any Government decision to join the single currency is whether the economic case is clear and unambiguous. The Government have said that they will make another assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament.

Climate Change Levy

12. **Mr. Swinney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when she last discussed with the Chancellor of the Exchequer the likely impact of the climate change levy on Scottish industry and business. [150746]

Mr. Foulkes: My right hon. Friend has regular contact with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss a wide range of matters. The climate change levy will raise an estimated £1 billion in its first year, all of which will be recycled back to business by a 0.3 percentage point cut in employers' National Insurance contributions and £150 million of spending on energy efficiency. The Government expect the levy to be broadly neutral between services and manufacturing.

The effect on any specific business, sector or region will depend on a number of factors, including their future energy consumption, the level of employment, eligibility for discounts, use of renewable or combined heat and power energy, and take up of enhanced capital allowances.

Textile Industry

13. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement about the implications of the disagreements on tariffs between the United States of America and the European Union on the Scottish textile industry. [150747]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Mr. Browne) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 158W.

Block Grant

15. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recent discussions she has had with the First Minister regarding the method for calculating the Scottish block grant. [150749]

Mrs. Liddell: I have regular discussions with the First Minister on a range of matters. Details of the method of calculating the Scottish Assigned Budget were set out in the Statement of Funding Policy, which was published by HM Treasury on 17 July 2000.

Shipbuilding

16. **Mr. Sarwar:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on the Scottish shipbuilding industry. [150750]

Mrs. Liddell: Shipbuilding in Scotland remains competitive. Orders for Landing Ships and First Class Type 45 destroyers for the Ministry of Defence and also orders for merchant ships for Stirling Shipping will all result in work for Clyde yards. Nevertheless, each year will have to continue to work hard to win orders. For my part, I will continue to do all I can to support shipbuilding on the Clyde.

Unemployment

17. **Mr. Doran:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on recent trends in unemployment in Scotland. [150751]

Mrs. Liddell: The latest labour market figures show that there are 2,391,000 people in work in Scotland, the highest level since 1960. The employment rate stands at 73.8 per cent., the highest level since 1975. Claimant count unemployment in Scotland is at its lowest level since January 1976 and has fallen by 49,900 since spring 1997.

Fuel Taxes

18. **Mrs. Ewing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when she last discussed with the Chancellor of the Exchequer the impact of fuel taxes on the rural economy of Scotland. [150752]

Mr. Foulkes: My right hon. Friend has regular contact with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss a wide range of issues affecting the Scottish economy.

The Chancellor announced a variety of measures in his pre-Budget report in November last year which will help mitigate the effect of fuel prices on rural areas. These include: the reduction in Vehicle Excise Duty for cars up to 1500cc; the abolition of Vehicle Excise Duty for tractors and agricultural vehicles; a transitional rebate of 50 per cent. for HGV Vehicle Excise Duty; a 2p per litre cut in cleaner ultra-low sulphur petrol and a 3p per litre cut for ultra-low sulphur diesel. He has also announced more recently that any reduction in duty on ultra-low sulphur petrol that is announced in the Budget will be matched by a reduction in duty on unleaded petrol for a temporary period until 14 June 2001.

Television Licences

19. **John Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many pensioners in Scotland are benefiting from the free television licences for over-75s. [150753]

Mr. Foulkes: Around 340,000 pensioners in Scotland aged 75 and over are benefiting, including an estimated 40,000 in accommodation for residential care.

Ultra-low Sulphur Fuel

20. **Mr. David Stewart:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry about levels of provision of ultra-low sulphur fuel in Scotland. [150754]

Mr. Foulkes: My right hon. Friend has regular contact with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to discuss a wide range of matters.

The continued roll out of ultra-low sulphur fuel across the country is being monitored regularly by the Department of Trade and Industry. The Government's objectives are to ensure that everyone should be able to share the environmental benefits of ultra-low sulphur fuel, and the benefits of the duty cut associated with it. The Government intend to match any reduction in duty on ultra-low sulphur fuel that is announced in the Budget with a reduction in duty on unleaded petrol for a temporary period until 14 June 2001 while ultra-low sulphur fuels are rolled out across the country.

Working Families Tax Credit

21. **Mr. Wray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many families in Scotland are estimated to have benefited from the Working Families Tax Credit. [150755]

Mr. Foulkes: This information is contained in the Working Families Tax Credit Quarterly Enquiry for August 2000, a copy of which is in the House Library. The Quarterly Enquiry shows that Working Families Tax Credit is paid to an estimated 108,000 families in Scotland.

Economic and Social Policy

22. **Mr. Salmond:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when she last met the Scottish First Minister to discuss the impact of the Government's economic and social policy on Scotland. [150756]

Mrs. Liddell: I have regular discussions with the First Minister on a wide range of issues. The Government are pursuing a comprehensive and co-ordinated strategy to fulfil Britain's economic potential, building a stronger economy and a fairer society in which everyone can contribute to and share in rising prosperity. Scotland is benefiting and will continue to benefit from this comprehensive strategy.

Oil and Gas Industry

Dr. Strang: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if she will make a statement on the future of oil and gas industry businesses in Scotland. [150738]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government and industry are working together through PILOT to ensure that Scotland and the UK remains a centre of profitable activity well into the new century.

The Oil and Gas industry continues to be a major contributor to the Scottish Economy. Renewed confidence in the UK Continental Shelf as a place to do business is leading to increased investment intentions. The major package of investment projects announced by the oil companies in December last year will generate 2500 jobs across the UK, around half of which will be in Scotland.

These projects are excellent examples of how new ideas and initiatives—such as sharing knowledge on new technologies, improving communication across the supply chain, facilitation of asset trading technologies and commercial co-operation—are enabling access to previously undeveloped fields.

ADVOCATE-GENERAL

Brown Judgment

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Advocate-General for Scotland what advice she has given on the Brown case judgment and implications for road traffic and other cases in Scotland. [150760]

The Advocate-General for Scotland: As the hon. Lady will be aware, I give advice to Departments on various matters. In relation to the Brown case, I presented arguments to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in November of last year. Their Lordships decided that the current legislation was compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights.

PRIME MINISTER

Taoiseach

Mr. Grieve: To ask the Prime Minister when Her Majesty's Government were consulted by the Office of the Irish Taoiseach concerning his planned visit to Scotland on 11 February. [150822]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The Government were not consulted. However I understand that the Scotland Office, the Northern Ireland Office, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office were aware of the visit.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Summer Recess

45. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the President of the Council what representations have been received about changing the summer recess dates to more closely mirror school summer holidays. [150782]

Mr. Tipping: I have received no recent representations, although I am aware this is a matter which concerns many Members.

Regional Select Committees

46. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the President of the Council what proposals she has for establishing Select Committees for the regions. [150785]

Mrs. Beckett: I have no proposals to add to the establishment of the Standing Committee on the Regions.

Modernisation Committee

47. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the President of the Council what further proposals she plans to bring before the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House. [150786]

50. **Mrs. Anne Campbell:** To ask the President of the Council what further proposals she plans to bring forward to the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons. [150789]

Mrs. Beckett: I have little to add to the answer given by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary on 19 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 204.

Information Technology

49. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the President of the Council when she expects to *(a)* receive and *(b)* implement the SSRB report on the supply to and use of information technology by hon. Members. [150788]

Mrs. Beckett: The report is made to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and it will be dealt with in the normal way.

Programming of Legislation

51. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the President of the Council what assessment she has made of the progress on the programming of legislation. [150790]

53. **Shona McIsaac:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on progress on the programming of legislation. [150792]

Mrs. Beckett: I refer my hon. Friends to the answer I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Dr. Stoate), *Official Report*, column 145.

House of Lords Reform

52. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the President of the Council what progress is being made on setting up the Joint Committee on the reform of the House of Lords. [150791]

Mr. Tipping: My right hon. Friend the President of the Council announced on 3 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 92W, that the Government aimed to establish a Joint Committee of both Houses to consider the parliamentary implications of the Royal Commission on Reform of the House of Lords so that it should begin work as soon as possible after the summer recess.

Unfortunately, discussions with the other parties in both Houses on the membership and precise terms of reference failed to reach agreement. We have therefore concluded that there is little present prospect of setting up a Joint Committee in the present Parliament.

Business Co-ordination Unit

Gillian Merron: To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on progress with the Government's Business Co-ordination Unit. [150787]

Mr. Tipping: Following its launch in September I am very pleased to report that the Unit has made good progress. In just a short space of time it has improved access to Ministers for the business community, through its co-ordination of invitations received across Whitehall.

The initiative has been extremely well received both by the business community and the agencies that represent business. I am also pleased to say that this initiative is an

excellent example of Government working together—the support the Unit has received from Regional Government Offices has been a key factor in its success.

Paper Recycling

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what plans she has to set targets for the recycling of paper. [150781]

Mrs. Roe: This is a matter for the Serjeant at Arms. I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

House of Commons Envelopes

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee how many pre-paid House of Commons envelopes have been supplied to hon. Members since May 1997. [150783]

Mrs. Roe: This is a matter for the Serjeant at Arms. I have asked him to write to my hon. Friend.

Messages from Her Majesty

Mr. Winnick: To ask the President of the Council if she will put proposals before the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons to allow messages from Her Majesty no longer to be communicated to the House by the Vice-Chamberlain of the Household. [152456]

Mrs. Beckett: I have no such plans, but my hon. Friend may wish to raise the matter with the Procedure Committee.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money has been allocated to clear the dome site. [150929]

Janet Anderson: As indicated in the New Millennium Experience Company's (NMEC) October 2000 forecast, which was placed in the Libraries of both Houses on 26 October, decommissioning costs being borne by the company are estimated at £7.5 million. Further potential costs of approximately £15 million relating to certain decommissioning requirements will be borne by English Partnerships as indicated in the agreement of 12 January 2001 between English Partnerships and NMEC. English Partnerships are to be reimbursed from sale proceeds. I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government and the Regions on 17 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 258W, which gives details of that agreement.

Dancing Schools

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his estimate is of the number of dancing schools in *(a)* London and *(b)* England and Wales; if he will break them down by styles of dance predominantly taught; what funding is available for ethnic minority schools of dancing; and what the level of public expenditure was on each variety of dance in each of the past five years. [151627]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Council for Dance Education and Training (CDET), an independent body representing dance training providers, accredits courses at vocational dance training schools. CDET's membership includes 24 vocational dance schools in England: 13 in London, five more in the south-east, and six in the midlands or north-west. Ten of these focus on musical theatre (dance), six on ballet, four on contemporary dance, three on both musical theatre and ballet, and one on these three styles. In addition, the CDET is aware of at least 10 other schools in England which say they offer vocational training. Information on Welsh schools is a matter for the devolved Administration.

Funding for dance is provided through a range of public and private sources, at central Government and local levels. DCMS support for dance is undertaken by the Arts Council of England and the regional arts boards. The information is not readily available in the form requested, but the Arts Council has provided the following breakdown of grant in aid for specific dance causes, and headline figures for Arts Lottery expenditure on dance, as follows:

Grant in aid

£

Year	*Total*	*Ballet*	*Contemporary*	*African/Asian*
1997–98	23,548,016	17,425,531	2,354,803	941,920
1998–99	23,165,756	17,142,659	2,316,576	1,158,289
1999–2000	27,264,356	19,902,979	2,726,435	1,363,217
2000–01	25,895,815	18,903,944	2,589,581	1,297,790

Arts Council Lottery dance expenditure/awards total £133,074,167. It includes:

New Audiences Programme: £698,000;

Regional Arts Lottery Programme: £4,850,109;

Interim Funding Scheme £19,114,413 (includes awards to drama colleges, and a 50 per cent. grant from the DfEE).

Sport England provides some support for ballroom and Latin dancing, and some physical movement related dance forms. Grant in aid provision totalled over £300,000 in the last five years, with Lottery awards of at least £420,000, although the overall figure is likely to be higher where dance has featured as part of broader Lottery applications.

Sites and Monuments Records (Internet)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he is taking to ensure local authorities maintain and develop comprehensive sites and monuments records and post them on the internet. [151865]

Mr. Alan Howarth: A recommendation that the Government should ensure that local authorities have access to comprehensive records of the historic environment and that such information should be widely available through the electronic media was included in English Heritage's recent report "Power of Place". The Government are considering all the recommendations made in that document and plan to issue a policy statement during the spring.

Football Supporters Trusts

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what financial and other

resources the Government have provided for the establishment of football supporters trusts in England; to whom the Government provided such resources; and on what dates. [152071]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Supporters Direct was established last year to offer advice to those wishing to form supporters trusts. Supporters Direct receives no funding from the Government. The Football Foundation has allocated funding of £250,000 to Supporters Direct for 2000–01, and funding arrangements for 2001–02 and subsequent years are under discussion.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152103]

Janet Anderson: In common with all other Government Departments, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport will submit details of timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers. The Green Ministers' report is published annually and will make specific reference to timber procurement.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much certified timber has been purchased by his Department over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152119]

Janet Anderson: To answer the parliamentary question would incur disproportionate cost. Departments do not yet have systems in place to provide the data on the proportion of certified timber purchased over the last six months. The interdepartmental working group on timber procurement is working to develop a common reporting template, which will form the basis for the future reporting on timber procurement.

Regional Arts Boards

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the administration costs as a percentage of total expenditure were of each of the regional arts boards in each of the last three years; and what the forecast figures are for the current year, including the underlying data, on which the calculations are based. [152620]

Mr. Chris Smith: The information requested is in the table:

	East England Arts	*East Midland Arts Board*	*London Arts*	*Northern Arts Board*	*North West Arts Board*	*Southern Arts Board*	*South East Arts Board*	*Arts Board South West*	*West Midlands Arts Board*	*Yorkshire Arts Board*	*Average*
1996–97											
Total administration and overheads	1,172,567	907,999	1,788,826	1,153,409	1,346,020	987,085	837,920	1,062,346	1,163,108	1,098,290	—
Total expenditure	5,672,041	5,039,043	14,864,120	8,267,016	9,667,594	4,396,563	3,386,680	4,980,592	6,468,162	7,641,412	—
Admin. and overheads as percentage of total expenditure	21	18	12	14	14	22	25	21	18	14	18
1997–98											
Total administration and overheads	1,306,192	1,022,998	2,148,360	1,191,143	1,467,866	1,152,545	1,105,794	1,076,834	1,222,727	1,232,622	—
Total expenditure	5,921,244	5,168,319	14,872,438	7,891,794	11,219,265	4,503,999	3,615,520	5,238,197	6,822,659	7,774,146	—
Admin. and overheads as percentage of total expenditure	22	20	14	15	13	26	28	21	18	16	19
1998–99											
Total administration and overheads	1,356,880	1,122,304	1,967,743	1,153,409	1,548,197	1,214,485	1,133,405	1,278,564	1,277,346	1,315,188	—
Total expenditure	5,639,774	5,365,203	14,811,118	8,267,016	10,078,239	5,079,650	3,761,861	5,297,039	7,000,927	8,021,625	—
Admin. and overheads as percentage of total expenditure	24	21	13	14	15	24	30	24	18	16	20
1999–2000											
Total administration and overheads	1,627,448	1,674,667	2,329,840	1,304,918	1,685,940	1,447,191	1,474,530	1,843,841	1,480,836	1,464,843	—
Total expenditure	6,293,572	7,006,544	16,015,916	9,405,899	11,546,441	5,819,415	4,398,127	6,183,189	8,145,266	8,814,294	—
Admin. and overheads as percentage of total expenditure	26	24	15	14	15	25	34	30	18	17	22
2000–01[1]											
Total administration and overheads	2,028,838	1,534,075	3,214,962	1,407,115	2,071,889	1,565,038	1,642,913	1,426,484	1,637,777	1,665,275	—
Total expenditure	9,690,169	9,598,019	31,498,337	12,623,240	18,643,253	11,278,692	7,210,107	9,266,951	13,766,026	12,775,457	—
Admin. and overheads as percentage of total expenditure	21	16	10	11	11	14	23	15	12	13	15

[1] Forecast

Notes:

1. Total administration and overheads figure includes staffing costs, costs related to premises, office costs, travel and subsistence and company costs. It excludes everything which may be considered to be direct arts spend.

Source:

All figures are taken from RAB audited accounts, with the exception of 2000–01 which are taken from RAB business plans

Television Audio-description Services

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the level of audio-description services available to blind people with television sets. [151849]

Janet Anderson: The Broadcasting Act 1996 sets a 10 per cent. target for audio description to be reached by the 10th anniversary of the start of the digital terrestrial television (DTT) service. The Independent Television Commission (ITC) has set an interim target for at least 2 per cent. of programmes on DTT to be audio described by the start of the second year of the service. The BBC's policy is to at least match these targets. I understand from the ITC that the 2 per cent. target has been met, except by those channels which have been granted special exemption.

Television Subtitling

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the powers of Ofcom as proposed in the White Paper, "A New Future for Communications", will include the provision to ensure that television advertisements are accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing people through the provision of closed caption subtitles. [151850]

Janet Anderson: It is intended that Ofcom will have the same general powers in respect of the provision of programmes for deaf and hard-of-hearing people that the Independent Television Commission (ITC) currently possesses under section 20 of the Broadcasting Act 1996. There are at present no statutory requirements for advertisements to be subtitled on digital terrestrial television; indeed they are specifically excluded from the definition of "programme" under section 20(14). The ITC does not therefore monitor the level of subtitling in advertisements but has advised my Department that about 50 to 60 per cent. of advertisers currently subtitle advertisements voluntarily.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects the Independent Television Commission to commence its review on the feasibility of *(a)* Channel 3 and *(b)* Channel 4 increasing beyond 80 per cent. the target for subtitling on digital terrestrial television; and when this review is expected to be completed. [151851]

Janet Anderson: My Department recently published the results of a review of the statutory requirements for the provision of subtitling, sign language and audio description services on digital terrestrial television(DTT), which included our intention to raise the level of subtitling on DTT from 50 per cent. to 80 per cent. The Independent Television Commission, which is responsible under the Broadcasting Act 1990 for setting targets on analogue services, have separately undertaken to review the feasibility of Channel 3 and Channel 4 increasing subtitling beyond 80 per cent. in respect of these services before the end of 2001.

Athletics Championships (Funding)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what funding guarantees his Department has given to the organisers of *(a)* Manchester 2002 and *(b)* the World Athletics Championships in 2005. [152519]

Kate Hoey: The Government have not given any funding guarantees to the organisers of the 2002 Commonwealth Games or the 2005 IAAF World Athletics Championships. However, the Government are providing £10.5 million towards the costs of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2002 Commonwealth Games.

Physical Activity Promotion

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what plans he has to appoint a joint special adviser between his Department and the Department of Health; [152536]

(2) what plans he has to encourage physical activity *(a)* among young people and *(b)* in society to tackle increasing levels of obesity; [152531]

(3) if he will set joint targets with the Department for Health for the promotion of physical activity. [152535]

Kate Hoey: My Department is working closely with the Department of Health to encourage physical activity, and we will consider the potential for developing joint targets and joint appointments. We have also been working together with the Department for Education and Employment to develop a number of initiatives to improve opportunities for children to enjoy sport in schools including an intention to offer school children an entitlement to two hours per week of high-quality PE and sporting activity within and around the school day. We are consulting on how best to do this. In addition, DCMS is part of the Inter-Ministerial Group to Improve Children's Diet and Activity which is considering cross-departmental action to promote the health benefits of physical activity and to tackle the increasing levels of obesity.

Register of Exercise Professionals

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what arrangements have been made for funding the Register of Exercise Professionals. [152532]

Kate Hoey: Sport England has commissioned a feasibility report into the operation and funding of a Register of Exercise Professionals. Any decision on funding arrangements for the register will be made after the report has been completed and consideration has been given to its findings.

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152646]

Mr. Chris Smith: Following the introduction of the Department's new name in July 1997, a detailed review of all of the Department's internal and external communications processes was undertaken.

Part of this review included the production of a new visual identity or logo to replace the Government roundel which had previously been used.

The cost of this element of the review was £26,000. The work included the development of the logo and the layout of all internal and external documents and stationery.

Improvements identified during the process achieved a 25 per cent. saving on the purchase of the Department's printed stationery bill. Further efficiency gains have been achieved from the wider communications improvements put in place following the review.

CABINET OFFICE

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) if her Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published; [152111]

(2) how much certified timber has been purchased by her Department over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152118]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Cabinet Office purchases timber wherever possible from sustainably managed sources. To quantify the proportion of certified timber that the Department has purchased over the last six months would incur disproportionate cost. The Cabinet Office will take advice from the interdepartmental timber working group on timber procurement monitoring and reporting arrangements, and in line with Government guidance to Departments, the Cabinet Office will report details of its timber purchases through the annual Green Ministers' report.

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the total cost was of pension contributions paid by the Government *(a)* to special advisers and *(b)* into the pension schemes of special advisers, during the period 1 April 1999 to 30 March 2000. [152062]

Marjorie Mowlam: *(a)* None. Pension contributions are paid direct by Departments into the individual special advisers' pension schemes.

(b) Provision has been made for a maximum of £476,000 to be paid into the pension schemes of special advisers for the year 1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000.

In addition, National Insurance contributions are paid at the contracted-in rates.

Civil Service Pensions

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the employers' contribution will be to the new civil service pension scheme due to be introduced in October 2002. [151867]

Mr. Stringer: I refer the hon. Member to my answer of 7 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 542W. The aim is a new scheme which better reflects employment costs. The new scheme will have an important part to play in supporting the wider corporate objectives and reward strategies of the civil service reform programme.

Employer contributions are set on advice from the Government Actuary. Salary-banded contributions averaging 13.5 per cent. of pensionable pay are paid by employers for staff in the existing defined benefit scheme.

The first strand of the new arrangements is an improved defined benefit scheme. Employer contributions to this will be the same as for the existing defined benefit scheme, with the entire cost of the changes met through an increase in the member contribution rate. The second strand of the new arrangements is a defined contribution plan (delivered through stakeholder pension products). Employers will make contributions to this according to the age of the scheme member. In addition to the age-related contribution, the employer will match employee contributions to a maximum of 3 per cent. of pensionable pay. The Government Actuary has not yet finalised the contribution scale for the defined contribution plan, but the scale will be commensurate with the costs to employers of the new defined benefit option for those expected to be attracted to the defined contribution plan.

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many press releases were issued by her Department in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; how many have been issued in the current financial year; and what her estimate is of the total number for the current financial year. [149254]

Marjorie Mowlam: The total number of press releases issued each financial year by my Department is as follows: *(a)* 180 in 1996–97; *(b)* 253 in 1997–98; *(c)* 264 in 1998–99; and *(d)* 412 in 1999–2000. In this financial year (up until the end of January) my Department has issued 281 press releases. On a purely statistical basis I estimate that for the current financial year my Department will issue approximately 337 press releases.

My press office also issues releases on behalf of the Privy Council Office.

The figure for 1999–2000 includes press releases issued by the Year 2000 Media Co-ordination Unit, which also operated from the Cabinet Office.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Magistrates Courts

33. **Mr. Prior:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what estimate she has made of the effects of the European convention on human rights on the operation of magistrates courts in England and Wales. [150769]

Jane Kennedy: My Department will shortly publish an update on the early impact of the European Convention on Human Rights on all courts and tribunals for which the Department is responsible.

Data provided by the magistrates courts in the period October to December 2000 show that there has been no significant impact so far on the operation of the magistrates courts as a result of the ECHR.

36. **Mr. Shepherd:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will make a statement on protecting local magistrates courts from closure. [150772]

Jane Kennedy: It is the Government's policy that decisions on the number and location of magistrates courts is best made by the local Magistrates Courts Committee.

38. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what recent assessment she has made of the compatibility of the operation of magistrates courts in England and Wales with the provisions of the European convention on human rights. [150774]

Jane Kennedy: The responsibility for ensuring that magistrates courts meet the requirements of the Convention lies with the Magistrates Courts Committees in consultation with local paying authorities. The Lord Chancellor's Department has encouraged the Magistrates Courts Committees to review their courts in the light of the Convention.

Data provided by the magistrates courts in the period October to December 2000 show that there has been no significant impact so far on the operation of the magistrates courts as a result of the ECHR.

Sentencing Standards

34. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps he is taking to ensure *(a)* consistency of sentencing standards and *(b)* full information about evaluation of possible disposals of judges and magistrates. [150770]

Mr. Lock: On the assumption that the hon. Member's question relates to disposals of cases by judges and magistrates I refer him to the oral answer given to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 164–65.

Bail

37. **Mr. Gordon Marsden:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what guidance is given to judges on granting bail in cases where the defendant is accused of murder. [150773]

Jane Kennedy: Bail in all criminal proceedings is governed by the provisions of the Bail Act 1976. A defendant accused of any offence punishable with imprisonment need not be granted bail if the court is satisfied that one or more factors set out in paragraph 2 of Schedule 1 to the Bail Act apply in his case. A person charged with murder who has a previous conviction for murder, manslaughter or rape may only be granted bail if the court is satisfied that there are exceptional circumstances which justify it (section 25 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994).

Solicitors

39. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the contractual arrangements for criminal defence solicitors. [150775]

Mr. Lock: The Criminal Defence Service (CDS) will be implemented on 2 April 2001, when the provisions of the Legal Aid Act 1988, which provide for the current system of criminal legal aid, will be repealed.

Within the CDS, the primary mechanism for providing services to those being investigated for, or charged with, a criminal offence will be through private practice lawyers operating under contract to the Legal Services Commission.

A draft contract for consultation was published at the end of August 2000, and a revised contract, significantly amended following detailed discussions with the Law Society, at the end of December.

The Commission has invited firms to sign contracts, and signed contracts are now being returned to it.

From 2 April, only solicitors' firms with a contract will be able to undertake criminal defence work funded by the Commission.

County Courts

40. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the closure of county courts. [150776]

Mr. Lock: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer I gave him on 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 154W, to his previous question on this subject. Responses to the consultation paper "Modernising the Civil Courts", which I mentioned in that answer, should be returned to the Court Service Agency by 21 April 2001.

Lay Magistracy

41. **Sir Sydney Chapman:** To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will make a statement on her plans to reform the lay magistracy. [150777]

Jane Kennedy: The report by Rod Morgan and Neil Russell, "The Judiciary in the Magistrates' Courts", published on 14 December, concluded that to abolish or greatly diminish the role of the lay magistracy would not be widely understood or supported in the country, and the Government agree with that view.

Lord Justice Auld is currently conducting his independent review of the criminal courts. It would be premature to comment on that until he submits his report.

Departmental Policies (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Warrington, North constituency, the effects on Warrington, North of her Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152320]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective

system of justice, improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

In particular, the Warrington, North constituency is covered by the Warrington Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP). This has recently formed its Executive and met initially on 8 February 2001. There are currently 165 CLSPs throughout England and Wales.

Across Warrington Borough Council, 15 agencies (13 solicitors, one Law Centre and one District CAB) have been awarded contracts with the Community Legal Services (CLS). The suppliers are located mainly in the centre of Warrington and this includes Warrington, North wards. The total 12-month value of contracts awarded amounts to over £249,000, and these cover categories including primarily family, but also debt, housing and welfare benefits.

Legal Services Commission

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what decisions have been made on the changes proposed to the financial conditions for funding civil and family cases by the Legal Services Commission. [152740]

Mr. Lock: We have today published a report giving details of the Government's conclusions following consultation on these proposals. The introduction of these changes to the financial eligibility tests for funding in civil cases will move towards alignment of the eligibility limits for all levels of publicly funded legal services, provide simplified means testing arrangements for both applicants and suppliers and ensure a fair balance between publicly and privately funded litigants.

We are raising the income and capital threshold for legal help so that an estimated 5 million more people can get the advice and assistance on everyday problems that they need. We will not be introducing contributions for legal help so all eligible clients will be able to receive legal advice entirely free of charge.

We have listened carefully to the responses and we will not be introducing capital contributions from equity at the present time. We believe the implementation of these proposals might deter low-income homeowners from seeking legal advice.

We will fully equalise the income eligibility limit for legal help with legal representation as soon as it is financially prudent to do so. This will bring a further 2 million people into the scope of the Community Legal Service Fund.

The cost of these changes is £30 million over three years. We have been able to spend this money on increasing eligibility because of the success of our legal aid reforms in controlling and refocusing expenditure on priorities.

We undertook to consult on the new eligibility limits for all levels of service once they were available and a consultation paper has been published today. Consultation will run until 1 May 2001. These changes will be implemented on 1 October 2001.

Court Service Annual Report

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when she will publish the Court Service annual report for 1999–2000. [152741]

Jane Kennedy: The Court Service annual report for 1999–2000 has been published today and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Law Commission Report No. 251

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when she will make an announcement on Law Commission Report No. 251, "The Rule against Perpetuities and Excessive Accumulations". [152742]

Jane Kennedy: The Government accept the Law Commission's recommendations in Report No. 251 "The Rule against Perpetuities and Excessive Accumulations" and will legislate when parliamentary time allows.

Review of Civil Enforcement

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress has been made on Phase Two of the Review of Civil Enforcement. [152743]

Mr. Lock: We have been engaged in a comprehensive review of the enforcement of civil court judgments since 1998. I announced by way of a written answer on 26 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 715W, the completion of Phase One of the review. The rules of court arising from this phase are currently being drafted.

I also announced on 26 July last year the terms of Phase Two of the review. These were:

> To implement costed recommendations, including the production of a unified set of rules of court for enforcement, and
>
> To identify, in the light of the amended procedures and revised powers of bailiffs, the type of agent or form of agency, which should be responsible for carrying out those enforcement procedures, and to make costed recommendations.

I am pleased to announce that Phase Two of the review of enforcement procedures will now be broadened to include structures for, and the regulation of, civil enforcement agents generally, not just within the High Court and the county courts.

It would be a wasted opportunity not to attempt to go further and devise a single model encompassing not just civil court warrant enforcement agents, but other private sector civil enforcement agents collecting money for central or local government. This will involve my officials exploring systems across all areas of enforcement, and they will now examine various possible options, including issues surrounding a new class of enforcement agents who would be officers of, but not necessarily employees of, the court.

For this reason we will publish in late Spring 2001 a Green Paper on the structure and regulation of enforcement, and a single piece of bailiff law, followed by a White Paper later in the year, setting out our proposals for legislation.

This approach offers the best prospect of ensuring that there are real gains from the Review. Continuing with the narrower focus would pass up the opportunity of achieving a fundamental improvement in our enforcement system.

Departmental Policies (Vale of Clwyd)

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Vale of Clwyd constituency, the effects on the Vale of Clwyd of the Lord Chancellor's Department's policies since May 1997. [151933]

Mr. Lock: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

The Vale of Clwyd is covered by Denbighshire Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP). There are currently 165 CLSPs throughout England and Wales. Fifteen of these are based in Wales.

Within Denbighshire 10 solicitor firms and two not-for-profit organisations have been awarded contracts whose total value amounts to over £273,000. The contracts cover a range of categories, including family, debt, housing and welfare benefits.

Eleven of the organisations are based within the Vale of Clwyd constituency area and predominantly provide services to residents covered by the towns of Rhyl and Denbigh. Although one provider, South Denbighshire CAB, is based outside the Vale of Clwyd, its services can still be accessed by people living within the Vale of Clwyd.

All 12 organisations above are holders of the Community Legal Service Quality Mark. In addition, the award of a specialist level Quality Mark is imminent for the Welfare Rights Unit at Denbighshire County Council, and should be issued no later than May 2001. North Denbighshire CAB has submitted an application at the General Help level and is due to be audited at the beginning of April 2001.

Community Legal Service

Maria Eagle: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the changes which would be required in the budget of the Community Legal Service for civil cases for each 5 per cent. increase in solicitors' remuneration in criminal cases; and how many people requiring support for civil cases would be affected by each 5 per cent. increase. [152063]

Mr. Lock: Each 5 per cent. increase in remuneration for all categories of criminal legal aid would cost around £42 million, and would reduce the ability of the Legal Services Commission to support about 75,000 acts of assistance in civil matters.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 7 March 2001

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Ronald Maddison

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Solicitor-General if he has received a recent request from the Wiltshire Coroner to hold a fresh inquest on the death of Ronald Maddison at the defence research establishment at Porton Down; and if he will make a statement. [152378]

The Solicitor-General: Her Majesty's Coroner for Wiltshire and Swindon has requested the Attorney-General's consent for a fresh inquest into the death of Ronald Maddison which occurred in 1953. The Coroner has been asked to provide further information.

The procedure is governed by section 13 of the Coroners Act 1988. Only the High Court may order a fresh inquest to be held. The Attorney-General's consent is required for the application to the High Court for that fresh inquest.

The application for the Attorney-General's consent will be considered when the further information he has requested arrives. If the Attorney-General grants his consent the Coroner will then be able to make the necessary application to the High Court.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Prison Places

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the prisons being built in England and Wales; when each is expected to open; and how many inmate places there will be at each. [152679]

Mr. Boateng: One prison is currently under construction, Dovegate prison, and is due to open on 9 July 2001. There will be 800 prisoner places, of which 200 will form a therapeutic community.

Asylum

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum in the UK have been rejected on non-compliance grounds in each of the last three years; and how many of those claims have subsequently been given substantive consideration *(a)* prior to an appeal hearing and *(b)* following a successful appeal. [151625]

Mrs. Roche: The available information on the number of non-compliance decisions is given in the table.

Statistical information for each of the last three years on the consideration of non-compliance cases following an initial decision but before appeal is not held centrally and would therefore only be available through examination of case records at a disproportionate cost.

We have not generally reconsidered claims following a successful appeal, although it is open to the Department to challenge the outcome of an appeal through the tribunal.

Non-compliance refusals (under paragraph 340 of the immigration rules and paragraph 180F prior to October 1994) are for failure to provide evidence to support the asylum claim, including non-attendance at a substantive interview within a reasonable period. From November 1991, these include refusals for failure to respond to invitations to interview to establish identity under the measures introduced then.

Refusals of asylum on non-compliance grounds in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, 1998 to 2000[1,2]

		Refused on non-compliance grounds	
Year	*Number of decisions*	*Cases under normal procedures*	*Cases under backlog criteria*[3]
1998	31,570	2,995	[5]—
1999[4]	33,720	1,085	1,275
2000[4]	110,065	26,630	1,335

[1] Information is for initial decision, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decisions.
[2] Figures rounded to the nearest 5.
[3] Includes cases decided under measures announced in the White Paper.
[4] Provisional figures.
[5] Nil.

Wandsworth Prison

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason and by what amount Wandsworth prison's budget was cut last year; what other prisons received notification of budget cuts and what the amounts were in each case; and if he will make a statement on the budgetary control system for prisons. [152325]

Mr. Boateng: Under the 1998 comprehensive settlement review (CSR) settlement, the Prison Service was required to make cash-releasing efficiency savings of £18 million, equivalent to one per cent., in 2000–01. Prison establishments were required to contribute efficiency savings towards this target, and their budget baselines adjusted accordingly. The table shows the amounts by which individual establishments' baselines were reduced.

The 1998 CSR also provided an additional £226 million over three years for the Prison Service to manage population increases and provide purposeful regimes for prisoners designed to prevent their reoffending. This money was allocated to individual establishments for specific purposes related to this aim.

It follows, therefore, that in some cases establishments will have experienced reductions in their baseline at the same time as they received additional CSR funding. The reductions in the baseline reflected required efficiency savings in performing existing functions, while the CSR allocations were to facilitate specific new work.

The allocation of budgets and the efficiency savings required of individual establishments are designed to achieve the most equitable allocation of resources across the service in the context of tight financial constraints and the requirement to make efficiency savings.

Establishment	Efficiency savings 2000–01
Acklington	60,000
Albany	80,320
Ashwell	50,000
Askham Grange	50,000
Aylesbury	91,300
Bedford	69,890
Belmarsh	288,000
Birmingham	160,000
Blantyre House	20,570
Blundeston	82,010
Brinsford	70,000
Bristol	153,950
Brixton	163,430
Brockhill	25,000
Bullingdon	126,370
Bullwood Hall	37,320
Camp Hill	79,620
Canterbury	63,230
Cardiff	110,540
Castington	45,000
Channings Wood	90,810
Chelmsford	86,730
Coldingley	54,660
Cookham Wood	30,160
Dartmoor	124,970
Deerbolt	50,000
Dorchester	42,080
Dover	56,750
Downview	61,860
Drake Hall	60,000
Durham	95,000
East Sutton Park	16,480
Eastwood Park	61,550
Elmley	137,910
Erlestoke	53,520
Everthorpe	60,000
Exeter	87,560
Featherstone	60,000
Feltham	162,800
Ford	53,120
Foston Hall	25,000
Frankland	227,000
Full Sutton	231,000
Garth	230,000
Gartree	77,510
Glen Parva	85,000
Gloucester	59,250
Grendon	93,690
Guys Marsh	71,010
Haslar	24,790
Hatfield	50,000
Haverigg	60,000
Hewell Grange	25,000
High Down	162,070
Highpoint	123,190
Hindley	70,000
Hollesley Bay	84,480
Holloway	177,700
Holme House	170,000
Hull	150,000
Huntercombe	68,980
Kingston	39,170
Kirkham	200,000
Kirklevington Grange	35,000
Lancaster Castle	60,000
Lancaster Farms	85,000
Latchmere House	22,680
Leeds	245,000
Leicester	310,000
Lewes	91,030
Leyhill	58,070
Lincoln	105,000
Lindholme	200,000
Littlehey	86,880
Liverpool	860,000
Long Lartin	203,000
Low Newton	35,000
Maidstone	97,010
Manchester	600,000
Moorland	210,000
Morton Hall	25,000
New Hall	95,000
North Sea Camp	35,000
Northallerton	60,000
Norwich	118,420
Nottingham	95,000
Onley	99,760
Parkhurst	103,810
Pentonville	185,780
Portland	88,240
Preston	180,000
Ranby	110,000
Reading	53,630
Risley	160,000
Rochester	77,060
Send	37,510
Shepton Mallet	39,720
Shrewsbury	50,000
Stafford	220,000
Standford Hill	50,280
Stocken	80,000
Stoke Heath	50,000
Styal	60,000
Sudbury	50,000
Swaleside	118,620
Swansea	64,740
Swinfen Hall	40,000
The Mount	95,580
Thorn Cross	95,000
Usk/Prescoed	50,100
Verne	79,750
Wakefield	197,000
Wandsworth	203,160
Wayland	87,370
Wealstun	95,000
Weare	—
Wellingborough	79,610
Werrington	25,000
Wetherby	110,000
Whatton	25,000
Whitemoor	222,000
Winchester	104,480
Woodhill	108,000
Wormwood Scrubs	188,580
Wymott	190,000
Total	13,384,220

Prisons Activities

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisons operate industrial workshops; how many prisoners are employed in such workshops; what the income and expenditure of each prison workshop is; and if he will make a statement. [151210]

Mr. Boateng *[pursuant to his reply, 26 February 2001, c. 492W]*: On 31 March 2000 there were 9,527 employed in public sector workshops, not 1,041 as previously stated.

NORTHERN IRELAND

RUC (Redundancies)

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if training of new replacement recruits will be completed before redundant RUC officers leave. [152384]

Mr. Ingram: Officers began to leave the RUC under the terms of the early retirement/voluntary severance scheme in January 2001. The first police trainees will join the Police Service of Northern Ireland in September 2001, and are expected to have completed their training by February 2002.

Force Research Unit

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what date the Chief Constable of the RUC requested an investigation into the operation of the Force Research Unit; how many items of correspondence he has received from the RUC on the subject of the FRU in the past 12 months; and at how many meetings this subject has been discussed. [150579]

Mr. Ingram: On 19 April 1999 the Chief Constable asked Sir John Stevens to investigate the murder of Mr. Patrick Finucane plus associated allegations contained within the British Irish Rights Watch report on the subject. An investigation into the activities of the FRU is an important part of Sir John's investigation. In the last 12 months neither the Secretary of State nor his predecessor received any correspondence from the RUC specifically on the subject of the activities of the FRU. In that same period the Stevens Inquiry has been discussed at ministerial level in a number of meetings held with a range of individuals.

DEFENCE

Warrior Armoured Vehicle

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the use of the Warrior armoured vehicle. [153038]

Mr. Spellar: I announced on 30 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 726–27W, that a number of precautionary operating restrictions had been put in place on the use of the Warrior armoured vehicle following the failure of the driveshaft system in some vehicles. A technical solution to the problem has now been developed and the fitting of modified parts commenced on 5 March 2001. The operating restrictions are being lifted from individual vehicles as they receive the modified driveshafts. The programme to convert all Warrior vehicles is expected to be completed by July 2001.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) where ex-servicemen who suffer post-traumatic stress disorder can be treated; [152007]

(2) if he will ensure that the Duke of Kent Hospital at Catterick offers treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder to ex-servicemen who require it; and if he will provide the necessary funding; [152006]

(3) if he will make funds available for the hospital treatment of ex-servicemen who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. [152008]

Dr. Moonie: Ex-service personnel seeking advice on post-traumatic stress disorder from the Ministry of Defence's veterans advice unit are referred to a variety of contacts for assistance, including their own national health service (NHS) GP and ex-service welfare organisations, especially those that specialise in stress-related disorders. However, if any treatment was necessary, it would be carried out by the NHS, as it becomes responsible for the health care of personnel when they leave the armed forces. There are no plans to change this arrangement. The NHS has a range of psychiatric services available, including those that specialise in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. Current NHS guidance provides priority for out-patient and in-patient treatment to be given to war pensioners, where they require treatment for the condition for which they receive their war pension.

Defence Medical Services

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list by specialty and rank the number of Defence Medical Services personnel on operational duty in Sierra Leone in September 2000; and if he will make a statement. [151799]

Dr. Moonie: The number of Defence Medical Services personnel on operational duty in Sierra Leone during September 2000 is set out. The majority of these personnel deployed to provide initial medical support to UK troops. A surgical team also deployed briefly to Sierra Leone in support of the UK military operation which successfully freed six members of the Royal Irish Regiment on 10 September, and this is included in the details as shown. Medical support to UK forces was also provided by the UN hospital which was then run by the Indian armed forces.

Lieutenant Colonel—Consultant General Surgeon
Lieutenant Colonel—Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon
Lieutenant Colonel—Consultant Anaesthetist
Lieutenant Colonel—Medical Officer
Lieutenant Colonel—General Medical Practitioner
Major—Consultant Anaesthetist
Captain—Medical Officer
Captain—Medical Officer
Flight Lieutenant—Nursing Officer
Warrant Officer Class 1—Operating Department Practitioner Class 1
Warrant Officer Class 2—Combat Medical Technician Class 1
Staff Sergeant × 2—Operating Department Practitioner Class 1
Sergeant—Regimental Medical Assistant Class 1
Sergeant × 2—Operating Department Practitioner Class 1
Sergeant—Registered General Nurse
Sergeant × 3—Combat Medical Technician Class 1
Corporal × 3—Combat Medical Technician Class 1
Corporal—Environmental Health Technician Class 1
Corporal × 2—Operating Department Practitioner Class 1

Ranger × 2—Regimental Medical Assistant Class 2
Lance Corporal—Combat Medical Technician Class 1
Lance Corporal—Regimental Medical Assistant Class 1
Lance Corporal—Operating Department Practitioner Class 1
Lance Corporal—Regimental Medical Assistant Class 3
Senior Aircraftman—RAF Medical Assistant
Private—Combat Medical Technician Class 1.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list by specialty the number of Defence Medical Services personnel who will be deployed as part of Exercise Saif Sareea 2 stating in each case how many are *(a)* regular and *(b)* reserves; and if he will make a statement. [151808]

Dr. Moonie: Requirements for medical support to Exercise Saif Sareea 2 have not yet been finalised. Consequently, we are not yet able to determine the numbers and specialties of the Defence Medical Services personnel who will be deployed, nor whether they will be regular or reserves.

Iraq

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions *(a)* coalition aircraft and *(b)* UK aircraft patrolling the southern no fly-zone in Iraq have released ordnance in response to violations from 12 January to date, stating in percentage terms (i) the nature of the threat, (ii) the category of the target attacked and the tonnage of ordnance released on each category of target in proportion to the overall tonnage released; and if he will make a statement. [151804]

Mr. Hoon: Between 12 January 2001 and 28 February 2001, coalition aircrew conducting legitimate humanitarian patrols in the southern no-fly zone were directly threatened by Iraqi air defence forces on 39 occasions and responded in self-defence on six occasions against Iraqi military facilities posing a direct threat to coalition forces. UK aircraft released ordnance on four occasions. Details of the threats to coalition aircraft, targets and UK ordnance, in percentage and weight terms as appropriate, are as follows:

(i) Nature of threat:

Anti-Aircraft Artillery/Surface to Air Missile firings—100 per cent.

(ii) Category of Target Attacked:

Integrated Air Defence System—100 per cent.

(iii) UK Weapons Released Against Integrated Ground Based Air Defence System

(A) By tonnage—6.6 tonnes

(B) By per cent.—100 per cent.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence under what legal powers recent international military intervention took place in Iraqi no-fly zones. [152460]

Mr. Hoon: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement I made in the House on 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 620–34, about coalition operations to enforce the no-fly zones over Iraq.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to the oral statement by the Minister for the Armed Forces on 9 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 878, concerning oversight of the firing programme of DU shells at the Dundrennan range, if he will specify the nature and extent of the oversight. [151868]

Mr. Spellar: Officials from the Health and Safety Executive and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency and its predecessor organisations were consulted before test firing began at Dundrennan. Inspectors from both organisations have visited the site on several occasions and are kept fully informed of all activities on the site.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many depleted uranium shells were fired in Wales in each of the last 10 years. [152628]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* No depleted uranium rounds have been fired in Wales in the last 10 years.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what reports he has received on the long-term effects of depleted uranium ammunition on the troops responsible for using the ammunition and recovering vehicles damaged by depleted uranium ammunition. [152155]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 558W; to the independent analysis by Steve Fetter and Frank von Hippel in Science and Global Security, 1999, Volume 8.2, pages 125 to 161; and to the Ministry of Defence paper "Depleted uranium—Documents explaining the Ministry of Defence position on the risks and health hazards", a copy of which was placed in the Library of the House on 25 January 2001. The Ministry of Defence is also in the process of compiling a list of risk assessments we have undertaken to assess any possible dangers to the environment and human health arising from the use of depleted uranium-based ammunition. That list will be placed in the Library of the House.

Road Accidents (Balkans)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much the UK has paid out in compensation because of road accidents to non-UK persons for road accidents involving UK personnel; how many civilians have been *(a)* killed and *(b)* seriously injured in such accidents in (i) Bosnia and (ii) Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [152596]

Mr. Spellar: A total of £808,674.78 has been paid in compensation to non-UK persons involved in road traffic accidents involving UK personnel in Bosnia. This sum includes compensation in respect of five fatalities and 50 cases of personal injury. No compensation has been paid so far in similar circumstances in Kosovo.

Centre for Defence Medicine

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research facilities exist at the Centre for Defence Medicine; how much money has been earmarked for the development of research facilities; and if he will make statement. [151801]

Dr. Moonie: The Centre for Defence Medicine will develop medical research opportunities which are relevant to the Defence Medical Services in close conjunction with its partners, in particular the University of Birmingham. It will also work closely with other elements of the

Ministry of Defence concerned with medical research activities. No dedicated military medical research facilities are currently envisaged.

MOD Establishments (Security)

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the state of security at his Department's bases and headquarters in the UK and the steps taken to deter unwanted intrusion; what review of security procedures at his Department's bases and headquarters he plans to undertake; what the remit of the investigations will be; which bases and headquarters will be investigated; when he expects investigations to be completed; and if he will make a statement. [151805]

Mr. Hoon: Security at Ministry of Defence (MOD establishments is given the highest priority and procedure are kept under constant review. For obvious reasons it is not the practice to discuss MOD security measures publicly. However, I can assure the right hon. Member that wherever a security incident occurs, it is speedily investigated and remedial action is taken if appropriate.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many breaches of security were reported at his Department's bases and headquarters in each of the last five years; how many arrests and prosecutions have resulted; and if he will make a statement. [151806]

Mr. Hoon: Taking breaches of security incursions on to the Ministry of Defence estate, the figures for each of the last four years were: 1996–97: 67; 1997–98: 87; 1998–99: 182; 1999–2000: 239; central records were not kept prior to 1996–97. The figures cover sites in Great Britain (excluding USAF installations) and Germany. The great majority of the incursions related to anti-nuclear demonstrators, whose activities have increased over the last two years. I will write to the right hon. and learned Member with the numbers of arrests and prosecutions recorded by the Ministry of Defence police. Information on incidents dealt with by local constabularies could be provided only at disproportionate costs.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Parental Leave

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to give mothers and fathers the right to work reduced hours after the birth of a child. [152279]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Green Paper "Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice", published by the Government in December 2000, sets out a number of options to help parents balance their family and work responsibilities. It includes three options on a right to work reduced hours:

whether there should be a right for mothers to work reduced hours during the period of maternity leave,

whether fathers should have a right to work reduced hours during the period of maternity leave,

or whether both parents should have a right to work reduced hours when the mother's maternity leave ends.

The options included the fact that the impact on employers would be minimised through giving employers the right to refuse requests if to grant them would unduly disrupt the business and an exemption for employers of a certain size.

The Green Paper makes it clear that not all options can be pursued. Employers, large and small, and parents have been invited to indicate which options are of greatest priority to them. The closing date for comments is 7 March 2001. Responses to the consultation are being considered carefully.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce flexible paid parental leave. [152282]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The Green Paper "Work and Parents: Competitiveness and Choice", published by the Government in December 2000, sets out a number of options to help parents balance their family and work responsibilities. It invites views on whether paid parental leave should be introduced, although it notes that the cost to employers and the State of doing so would be considerable. Another option is whether funding should be available to help employers develop more flexible parental leave schemes.

The Green Paper makes it clear that not all options can be pursued. Employers, large and small, and parents have been invited to indicate which options are of greatest priority to them. The closing date for comments is 7 March 2001. Responses to the consultation are being considered carefully.

Mercedes-Benz

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have held with (i) Mercedes-Benz (UK) and (ii) the Retail Motor Industry Federation on the future plans for the sale of Mercedes-Benz cars in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [152097]

Mr. Alan Johnson: (i) Neither I nor my officials have had any discussions as yet with Mercedes-Benz (UK) on the future plans for the sale of their cars in the UK.

(ii) My officials have had preliminary discussions with the Retail Motor Industry Federation (RMIF) on the future plans of Mercedes-Benz. The Retail Motor Industry Federation has written to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, requesting a meeting to discuss this subject along with other issues pertaining to the retail motor industry. This is in the process of being arranged.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with the Director General of Fair Trading on the proposals by Mercedes-Benz (UK) for their planned future car sales structure in the UK; and if he will make a statement. [152096]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I have had no discussions as yet with the Director General of Fair Trading on the proposals by Mercedes-Benz (UK) for their planned future car sales structure in the UK. I understand that Mercedes-Benz Dealer representatives have sent a letter to DaimlerChrysler UK calling on the company to justify or withdraw the termination notices, failing which the Dealers intend to commence legal proceedings.

Miners' Compensation (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many former miners in Warrington, North have *(a)* claimed and *(b)* received payments in compensation for (i) chronic bronchitis and emphysema and (ii) vibration white finger. [152458]

Mr. Hain: In the area of Warrington, as defined by the postcodes WA2, WA3, WA12 and M44, which encompasses the Warrington, North constituency, IRISC, the Department's claims handlers, have registered 274 claims in respect of compensation for respiratory disease and 176 claims in relation to Vibration White Finger, VWF. To date, there have been 65 individual payments totalling £236,000 in respect of respiratory disease and 59 individual payments in respect of VWF amounting to £358,000.

Directors' Remuneration

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how he intends to take forward the proposals in his Department's consultative document on directors' remuneration. [152845]

Mr. Byers: My Department received 140 responses to its consultative document on directors' remuneration. Most respondents supported the Government's proposals to promote a more effective linkage between performance and boardroom pay. The Government have now decided to introduce secondary legislation under the Companies Act 1985 which will require quoted companies incorporated in Great Britain to publish a report on directors' remuneration as part of the company's annual reporting cycle. Companies will be required to disclose within the report details of individual directors' remuneration packages, the role of the board's remuneration committee and the board's remuneration policy, including information on performance linkage, directors' service contracts and compensation payments.

The Government recognise that it is also important that directors are accountable to shareholders in this area, not least because boards of directors face a conflict of interest in relation to directors' remuneration. The Government continue to be concerned that many quoted companies are failing to respond adequately to the best practice recommendations on accountability, but they are also aware that the Company Law Review is looking at a number of issues in adjacent areas. I will therefore take a final decision on how to improve accountability on boardroom pay, including whether or not to introduce a compulsory vote on the board's remuneration report, in the light of the Review's wider recommendations on company law reform.

Ahead of this there is of course nothing to stop institutional investors taking action now. I have had helpful discussions with the Association of British Insurers and the National Association of Pension Funds and with some of their members about the action they are taking to improve compliance with best practice in this area. In particular, I will be looking to see further evidence that:

remuneration committees are composed exclusively of independent non-executive directors;

companies are complying with the spirit of existing best practice on accountability and that shareholders are fully involved.

Foresight

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when Foresight was established; which of its reports are placed in the public domain; how many *(a)* departmental and *(b)* non-departmental special advisers participate in its work; how many regular (i) non-departmental and (ii) departmental staff participate in its work; and how many of these work for Foresight on a full-time basis. [152037]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Foresight was established, and the first round launched in 1994, with a second round starting in 1999. All the reports produced by Foresight are in the public domain.

No departmental or non-departmental special advisers participate in the work of Foresight. (However, special advisers give advice to Ministers on the programme and its outputs from time to time as they do for any other Departmental activity.)

There are currently 40 people in the Foresight Secretariat in the Office of Science and Technology/DTI, and these are the only people fully occupied on Foresight. They are made up as follows:

Organisation	*Full-time*	*Part-time*
DTI	24	3
Other Government Departments	3	—
Research Council Secondees	2	—
Industry Secondees	1	1
Consultant	1	—
Temporary/Agency Staff	5	—

In addition, of the 500–600 people who were members of the 14 Foresight Panels and 64 associated Task Forces in the current round, 18 were DTI officials and 72 were officials from other Government Departments and the Research Councils.

Respiratory Disease Compensation Scheme

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many claims have been received by former miners in the Cannock Chase area under the respiratory disease compensation scheme; and how many of these claimants have received *(a)* interim payments and *(b)* full and final payments. [152412]

Mr. Hain: In the area of Cannock, as defined by the postcodes WS11, WS12 and WA15, which encompasses the Cannock Chase constituency, IRISC, the Department's claims handlers, have registered 1,961 claims in respect of compensation for respiratory disease. To date, there have been 539 interim payments made, including bereavement awards, and 42 full and final settlements totalling together £1,685,000. Until now, it has not been possible to make full and final settlements in all cases because compensation for some heads of damages, e.g. pensions, had not been agreed. This has now been settled, as I announced last week, and more full and final awards can be made.

Rural Post Offices

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the post offices that have been closed in *(a)* North and *(b)* South Wales in the past year. [150521]

Mr. Byers: This information is not available in the form requested.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the post offices in Wales, indicating those he defines as rural. [150520]

Mr. Byers: Details of individual post offices are maintained at a local level and a centralised listing of the type requested is not available.

TREASURY

Government Investments

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's investments. [152738]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Following a detailed review of the gold sales programme, which considered the recommendations made in the recently published National Audit Office Report on "The sale of part of the UK gold reserves", we have today confirmed our plans to sell 120 tonnes of gold in 2001–02. As in previous years the sales will be made through Bank of England auctions. There will be six auctions during 2001–02, which will be held every other month starting in May. The auctions will be of approximately 20 tonnes and will continue to be conducted on a single price basis.

Hourly Earnings

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of workers on adult rates of pay in part-time employment have hourly earnings, including and excluding overtime pay, that are less than *(a)* £5, *(b)* £6, *(c)* £7 and *(d)* £3.60 in (i) Scotland, (ii) each of the unitary local authority areas in Scotland and (iii) Great Britain, broken down by (1) male manual, (2) male non-manual, (3) all male workers, (4) female manual, (5) female non-manual, (6) all female workers, (7) all manual, (8) all non-manual and (9) all workers; what the average weekly earnings are, including and excluding overtime, for part-time workers in (A) Scotland and (B) each of the local unitary local authority areas in Scotland for (X) all employment and (Y) non-manual employment. [152153]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Mr. Douglas Alexander, dated 7 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question on average weekly earnings and hourly earnings for workers in Great Britain, Scotland and the unitary authorities in Scotland (152153). I am replying in his absence.

In order to address the issue of weekly pay, I have used data from the New Earnings Survey (NES). This survey can provide earnings data for small geographical areas. The release of NES data is restricted to figures that are derived from a sufficiently large sample of employees, and have an acceptable level of accuracy. I have provided the available data for average weekly earnings for part-time workers for Scotland and the unitary authority areas in Scotland. These are based on the 2000 NES, the latest survey for which data are available.

For hourly pay, I refer you to estimates which have been developed to measure low hourly pay more accurately. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has published estimates of the number of jobs paid at less than specific hourly low pay thresholds for all workers in the United Kingdom for Spring 2000, and the number of jobs paid at less than National Minimum Wage rates for Spring 2000, desegregated by gender and full and part time. These estimates are based on an improved methodology using data from the NES and Labour Force Survey (LFS). This methodology provides the best estimates for the number of jobs in the UK paid below low hourly rate thresholds. These estimates are posted on the National Statistics website at:

www.statistics.gov.uk/themes/labour_market/nmw_lowpay_tables.asp.

The improved methodology has been developed to overcome the deficiencies inherent in the two surveys, the NES and the LFS, in measuring low pay. Estimates based on this methodology are not available for the areas and population sub-groups requested.

Whilst it is possible to produce estimates for the proportion of employee jobs earning less than the specified hourly thresholds from the NES, the NES underestimates the number of low pay jobs since it does not provide a comprehensive picture of the lower end of the earnings distribution.

Average weekly gross earnings, excluding overtime, for part-time employees for Scotland

£

	Average earnings
All employees	
Non-manual	139.1
All	121.7

Average weekly gross earnings, excluding overtime, for part-time employees for unitary authority areas in Scotland

£

	Average earnings
All employees	
Non-manual	
Edinburgh, City of	136.7
Glasgow City	130.2
All	
Edinburgh, City of	122.4
Glasgow City	117.4
South Lanarkshire	111.4

Average weekly gross earnings, including overtime, for part-time employees for Scotland

£

	Average earnings
All employees	
Non-manual	145.6
All	128.2

Average weekly gross earnings, including overtime, for part-time employees for unitary authority areas in Scotland

£

	Average earnings
All employees	
Non-manual	
Edinburgh, City of	143.4
Glasgow City	134.9
All	
Edinburgh, City of	128.5
Glasgow City	122.7
South Lanarkshire	118.3

Tobacco and Alcohol Smuggling

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest assessment is of tobacco and alcohol smuggling and its impact on Government revenues; and what action he is taking to tackle it. [153056]

Dawn Primarolo: In March 2000, Customs and Excise forecast that tobacco duty revenues for 2000–01 would be £7.4 billion. In fact, tobacco duty revenues for 2000–01 are now expected to be £7.5 billion, the first time in four years that the forecast yield has been exceeded.

Last March, the Government announced their "Tackling Tobacco Smuggling" strategy, which is designed first to slow the growth in tobacco smuggling, which has been on a strong upward trend, and then to put it into decline within three years. The strategy provided £209 million for investment in 1,000 extra staff and a national network of X-ray scanners. This strategy is at an early stage but it is already beginning to show results. In the first nine months of 2000–01, Customs have seized more than 1.4 billion cigarettes in the UK and helped overseas enforcement agencies seize nearly 700 million cigarettes en route to the UK. Customs investigators have also broken up 38 major organised crime gangs involved in the smuggling and supply of huge volumes of illicit cigarettes. As more front-line staff are put in place, new X-ray scanners come on line, and tobacco pack marks come into force, Customs will be able to take even more effective action against the criminals involved in tobacco smuggling.

As part of the "Tackling Tobacco Smuggling" strategy, Customs are pursuing a target for 2000–01 of holding illicit market penetration to 21 per cent. of the UK cigarette market, equating to £2.8 billion in lost revenues. Customs' assessment for the calendar year 2000 suggests that 22 per cent. of the UK cigarette market is made up of smuggled cigarettes, equating to £2.9 billion in lost revenues. Customs also estimate that 70 per cent. of cigarette consumption in the calendar year 2000 was of UK tax paid product and 8 per cent. was legitimately purchased for personal consumption free of UK taxes.

Detailed estimates of revenue lost (excise and VAT) through cross-border shopping and smuggling of alcohol and tobacco for the calendar year 2000 and revised figures for 1999 are contained in the tables. In reaching these estimates using the best information currently available, Customs' assessment is that overall cigarette consumption in 2000 was approximately 81 billion cigarettes.

Table 1: Revenue lost through all forms of tobacco smuggling

£ million[1]

	1999	2000
Cross-Channel smuggling of:		
Hand rolling tobacco	670	890
Cigarettes and other tobacco	320	470
Total cross-Channel smuggling of tobacco	985	1,360
Tobacco smuggling by air passengers, internet and parcel	110	120
Freight smuggling of cigarettes[3]	1,600	2,300
Assessment of all forms of tobacco smuggling and evasion[4,5]	2,700	3,800

[1] Figures have been independently rounded to £5 million. Components may not therefore sum to the totals shown. Figures for freight smuggling and the overall assessment are rounded to the nearest £100 million.

[2] The 1999 cross-Channel smuggling figures have been revised to take into account new data on traffic flows from the ONS International Passenger Survey.

[3] Freight smuggling of cigarettes is calculated as the residual after the other forms of revenue loss have been subtracted from the overall assessment.

[4] Customs have only published assessments of all forms of tobacco smuggling and evasion for 1998 and 1999. Estimates of cross-Channel smuggling were first published in 1996.

[5] A comparable table of overall alcohol losses is being prepared and will be published in due course.

Table 2: Revenue lost through cross-border shopping of EU duty paid tobacco

£ million

Product type	1998	1999
Cigarettes and other tobacco products	n/a	185
Hand-rolling tobacco	n/a	35
Total	85	220

Notes:

1. Figures have been independently rounded to £5 million. Components may not therefore sum to the totals shown.
2. The figures shown for revenue lost assume that 100 per cent. of all tobacco purchased abroad substitutes for similar purchases in the UK.
3. The increase in the cross-border shopping estimates between 1998 and 1999 reflects the effects of the abolition of intra-EU duty free sale in July 1999. Prior to abolition duty free sales were not included in the estimates of cross-border shopping; from July 1999 onwards duty free sales have largely been replaced by EU duty paid sales, which are included in cross-border shopping. Because the switch from duty free sales to EU duty paid sales does not involve an additional revenue loss, the measured increase in cross-border shopping between 1998 and 1999 overstates the net additional loss of revenue.
4. Prior to 1999 the split between the different tobacco products was not robust enough to publish.

Table 3: Revenue evaded and revenue lost through cross-Channel smuggling of alcohol

£ million

	1999[1]		2000	
Product type	Revenue evaded	Revenue lost	Revenue evaded	Revenue lost
Beer	190	140	245	185
Wine	45	30	65	50
Spirits	20	15	15	15
Total	255	190	325	245

[1] Revised

Table 4: Revenue lost through cross-border shopping of EU duty paid alcohol

£ million

Product type	1998	1999
Beer	55	60
Wine	180	220
Spirits	50	90
Total	290	370

Notes:

1. Figures have been independently rounded to £5 million. Components may not therefore sum to the totals shown.
2. The figures shown for revenue lost assume that between 70 per cent. and 80 per cent. of all alcohol purchased abroad substitutes for similar purchases in the UK.
3. The figures exclude any amounts for revenue lost on alcohol products smuggled in freight consignments or diversion fraud.

4. The 1999 cross-Channel smuggling figures have been revised to take into account new data on traffic flows from the ONS International Passenger Survey.

5. Prior to abolition duty free sales were not included in the estimates of cross-border shopping from July 1999 onwards duty free sales have largely been replaced by EU duty paid sales, which are included in cross-border shopping. Because the switch from duty free sales to EU duty paid sales does not involve an additional revenue loss, the measured increase in cross-border shopping between 1998 and 1999 overstates the net additional loss of revenue.

Government Finance

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will outline the Government's financing plans for 2001–02. [152844]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Information concerning the Government's financing plans for 2001–02 can be found in the "Debt and Reserve Management Report 2001–02", which has been published today. Copies of the Report are available in the Library of the House.

EU Growth and Stability Pact

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if, with reference to Protocol 5 of the Maastricht Treaty concerning budget deficits and the document known as the Stability Pact, he will list *(a)* the last published paper issued by Her Majesty's Government containing the text of the Protocol, *(b)* the Treaty Base of the Stability Pact and the date on which it was (i) first published and (ii) approved by the Ministerial Council, *(c)* when it was presented to Parliament, considered by a Committee of either House and reported upon, and *(d)* the debates held or Resolutions made in respect of the document in either House of Parliament. [151496]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Protocol on the Excessive Deficit Procedure is annexed to the Treaty Establishing the European Community, as a result of the Treaty on European Union agreed at Maastricht on 9–10 December 1991. Royal Assent was given to the European Communities (Amendment) Act 1993 on 20 July 1993, amending UK law, following its third and final reading in the House of Lords.

Detail on the legal bases used for the Stability and Growth Pact and background on the submission of the proposals for UK parliamentary scrutiny is contained in the comprehensive Explanatory Memorandum which covered them, submitted to Parliament by HM Treasury on 3 June 1997 (6946/97 and 6947/97).

The House of Commons Select Committee on European Legislation noted, in its Second Report of the 1997–98 Session, that the documents had been the subject of a full day's debate on the Floor of the House, and had cleared scrutiny by virtue of the Resolution come to at the end of that debate. I refer my hon. Friend to column 896 of the *Official Report* on 9 June 1997. The House of Lords Scrutiny Committee confirmed that these items had cleared scrutiny in their 11 June 1997 Progress of Scrutiny Report.

The draft Resolution was adopted by the Amsterdam European Council on 16 and 17 June 1997, which invited ECOFIN to adopt the two regulations.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefits Agency (Chief Executive)

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if it is the practice of the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency to sign the substantive replies to hon. Members who have written to him on behalf of constituents. [152615]

Mr. Bayley: This is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. David Winnick, dated 6 March 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if it is the practice of the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency to sign the substantive replies for honourable Members who have written to him on behalf of constituents.

The commitments I have as Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency means that I am at several of the Agency's locations throughout the week and I am therefore not always able to personally sign the substantive replies to MP's letters. I sign in the region of 40% of the letters I receive from MPs each week. When I am unable to sign the reply myself, I ask a Director to sign on my behalf.

I hope this is helpful.

Minimum Income Guarantee

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will announce the outcome of the Government's consultation on the future of the minimum funding requirement. [153039]

Mr. Darling: I am setting out the Government's proposals on the future of the minimum funding requirement in a joint DSS/HMT paper "Security for Occupational Pensions: The Government's Proposals", which I am placing in the Library.

Pensions

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many firms have said they intend to replace their existing occupational pension scheme with a stakeholder pension. [152440]

Mr. Rooker: No firms have contacted us to say they intend to replace their existing occupational pension scheme with a stakeholder pension, and we would not expect them to do so.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if *(a)* a British pensioner living in France and *(b)* a French pensioner living in Britain is entitled to the Winter Fuel Payment. [152352]

Mr. Rooker: Winter Fuel Payments are one of the initiatives in our commitment to tackle fuel poverty in Great Britain. They are not only paid to pensioners and are not linked to receipt of State Retirement Pension.

Winter Fuel Payments are paid to people aged 60 and over who satisfy the qualifying conditions during the relevant qualifying week. One of the main qualifying conditions is that a person should be ordinarily resident in Great Britain.

Pension Credit Consultation Paper

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people requesting copies of the Pension credit consultation paper have been told that it was out of stock; for what periods it was not available; and if he will extend the consultation period to take account of such periods. [152353]

Mr. Rooker: The consultation paper has been continuously available since November 2000 on the internet. During this period 4,233 copies of the consultation document have been issued. Due to the high demand for copies, the Department ordered a second print of the command paper to replenish stocks. Printed copies of the document were not available for a short period of 12 days while delivery was awaited. During this time 441 orders were placed for 515 copies.

Electronic Signatures (Benefit Payments)

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the *(a)* Benefits Agency and *(b)* Benefits Fraud Inspectorate will accept the use of electronic signatures by claimants as valid. [152421]

Mr. Rooker: The Department does not currently accept the use of electronic signatures on claims or other applications. It is envisaged that electronic signatures will be accepted as soon as the necessary legal, security and authentication issues have been resolved.

Departmental Advertising Campaigns

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the total cost of advertising campaigns run by his Department and its agencies in each year since 1992 and the projected cost for the current year. [151453]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

The estimated increase in spending on Advertising for the year 2000–01 takes into account the work being undertaken by the Department around the Minimum Income Guarantee take up campaign, Pensions Education and anti-fraud activity.

Cost of advertising campaigns since 1991–92

Year	*Cost (£)*
1991–92	4,834,813
1992–93	4,452,277
1993–94	5,964,988
1994–95	3,597,308
1995–96	6,383,467
1996–97[1]	3,691,170
Average Yearly Cost	4,820,671
1997–98	1,430,698
1998–99	4,671,862
1999–2000	2,788,062
2000–01	11,336,000
Average Yearly Cost	5,056,656

[1] Figures only available for the Department's Headquarters.

National Insurance Numbers

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for each of the past 20 years *(a)* the number of National Insurance numbers, *(b)* the number of National Insurance numbers created, *(c)* the number of National Insurance numbers cancelled and *(d)* the population aged 16 years or older. [151921]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The information for the past 12 years is in the tables. There is no confirmed information available for earlier years.

There are currently 82 million NINOs in existence. This includes:

approximately 13.5 million deceased records kept in case spouses make a claim on their partner's contribution. These cannot be used for fraud as they have a death date on them;

approximately 12.5 million Child Reference Numbers for all children included on claims to Child Benefit. These become proper NINOs when the child reaches 16;

of the remainder the vast majority are people who have moved abroad some of whom will return and need their NINO.

National insurance numbers (NINOs) held

Million

Year	*Total of NINOs at 31 December*
1989	58
1990	60
1991	61
1992	71
1993	75
1994	76
1995	77
1996	77
1997	79
1998	80
1999	81
2000	82

Note:
Figures rounded to the nearest million.

Number of national insurance numbers created per year

Year (January to December)	*NINOs created*
1989	894,000
1990	1,862,000
1991	1,146,000
1992	9,765,000
1993	3,292,000
1994	1,057,000
1995	1,008,000
1996	979,000
1997	1,018,000
1998	1,027,000
1999	1,023,000
2000	996,000

Notes:
1. Figures rounded to the nearest thousand.
2. The reason for the large increase in NINO creation for years 1990–93 is:
During 1990–91 NINOs were created for all those customers in receipt of retirement pensions where the customer did not have a NINO.
During 1992–93 Child Reference Numbers (CRN) for all children included on claims to Child Benefit were allocated. CRNs become NINOs when the child reaches age 16.

Number of national insurance numbers removed per year

Year (January to December)	*NINOs removed*
1989	13,000
1990	18,000
1991	19,000
1992	21,000
1993	19,000
1994	15,000

Number of national insurance numbers removed per year

Year (January to December)	*NINOs removed*
1995	16,000
1996	55,000
1997	58,000
1998	38,000
1999	61,000
2000	182,000

Notes:
1. Figures round to the nearest thousand.
2. The varying figures for removals are due to the varying Data Cleanse exercises (i.e. not all of the exercises involved the removal of records).

Estimated mid-year resident population aged 16 and over, 1979–99

thousands

Mid-year	*UK population over age 16*
1979	43,210.1
1980	43,535.9
1981	43,814.7
1982	44,028.1
1983	44,311.1
1984	44,620.2
1985	44,931.8
1986	45,183.0
1987	45,439.7
1988	45,625.8
1989	45,811.3
1990	45,942.4
1991	46,071.3
1992	46,161.4
1993	46,231.5
1994	46,325.6
1995	46,505.0
1996	46,708.0
1997	46,906.6
1998	47,126.5
1999	47,387.0

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 7 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 552W, on national insurance numbers, what reasons underlay the increase in the number of national insurance numbers removed from the Departmental Central Index. [152442]

Mr. Rooker: The primary objective of the Departmental Central Index (DCI) Data Cleaning Project was to undertake an analysis of the DCI database to identify specific data issues which would need to be resolved to clean up the DCI database.

The Project removed 182,000 National Insurance Numbers (NINOs) during this financial year—more than in the whole of the last Parliament. The increase in the number of NINOs removed is due to the Project designing various enhanced IT scans which identified high risk records and continued to target duplicate records. Since the Project commenced only 10 fraudulent NINOs have been discovered, the vast majority were duplicates.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many new national insurance numbers have been *(a)* created and *(b)* cancelled in each year since 1992. [148487]

Mr. Rooker *[pursuant to the reply, 7 February 2001, c. 552W]:* The information is in the table.

January to December	*NINOs created on DCI*	*NINOs removed from DCI*
1992	9,765,000	21,000
1993	3,292,000	19,000
1994	1,057,000	15,000
1995	1,008,000	16,000
1996	979,000	55,000
1997	1,018,000	58,000
1998	1,027,000	38,000
1999	1,023,000	61,000
2000	996,000	182,000

Note:
Departmental Central Index (DCI)

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152106]

Mr. Battle: My Department will provide information on timber procurement to DETR as part of the Green Ministers' Committee reporting process.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much certified timber has been purchased by his Department over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152146]

Mr. Battle: Figures on timber procurement are not readily available. The interdepartmental timber working group is working to develop a common reporting template which will form the basis for future reporting on timber procurement. New FCO guidance has been issued to help buyers to work to ensure that timber procurement is in accordance with international agreements such as CITES and bought from sustainable legal sources.

Science and Technology

Mr. Roy: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to increase the resources his Department devotes to international science and technology work. [152947]

Mr. Battle: As part of their contribution to the Government's competitiveness agenda, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office funds and manages a Science and Technology Network currently based in 10 countries. As a result of the 2000 Spending Review they can now allocate an additional £3 million to Science and Technology work over the next three Financial Years (2001–04). This will mean doubling the number of countries in which our diplomatic posts have specialist Science and Technology staff, and the creation of a dedicated Science and Technology Unit in the FCO.

Zanzibar

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what meetings he has had with representatives of the Commonwealth regarding the situation in Zanzibar. [151693]

Mr. Wilson: We remain in close touch with the Commonwealth Secretariat over the situation in Zanzibar. We have encouraged the Commonwealth Secretary General to become personally engaged in the search for a solution to the continuing political impasse on the islands. We have reiterated our support for the implementation of key provisions of the Commonwealth brokered agreement between the parties, which we continue to see as the best way of achieving a durable solution.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps the Government have taken to ensure that the Government of Tanzania discontinue the harassment of opposition politicians on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. [151694]

Mr. Wilson: We were shocked by the killings, mass arrests and other human rights abuses carried out by the security forces on Zanzibar at the end of January against civilians exercising their democratic right to peaceful assembly.

We believe that progress can be made only through serious dialogue between the Government and the Opposition.

When I saw the Tanzanian Foreign Minister on 15 February I urged him to ensure that the security forces acted with restraint and that the Governments of Tanzania and Zanzibar entered into dialogue without preconditions with the Opposition.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is in respect of the elections held in Zanzibar in 2000; and if he will press for a re-run of the elections. [151695]

Mr. Wilson: The organisation of the elections on Zanzibar in October and November 2000 was inadequate. International observers noted numerous irregularities, including the excessive use of force by Government forces against opposition supporters.

A re-run of the elections in the same circumstances would be unlikely to advance the cause of democracy in Zanzibar. The only way forward is through the establishment of serious dialogue between the Government and the Opposition, to enable needed reforms to the Zanzibar electoral and judicial systems to be discussed and implemented. I made this point to the leader of the Zanzibar Opposition when I saw him on 1 February and also discussed it with the Tanzanian Foreign Minister at my meeting with him on 15 February.

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department has taken to prevent human rights abuses on the islands of *(a)* Zanzibar and *(b)* Pemba, following the arrests and deaths of political opponents of the Government of Tanzania. [151696]

Mr. Wilson: Following the shocking incidents in Zanzibar and Pemba over the weekend of 27–28 January 2001, the EU issued a statement condemning the actions of the security forces and calling on the Government of Tanzania to ensure respect for human rights. We also raised our concerns with the Government of Tanzania and pressed for swift humanitarian access to those injured and detained on both islands. The ICRC have since been given access to Zanzibar and Pemba.

I reinforced these concerns when I saw the Tanzanian Foreign Minister on 15 February. We believe the Tanzanian Government have a duty to find a peaceful solution to the political impasse on Zanzibar that respects the human and democratic rights of all Zanzibaris.

EU Council of Ministers

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many technical committees and working parties of the EU Council of Ministers have been *(a)* attended and *(b)* led by Scottish Executive officials in a UK capacity since 1 July 1999. [152354]

Mr. Vaz: This information is not held centrally, and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

HEALTH

Stem Cell Research

Mr. Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information his Department collects on companies involved in *(a)* germ line therapy, *(b)* stem cell techniques and *(c)* transgenic technologies. [146859]

Yvette Cooper: Stem cell techniques are very widely used in human and animal cell research. During 2000 over 4,000 scientific papers were published in peer-reviewed journals. Applications for stem cell research involving the use of embryos require a licence from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. No companies have applied for a licence.

Transgenic techniques are used in many areas of scientific research including work with plants and animals. All transgenic techniques involving animals and plants fall under the definition of "genetic modification" as defined in the Genetically Modified Organisms (Contained Use) Regulations 2000. This includes germ line therapy in animals. All premises where genetic modification is undertaken have to be notified to the competent authorities (CA) under these Regulations. Where the genetically modified animal or plant poses a greater risk to humans than the non modified animal or plant, the activity must be notified to the CA. For England and Wales the CA comprises the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the Secretary of State and the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. For Scotland the CA comprises the HSE and Scottish Ministers.

When transgenic techniques are used in humans these are for the purpose of gene therapy. A list of all United Kingdom gene therapy trials is published in the annual report of the Gene Therapy Advisory Committee, copies of which are available in the Library.

Germ line therapy is not permitted in humans.

Correspondence

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for Broxbourne will receive a reply to her letters of *(a)* 5 October 2000, *(b)* 31 October 2000, *(c)* 22 November 2000, *(d)* 29 November 2000, *(e)* 9 January and *(f)* 8 February relating to her constituent, Mr. S. Russell of Wormley. [150335]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 13 February 2001]:* A reply to the hon Member's letter was sent on 5 March 2001.

Serco Contracts

Mrs. Dunwoody: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the contracts that exist between Serco and the Department, its executive agencies and associated public bodies; and if he will list those which have existed in the last three years. [151345]

Mr. Denham: NHS bodies with contracts for goods or services provided by Serco since May 1997 are:

	Period	*Value (£)*	*Coverage*
Leicestershire Royal Infirmary (University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust)	August 1996-July 2003	40 million over seven years	All non-clinical support services
Ashford and St. Peter's Hospitals NHS Trust	April 1994-March 1999	20 million over five years	Full Facilities Management contract (catering, estates, portering, transport, switchboard, domestic). Contract partially cancelled July 1998 except catering and domestic which continued until the end of the contract in March 1999
Norfolk and Norwich Health Care NHS Trust	January 1999-December 2001 (option to extend to December 2003)	7.5 million over two years	Domestic, portering and ward beverage service. Contract is for existing hospital
	August 2001-July 2006	11.1 million per annum	Soft services within the PFI new hospital Services include grounds maintenance, domestics and portering, catering, waste disposal, laundry, car parking and security, non-emergency transport and utilities dealt with as they pass through
Premier Health NHS Trust	October 1999-September 2002	(a) £48,000 (b) £22,000	(a) Wheelchair modification (b) Preventative maintenance
Mid Staffordshire General Hospitals	October 1999-September 2002	(a) £69,000 (indexed) per annum for repair (b) £33,000 (indexed) per annum for annual inspection	Wheelchair services
Birmingham Specialist Community Health	April 1994-September 2001	130,000 per annum	Wheelchair repair service
Worcestershire Community and Mental Health	April 2000-March 2003	67,000 per annum plus £13.65 per hour for modifications	Repair service for all wheelchairs and minor modifications
Rampton Hospital Authority	September 2000-August 2001	Estimated at £2,000. Time charge basis as and when required	Authorising Engineer Services for three disciplines—high voltage, low voltage, pressure systems
University Hospitals of Leicester (LRI, Leicester General and Glenfield)	August 1996-July 2003	7.2 million per annum	Full facilities management comprising of: Estate service, catering, domestic, car parking, switchboard, portering, security, reception, linen service, post room service.
North East Essex Mental Health	1998-ongoing	10,000 per annum	Serco subcontract gardening services from the trust to fulfil contract with new possibilities
New Possibilities NHS Trust	Rolling Contract	500,000 per annum	All non-clinical services
Southend Hospital	January 2001-ongoing	6,000 per annum	Medical Records Storage
Ashford and St. Peters Hospitals NHS Trust/Sussex Ambulance NHS Trust	April 1994-March 1999	20 million over five years	Facilities and Estates Management
Sussex Ambulance NHS Trust	Rolling contract	1,000 per annum	Wheeled Bin Collection Service for commercial waste
Eastbourne Hospital NHS Trust	1 June 1995–7 September 1998 1 April 1996–10 March 1999 30 April 1998–11 May 1999	33,543.28 104,862.31 5,585.89	Trust contract van hire ECS contract van hire Contract van hire and excess mileage charge

	Period	Value (£)	Coverage
Hastings and Rother NHS Trust	Rolling contract until 5 March 2001	4,222.40 per annum	Refuse disposal at Bexhill Hospital and Rye Clinic
Medway NHS Trust	Rolling contract since 1995	7,500 per annum	Staff discount scheme at local leisure centre
Kent Ambulance Service	Rolling contract since 1997 Rolling contract since 1997	100 per annum 200 per annum	Waste Collection—Herne Bay Waste Collection—Canterbury
Parkside Health NHS Trust	April 1999-March 2004 (option to extend to 2006)	574,000 per annum	Wheelchair maintenance
South West London NHS Trust	April 2001-March 2006	430,000 per annum	Wheelchair maintenance

Others

The Department, its agencies and associated public bodies, have also used Serco for a number of very small one-off payments.

Human Rights Act

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consideration he has taken since the enactment of the Human Rights Act 1998 of its implications for the exercise of his powers of ministerial decision on proposed developments within the NHS to which community health councils have lodged official objection. [151257]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* Under section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998 it is unlawful for a public authority, including the Secretary of State, to act in any way incompatibly with the rights under various articles of the European Convention on Human Rights. When making any decision, the Secretary of State will consider and seek appropriate advice on any relevant human rights issues, in particular whether his actions would be compatible with those Convention rights.

East Surrey Health Authority

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much additional funding above the GDP deflator will be available to East Surrey Health Authority for the 2001–02 financial year; and what the change in cash resources will be available to East Surrey Health Authority to spend at its discretion in meeting local health priorities above the GDP deflator for the 2001–02 financial year. [151687]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* East Surrey Health Authority (ESHA) will receive a total cash increase of £22,572,000 for the 2001–02 financial year. This is a 8.46 per cent. total cash increase or 5.82 per cent. in real terms. In monetary terms the additional funding in real terms is £15,516k.

The total cash increase figure includes the increase owing to the extra £140 million resources issued in February plus cost of living and performance fund elements. This gives the total recurrent/non-recurrent cash increase available to ESHA.

East Surrey health community, in line with all other health systems is currently implementing the NHS Plan at a local level through its annual planning process. The local priorities are set out in the East Surrey Health Improvement Programme and demonstrate robust close partnership working.

The new NHS Performance Fund, worth £250 million for 2001–02 and rising to £500 million by 2003–04, is being made available on a fair share basis to all health authorities. It will provide resources for locally developed and designed incentive schemes across each health economy, tailored to the particular needs of each area but aimed overall at supporting implementation of the NHS Plan.

Fishery Product

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what comments Her Majesty's Government have made on the recommendations made in the Mission report (ref. XXIV/1042/99 MR Final 22–26 Feb '99) to the Food and Veterinary Office on 26 April 1999; what visits Her Majesty's Government have received from EU officials to discuss the placing on the market of live bivalve molluscs and of fishery products in member states; what future visits have been notified to Her Majesty's Government under the EU's FVO Missions Programme for 2001; what progress has been made in implementing recommendations made to Her Majesty's Government following previous inspections; and if he will make a statement. [152094]

Ms Stuart: The Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) wrote to the European Commission following receipt of the draft Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) report of its mission to the United Kingdom to evaluate implementation of Directive 91/492/EEC. A number of comments were submitted both to correct inaccuracies in the draft report and to provide clarification on certain points. The CVO commented on two issues which had been identified as requiring immediate corrective measures. These concerned the immediate closure of production areas following the detection of diarrhoeic shellfish poison and the coverage of the phytoplankton and biotoxin monitoring programme in England and Wales. Action has been taken on these two recommendations. The CVO also welcomed the Commission's evaluation of the Directive within the European Community and indicated that the UK would play a full and active part in the proposed commission working group to discuss further some of the issues which were identified during the inspections visits to member states.

Apart from the visit by FVO inspectors in February 1999 Commission inspectors visited the UK in October 1995 and in May 1996 to evaluate implementation of Directive 91/493/EEC. No specific dates for a future visit to the UK have been decided but the FVO programme of

visits for the first half of this year indicates that the FVO will visit the UK to carry out inspections of fishery products and bivalve molluscs.

Following all visits, in those cases where deficiencies were noted by the inspectors in individual establishments, the relevant local food authorities were asked to ensure that corrected action is taken. In those cases where the recommendations are addressed to the competent authority, action has generally either been taken or is being considered as part of a wider strategy.

Hypodermic Needles

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the annual cost is of equipping the NHS with conventional hypodermic needles; what assessment he has made of the annual cost of equipping the service with safer needles; and if he will make a statement. [152074]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Sales of hypodermic syringes and needles to the National Health Service via the NHS Logistics Authority total £15.5 million per annum. This may not be the total figure because some NHS trusts may have their own contracts for these items for which records are not held centrally.

The cost to the NHS to introduce safer products and to replace the standard ones already available could be anything up to five times this amount depending on the type of product selected (from simple needle guard protectors to highly sophisticated products which automatically retract the needle into the syringe barrel).

There is not one single, optimum product which will meet everyone's needs.

Hospital Pharmacists

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library information relating to *(a)* the number of hospital pharmacists, *(b)* their recruitment and retention rates, *(c)* the number employed and the number of vacancies in each trust and *(d)* their pay scales in 2000 and 2001; and what plans he has to review the status and pay of hospital pharmacists. [152058]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The information requested has been placed in the Library. Information requested about hospital pharmacists' recruitment and retention is not collected centrally.

Offers have been made to health care pharmacists in line with those for other non pay review body staff of pay increases from 1 April 2000 of 3.25 per cent. or £300 if greater, and from 1 April 2001 of 3.7 per cent. or £380 if greater. We are working closely with unions and employers on a new pay system for National Health Service staff, and future arrangements for determining the pay of health care pharmacists are the subject of those negotiations.

Needlestick Injuries

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many settlements the NHS has made for needlestick injuries; how many of these cases were settled out of court; and what the total value of cases settled was in each of the last three years for which figures are available; [152075]

(2) how many needlestick injuries have been reported in the NHS; what the estimated figure including unreported needlestick injuries is; what proportion of those reporting injuries developed a blood borne infectious disease; and how many of these developed *(a)* hepatitis and *(b)* HIV in each of the last three years for which figures are available; [152072]

(3) how many days have been lost by NHS staff that have suffered a needlestick injury; and what the cost to the service was in each of the last three years for which figures are available; [152076]

(4) if he will list the 10 NHS trusts with the *(a)* highest and *(b)* lowest rate of needlestick injuries, indicating how many in *(b)* use safer needles; [152073]

(5) how many NHS staff are recorded as having lost time off work following a needlestick injury due to anxiety and stress in each of the last three years for which figures are available. [152077]

Mr. Denham *[holding answers 6 March 2001]:* Data on needlestick injuries to National Health Service staff and any absence resulting from such injuries, are not collected centrally unless the incident involves the risk of transmission of a blood borne virus. Information on needlestick injuries would be reflected in incident reports held locally by individual NHS employers.

Data collected as part of the National Surveillance of Occupational Exposure to Blood Borne Viruses in Health Care Workers between July 1997 and December 2000 indicated that 1,044 NHS staff were exposed to blood borne viruses during this period.

NHS Working Conditions

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made in providing more flexible working conditions for NHS staff; and if he will make a statement. [151942]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* We are fully committed to investing in National Health Service staff. We recognise that a modern NHS must offer staff a better deal in their working lives including the provision of more flexible working practices.

The Improving Working Lives Standard, launched in October 2000, has been developed to set a model of good employment practices against which NHS organisations will be measured. NHS organisations are required to provide a portfolio of evidence showing that they are delivering more flexible working for all staff by April 2003.

Evidence of flexible working is a component of trusts' pledge to achieve Improving Working Lives accreditation. In a number of trusts including Warrington General Hospital, where a ward pilot is currently taking place, a self-rostering system has been introduced to give staff more control and flexibility in their working lives. Team based self-rostering is also evident in Blackburn, North Manchester and Stepping Hill Hospitals.

The NHS has received funding of £1 million to support Improving Working Lives during 1999 and again in 2000. The NHS Plan announced investment building up to over £30 million by 2004 to boost child care arrangements and give parents more affordable, accessible, good quality child care.

Health Care Assistants

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress has been made towards setting up a registration system for health care assistants; and if he will make a statement. [151944]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* We are consulting the other Health Departments with a view to publishing the De Montfort University report on support workers shortly, and expect to follow this up with proposals for the effective regulation of support workers later this year.

Tobacco

Mr. Terry Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he intends to introduce to prevent the use of oral tobacco products from overseas sources. [152455]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* So long as oral tobacco from overseas sources does not fall within a banned category, complies with United Kingdom Customs and Excise duty regulations and carries health warnings, its use in the UK is not illegal.

However, we want to ensure that people have information about health risks. We are, therefore, seeking to develop greater awareness of the health risks associated with oral tobacco as part of our tobacco information strategy. We are working on a dedicated campaign, focused on high risk ethnic minority populations, to address the health risks of smoking and the use of oral tobacco in order to decrease demand for these products. We are also training trading standards officers in this area.

Angiographers

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the recommended level of angiographers per 1,000 head of population is; and which health authorities are *(a)* above and *(b)* below this level. [152627]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* There is no recommended level of staff performing angiographs per head of population.

NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency will publish its framework document. [152682]

Ms Stuart: We are pleased to announce that the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency's framework document has been published today and copies have been placed in the Library.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Regeneration Initiatives

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the criteria for assessing applications for financial support for economic and physical regeneration initiatives for funds administered by his Department; and how they take account of *(a)* the variation in the availability of previously developed land and buildings and *(b)* other considerations of environmental capacity. [152340]

Mr. Chris Smith: I do not administer any regeneration initiatives, although many public bodies in the culture and leisure field, including many funded by DCMS, participate in them.

Dance

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures are being taken to improve the efficiency of the funding system for dance projects which are of benefit to public health. [152533]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* My Department, the Arts Council of England and the Regional Arts Boards all recognise the clear links between dance and public health. The Arts Council funds a wide range of dance organisations, many of which have developed extensive education programmes which have a particular relevance to public health. These include organisations such as Green Candle Dance Company, the Foundation for Community Dance and The Place National Dance Agency. Support from the arts funding system also usefully functions as a lever for funding from sources such as local health authorities and health action zones. The efficiency of the funding system is kept under continuous review.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if BSE prions are live in rendered material produced under the OTMS. [151809]

Ms Quin: Current rendering methods do not completely remove prion infectivity. OTMS material must therefore be incinerated regardless of whether or not it has previously been rendered.

Hill Farm Allowance

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when his Department notified farmers of the stocking densities affecting their eligibility for hill farm allowance. [151742]

Ms Quin: Following extensive consultation with interested parties, a minimum stocking density of 0.15 livestock units per hectare in the hills was included in the proposals which were submitted to the Commission in January 2000. This was retained in the revised proposals sent to the Commission last August, and approved in October. These were matters of public record at the time and known to NFU and farmers organisations, although farmers were not notified individually until guidance notes were distributed in December 2000. These notes included an explanation of how the stocking density would be calculated to allow farmers to work out the position on their own holdings.

Imported Meat

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received

calling for imported pig products to match the same health and hygiene standards as the UK's domestic pig industry. [151670]

Ms Quin: Representations on this issue are received from time to time. Animal health and meat hygiene standards are established in EU legislation and apply in all member states. In addition, there are harmonised rules for the import of pigmeat and pig products from third countries approved by the EC to export into the Community.

EU Tobacco Subsidies

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much was paid in subsidies out of the EU budget in the latest available financial year to tobacco growers within the EU. [151899]

Ms Quin: The last year for which figures are available is the European Agriculture Guidance and Guarantee Fund financial year ending 15 October 2000 when 984.5 meuro (£592.1 million[1]) was paid in subsidies out of the EU budget to tobacco growers.

[1] £1 = 1.6631 euro

Bovine TB

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement about the recommendations of the Phillips report about preventing the spread of TB from badgers. [152285]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The report of the BSE inquiry (the "Phillips Report") contained no specific recommendations about preventing the spread of TB from badgers.

Farming Legislation

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many items of primary and secondary legislation relating to farming matters have been introduced since May 1997. [152306]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Out of 461 statutory instruments which the Ministry has laid since May 1997, some 330 might be said to relate to farming matters. Many of these are amendments to, or revocations of, previous instruments. In the same period the Ministry has introduced four Bills, three of which can be related to farming matters and have been enacted.

Veterinarians

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many registered veterinarians employed within his Department and its agencies are engaged in clinical diagnosis, epidemiological management and statutory control of animal disease. [151923]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* 404 registered veterinarians employed by MAFF and its agencies are involved in one or more aspects of clinical diagnosis, epidemiological investigations and statutory control measures in relation to animal health and welfare.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Webb: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure that exclusion zones are lifted as soon as a suspected case of foot and mouth disease produces a negative test and the farm in question is found to be clear of the disease. [151929]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* In the event of a negative test result for foot and mouth disease, restrictions on a suspected premises will be removed as quickly as possible. This will include any associated 'Form C' area restrictions in an eight kilometre zone.

Mr. Prior: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the application of the foot and mouth disease restrictions on importers of non-EU origin meat and dairy products who process it for immediate re-export outside the EU. [152514]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Provision has been made in EU and UK legislation concerning the foot and mouth disease export restrictions for such trade to take place under tightly controlled conditions. Information has been made available to the trade about these requirements and can be found on the MAFF website at http://maffweb/animalh/int-trde/misc/foot/fmd.htm.

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what studies he has *(a)* undertaken and *(b)* plans to commission to assess the effects of the large scale closure of small slaughterhouses on the geographical and chronological spread of foot and mouth disease. [151872]

Ms Quin: The reduction in the number of small abattoirs does not appear to be a factor in the spread of foot and mouth disease during the current outbreak. The main cause for the spread of the disease appears to be the movement of sheep for trade purposes. However, detailed epidemiological studies into the outbreak will continue.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Travellers

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much money was spent by the Highways Agency in respect of their site occupied by travellers near the A50/A38 junction in Willington, Derbyshire on *(a)* clearing waste, *(b)* erecting barriers and *(c)* maintaining security in the last 18 months. [151813]

Mr. Hill: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Tim Matthews, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. Mark Todd, dated 7 March 2001:

The Transport Minister, Keith Hill, has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about costs incurred by the Highways Agency in clearing waste, erecting barriers, and maintaining security following its occupation by travellers in April 2000.

The costs were £13,800, £3,700 and £17,200 respectively.

Public Safety Zones (Biggin Hill Airport)

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the status is of the maps and co-ordinates issued by his Department showing public safety zones for Biggin Hill airport; what consultation preceded their publication; under what powers public safety zones are established; and upon what information the designation of the public safety zones is determined. [151995]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Public safety zones have no basis at present in legislation, although reference to them is included in Department of the Environment Circular 2–92 and they have existed near an increasing number of airports since their introduction over 40 years ago. Following a review of public safety zone policy and its administration, my Department carried out public consultation in 1997–98 on a proposal that public safety zones should be redefined on the basis of risk contour modelling. My hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Ms Jackson), the then Under Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, announced on 31 July 1998, *Official Report,* columns 638–39W, that public safety zones would correspond essentially to the areas which might be expected to experience an individual risk of death from aircraft accidents of one in 100,000 per year or greater, based on broad assumptions about the numbers and types of aircraft expected to use the relevant airports in 15 years time. She announced on 15 June 1999, *Official Report,* column 86W, that public safety zones would be defined on this basis at the other airports for which modelling work suggested that this would be justified. On the same day my Department issued for public consultation a draft circular containing guidance to local planning authorities for considering planning applications arising within public safety zones.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), then the Under Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, announced on 19 April 2000, *Official Report,* columns 495–496W, that public safety zones would be established for the first time at Biggin Hill and several other airports. On 26 May 2000 my Department asked local planning authorities to apply the guidance in the draft circular on an interim basis when determining planning applications within these zones. Biggin Hill is one of 26 airports for which public safety zones have so far been established and Ordnance Survey grid co-ordinates issued, based on airports' forecasts of the numbers and types of aircraft expected to use the respective airports in 2015. I hope to issue the final version of the guidance and definitive maps of the zones in the next few months.

Policy Planning Guidance Notes

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the advantages and disadvantages in combining PPGs 15 and 16; and if he will make a statement. [151864]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We have made no such assessment and we have no current plans to combine these planning policy guidance notes.

One NorthEast

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much funding was made available to One NorthEast and its predecessor bodies engaged in regional regeneration in each year since 1995. [152472]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The predecessor bodies of One NorthEast that were engaged in regional regeneration were English Partnerships North East Regional Office, the Northern Regional Office of the Rural Development Commission, the Northern Development Company and the Government Office for the North East. The funding to these bodies from central Government from 1995–96 to 1998–99 is shown in the table:

From 1 April 1999 One NorthEast was funded by grant in aid from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, from European programmes and from receipts generated from the management and disposal of its land and property assets. For 1999–2000 the grant-in-aid was £93,479,000 and for 2000–01 it is currently estimated to be £105,799,000.

£ million

Year	*Government Office for the North East*[1]	*English Partnerships*[2]	*Rural Development Commission*[3]	*Northern Development Company*[4]
1995–96	80	34	3.332	1.800
1996–97	158	32	2.674	1.813
1997–98	142	47	2.463	1.823
1998–99	20	43	2.322	1.826

[1] The funding relates to the Single Regeneration Budget that was administered by the Government Office for the North East until 31 March 1999. The funding relates to the relevant SRB bidding round and for approved schemes for up to seven years.

[2] English Partnerships funding is a mixture of grant-in-aid and income generated from assets. Funds from all sources were pooled and allocated to each English Partnerships region.

[3] The figures represent spending on the Rural Development Commission's Rural Programme for the North East region.

[4] The figures represent funding received from the Department of Trade and Industry for inward investment and Regional Supply Office activities only.

Regeneration Initiatives

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the criteria for assessing applications for financial support for economic and physical regeneration initiatives for funds administered by his Department; and what account they take of *(a)* the variation in the availability of previously developed land and buildings and *(b)* other considerations of environmental capacity. [152338]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The assessment of applications for financial support for regeneration initiatives is based on a project appraisal. Guidance on appraisal is provided in the Treasury Green Book (1997) and in "A Framework for the Evaluation of Regeneration Projects and Programmes" (EGRUP, 1995). The basic requirements for an appraisal include assessing:

need for the project;

the project's fit with local regeneration strategies;

sustainability;

aims of the project;

alternative options;

costs, values and benefits of a project, including social, environmental and economic effects;

timing of these costs, values and benefits;

value for money;

additionality of outputs—looking at what additional outputs are delivered above those that would occur anyway;

project viability and risks to the project, including details as to how these risks will be minimised.

The appraisal should assess whether there are any suitable brownfield sites on which to locate the project before considering greenfield sites.

The Single Regeneration Budget supports schemes run by local regeneration partnerships, which can include economic and physical regeneration projects. It is for the partnership to decide the criteria for supporting a project, subject to it linking to the overall scheme objectives agreed previously with the RDA; limits under EC state aid regulations; and rigorous project appraisal, which would include all of the above.

Cycling

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many kilometres of dedicated cycle paths have been created in each year since 1992. [152345]

Mr. Hill: Information about the lengths of cycle lanes created on the carriageway and cycle tracks away from the road is not held centrally.

We are encouraging all local highway authorities to increase the provision of cycle facilities in accordance with a cycling strategy as part of their Local Transport Plans.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been spent by Government on dedicated cycling infrastructure in each financial year since 1992–93. [152344]

Mr. Hill: This information is not available in the form requested.

As far as local authority schemes are concerned, no separate funding is made available to encourage cycling. It is for individual authorities to decide the amount to spend on cycling from their overall total allocation of funding. Total allocations, from which spending on schemes to encourage cycling could be made, have been as follows.

£ million

Year	*Amount available*
1992–93	109
1993–94	125
1994–95	70
1995–96	128
1996–97	118
1997–98	79
1998–99	85
1999–2000	160
2000–01	250
2001–02	559

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been spent by Government on schemes in the Cycle Challenge project in each financial year since its creation. [152347]

Mr. Hill: The Cycle Challenge project was a one-off initiative. Payments were made only in 1995–96 and 1996–97. The Department spent £1,989,694.00 on 74 projects spread around the country. All the projects were designed to promote cycling at a local level.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much has been spent by Government on *(a)* research into promoting cycling and making cycling safer in each financial year since 1992 and *(b)* the marketing of the National Cycling Strategy in each financial year since its creation. [152346]

Mr. Hill: Government spend since 1992 on research into promoting cycling and making cycling safer is shown in the table.

Spend by financial year on cycling research projects

Year	*£000 (gross)*
1992–93	186
1993–94	156
1994–95	239
1995–96	432
1996–97	508
1997–98	606
1998–99	283
1999–2000	493
2000–01	[1]302

[1] Part year spend only

The Highways Agency also conducts research into promoting cycling and making cycling safer, on which we work collaboratively. The estimated spend last financial year was £100,000.

A contract to market the National Cycling Strategy was let in April 2000 and is due for completion in March 2002. The contract, which aims to deliver the main objectives of the Strategy to key decision makers in the public and private sectors, is worth £350,000. In addition, a further £35,000 was spent in 2001 on the production of a promotional video.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many kilometres of the London Cycle Network have been created in each year since its creation; and how much has been allocated to London boroughs for the London Cycle Network for each financial year since its creation. [152348]

Mr. Hill: The figures for kilometres created in individual years before 1997 are unavailable. In 1996–97 the London Cycle Network (LCN) was 908 kilometres long.

	Length (km)
1996–97	908
1997–98	147
1998–99	161
1999–2000	129

The LCN is currently some 1,345 kilometres long.

The following table provides details of the resources that my Department has allocated for the LCN under the Local Transport Settlement. Future allocations will be made by the Mayor and Transport for London.

	Allocation (£ million)
1995–96	3.00
1996–97	[1]4.00
1997–98	4.00
1998–99	5.00
1999–2000	5.50
2000–01	6.00
Total	27.50

[1] Includes £1 million for London Cycling Initiative

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the timetable and interim targets are for completion of the London Cycle Network; and if he will make a statement. [152343]

Mr. Hill: Responsibility for the London Cycle Network has transferred to the Mayor.

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the timetable and interim targets are for achieving the National Cycling Strategy's objective concerning the proportion of journeys made by bicycle; and if he will make a statement. [152342]

Mr. Hill: The Government endorsed the targets in the 1996 National Cycling Strategy, to double the number of cycle trips by 2002, and to quadruple them by 2012. To achieve increases on the scale envisaged, major improvements need to be made in the infrastructure for cycling. It has become increasingly clear that the interim target for 2002 did not allow enough time for such improvements to be planned and implemented. The Government remain committed to the target for 2012, and in the 10-Year Transport Plan we have set a new interim target of trebling cycling by 2010.

Housing Investment (London Boroughs)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the *(a)* percentage change and *(b)* cash change in real terms in the housing investment programme for each London borough in each year since 1996–97. [152333]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The information requested has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Planning Officers

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what mechanisms exist for members of the public to complain about the conduct of planning officers; and what remedies exist in respect of complaints which are upheld. [152264]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Complaints about officers' conduct should, in the first instance, be directed to the local authority concerned, to be handled in accordance with its complaints procedures and disciplinary code. If, after receiving the local authority's response, the complainant wishes to pursue the matter, it could be put to the Local Government Ombudsman, who is the independent and impartial body charged by Parliament with investigating complaints of maladministration causing injustice.

The Ombudsman may deal with complaints by correspondence or issue a report which the local authority must consider. Remedy may involve the payment of compensation, review of the authority's policy and procedures, or both.

Rail Speed Restrictions

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many speed restrictions were in place on the rail network at the end of each month since October 2000; and how many are anticipated at the end of March and April 2001. [152358]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Railtrack report the number of temporary speed restrictions at the end of each month as:

	Number
October 2000	346
November 2000	852
December 2000	456
January 2001	422
February 2001	307
March 2001[1]	177
April 2001[1]	61

[1] Plan

This covers temporary speed restrictions imposed since Hatfield because of gauge corner cracking and adverse weather, and addressed in the company's National Recovery Plan of 18 January 2001. It excludes speed restrictions in force at any one time for other reasons (including some gauge corner restrictions imposed since 18 January 2001).

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if all the speed restrictions on the London to Norwich railway line will be lifted by Easter. [152361]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Railtrack is removing the remaining speed restrictions on the London-Norwich line in accordance with its National Recovery Plan, but some of the less severe restrictions will remain in place into the summer. Additionally, as with other parts of the network, the London—Norwich line will continue to be affected by speed restrictions imposed for other reasons.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate his Department has made of the effect of speed restrictions on journey times on the London to Norwich railway line. [152360]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The Association of Train Operators reports that current average journey times for London to Norwich are between two hours 10 minutes and two hours 15 minutes. The normal timetable time is one hour 47 minutes.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what

representations he has made to Railtrack about the continued enforcement of speed restrictions; and when he estimates that the final restrictions will be lifted. [152355]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The Rail Recovery Action Group, chaired by my noble Friend the Minister for Transport, is pressing and helping Railtrack to ensure that temporary speed restrictions imposed in the light of the Hatfield accident are removed as soon as possible, consistent with high safety standards. Many other speed restrictions imposed for other reasons will remain, and so the group has not estimated when all restrictions might be lifted.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many speed restrictions are still in force on the rail network; and on which lines. [152349]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* As of 5 March, 287 temporary speed restrictions imposed in the light of the Hatfield accident remain in force at various points on the rail network, including on 32 of the 45 strategic routes identified in Railtrack's Network Management Statement:

West Coast Mainline
East Coast Mainline
Great Western Mainline
Reading and Bristol to Penzance
Midland Mainline
Channel Tunnel Routes
Derby to Bristol and Didcot
North Transpennine
Birmingham and Coventry to Peterborough
Crewe to Newport
Wolverhampton to Chester and Aberystwyth
Manchester and Crewe to North Wales
Manchester to Sheffield and North Lincolnshire
Edinburgh to Glasgow, Glasgow and Edinburgh to Aberdeen and Inverness
West Anglia Mainline
Great Eastern Mainline
Chatham Mainline and North Kent
Brighton Mainline and South London Network
South Coastal Route Portsmouth to Ashford
London to Portsmouth
Wessex Routes
Chiltern lines
North London Line
Cardiff Valleys
West Midlands local routes
East Midlands local routes
Yorkshire
North East England
South West Scotland
Strathclyde
Freight-only routes North England
Freight-only routes Scotland.

In addition, at any one time there is always a larger number of speed restrictions in force on the network, needed to maintain safe operation in adverse operating conditions and to enable normal maintenance activities to be completed.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what speed restrictions have been placed on the London to Norwich railway line in each of the last six months; how many of these restrictions remain; what monitoring of the situation he is undertaking; and what representations he has made to Railtrack about the disruption these restrictions have caused to journey times. [152359]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Railtrack is responsible for the management of speed restrictions, and reports to the Rail Recovery Action Group on the total in force nationally in the light of the Hatfield accident. The detailed figures for individual lines are a matter for Railtrack.

In the light of its concern about extended journey times on London-Norwich and other services, the group, chaired by the Minister for Transport, is urging Railtrack to remove temporary speed restrictions as soon as possible, consistent with high safety standards.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many speed restrictions were in place on the London to Norwich railway line in each month since the end of October 2000; and how many are anticipated at the end of March and April this year. [152362]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* This is a matter for Railtrack.

Rail Industry

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what regular meetings the Minister for Transport holds with representatives of the rail industry. [152357]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* My noble Friend the Minister for Transport chairs the Rail Recovery Action Group, meeting each week and bringing together senior rail industry representatives to help get services back to normal. Ministers have frequent meetings on a bilateral basis with a range of industry figures.

Sewers

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many miles of sewers in *(a)* Lancashire and *(b)* the United Kingdom are in a serious state of disrepair and need to be (i) repaired and (ii) replaced within the next 10 years; and if he will make a statement. [152275]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Information is available only on a water company basis. In the North West Water region, 4,597 miles of sewer (18.6 per cent. of their total) are assessed as being in a poor condition. For England and Wales, 10.6 per cent. of the sewer network is assessed as being in a poor condition. My Department does not have information covering the United Kingdom as a whole.

Between 2000 and 2005, North West Water plans to renew or renovate 281 miles of sewer. For England and Wales, the comparable figure is 1,130 miles. Companies' plans for 2006 to 2010 will be reviewed as part of the next periodic review of water companies' prices.

The condition of sewers is only one of several factors to be taken into account when assessing whether they need to be repaired or replaced. Various studies are under way to review the basis for future investment.

First Group School Bus Pilot

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if his Department has authorised the First Group School Bus pilot initiative on the basis that the vehicles are classified as coaches; and if he will make a statement; [152476]

(2) if he has made it a condition that vehicles used in the First Group School Bus pilot comply with *(a)* ECER 66 regulations and *(b)* ECEM 3 standard regulations; [152475]

(3) if the glass used in the construction of the First Group School Bus pilot meets the same standards as required for UK public service vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [152477]

Mr. Hill: The vehicles to be operated in the First Bus Pilot School Project are considered to be coaches. However, because they do not have any under-floor luggage space they are not required to comply with ECE Regulation 66. Before they can be used the vehicles will be modified to meet the requirements of the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986, as amended; the Public Service Vehicles (Conditions of Fitness, Equipment, Use and Certification) Regulations 1981, as amended; and the Road Vehicles Lighting Regulations 1986. These are the equivalent standards in the UK to those contained in the ECE regulations relating to the construction of large buses and coaches (ECE Category M3).

Where any of the component parts, such as the glazing, are not marked showing compliance with UK standards we have determined that the performance will be equivalent to UK standards.

On accessibility, we have agreed to exempt these vehicles from the seat spacing and destination display requirements of the Public Service Vehicle Accessibility Regulations, which are not generally relevant to school services.

Departmental Policies (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Warrington, North constituency, the effects on Warrington, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152313]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The principal kinds of funding which this Department has provided to Warrington in 1997–98 to 2000–01 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowings approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much money has been spent on Warrington, North. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are invested.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Revenue Support Grant[1]	4.5	57.5	58.9	56.7	61.4
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates[1]	5.9	44.5	48.4	54.8	53.6
Local Government Reorganisation Supplementary Credit Approval	3.3	2.3	—	—	—
Housing Investment Programme	2.2	2.1	3.7	4.6	1.7
Major Repairs Allowance	—	—	—	—	5.4
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	6.1	5.3	5.0	4.4	3.8
Capital Receipts Initiative	—	1.3	1.3	—	—
Cash Incentive Scheme	0.1	0.1	—	—	—
Loan Charges Defective Housing	0.005	0.005	0.005	0.005	0.005
SRB Funding[2]	—	0.04	0.08	0.2	0.2
Transport Supplementary Grant[1]	—	0.6	0.7	—	—
Transport Annual Capital Guideline[1]	—	0.6	0.7	—	—
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval[1]	—	0.3	0.7	2.7	4.3
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant[1]	—	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06
Capital Challenge (Supplementary Credit and Basic Credit Approvals)	—	0.1	0.1	—	—

[1] Warrington became a unitary authority from 1 April 1998.
For 1997–98 the following funding relating to the Warrington Borough area will have gone to Cheshire County Council:
Transport Supplementary Grant
Transport ACG
Transport SCA
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant
The change to Unitary status also explains the large increases in Revenue Support Grant and National Non-Domestic Rates from 1998–99.
[2] Single Regeneration Budget—Round 4
The T.R.E.E. Project (Training and Retraining for Employment and Employability)
The four-year scheme aims to develop an innovative solution to tackle deprivation on several estates in Warrington. Three key priority areas will be tackled—training and employability, community business support and community development.
Total SRB £584,000.

Electronic Signatures (Departmental Communications)

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress his Department has made in implementing the policy objective of the increased use of electronic signatures in communications *(a)* between officials, *(b)* from officials to persons and organisations outside and *(c)* from persons and organisations outside to officials in his Department. [152423]

Ms Beverley Hughes: DETR(C) is aware that Public Key Infrastructure (PKI) and its associated use of encryption and digital signatures will be used to provide strong authentication, non-repudiation and confidentiality for transactions which are designated to be above Level 1 in the "Guidelines for Trust and Authentication" of the "Confidentiality Services Framework" as defined by Cabinet Office.

Our plans include:

(a) for internal use-DETR(C) is currently carrying out a routine maintenance upgrade of its networking infrastructure; the new revision of the software will support the use of electronic signatures. Further work is under way to identify appropriate electronic signature products to work with the revised infrastructure, and the most effective way to deploy them.

(b) from officials to persons and organisations outside and *(c)* from persons and organisations outside to officials in his Department—DETR(C) will ensure that our systems serve both the authentication needs for internal departmental communications, and for those with external persons and organisations. For that reason, we are in discussion with OGC, the E-envoy's office, CESG and the Gateway team so that the eventual solution will be compatible with facilities to be provided through the Government Gateway, the Government Secure Intranet and meet all interoperability requirements.

Nuclear Waste (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the local and regional authorities with which he has had discussions regarding the transporting of nuclear waste by train through Wandsworth; and if he will make a statement. [152677]

Mr. Hill: No such list is maintained.

Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the outcome was of the Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context held in Sofia from 25 to 27 February. [152846]

Mr. Raynsford: The second meeting of the Parties to this Convention agreed to begin negotiations on a protocol to the Convention covering strategic environmental assessment with a view to its adoption at the Environment for Europe Conference at Kiev in 2003. The meeting adopted a proposal, developed under UK leadership, to establish an Implementation Committee to develop reporting procedures and to assist Parties to meet fully their obligations under the Convention. The UK will support this work and will chair the Implementation Committee for its first year. The UK also agreed to work closely with the Russian Federation on a project to develop guidelines on public participation in environmental impact assessment in a transboundary context. A decision was taken to adopt some minor amendments to the Convention. A review group was established to consider the need for further amendments, taking into account developments in environmental impact assessment since the Convention was signed 10 years ago, and other changes that may be necessary to harmonise with other relevant multi-lateral environmental agreements. A work programme and funding to give effect to these decisions was agreed.

WALES

Euro (Manufacturing Industry)

9. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the impact of future UK membership of the single European currency on manufacturing industry in Wales. [151056]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Government have said that they will make an assessment of the five economic tests early in the next Parliament. If the five tests have been met and there is clear and unambiguous evidence of the benefits of joining a single currency, the Government will then make a decision to recommend membership to Parliament, and then because of the magnitude of the decision, put it to a referendum of the British people.

Unemployment

11. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the latest calculation is of the level of unemployment in Wales. [151058]

Mr. Hanson: The latest available statistics for Wales show a fall in claimant count unemployment from 6.6 per cent. in April 1997 to 4.4 per cent. in January 2001.

15. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about long-term and youth unemployment in Wales. [151062]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet the First Secretary and discuss a wide range of issues including employment in Wales.

Thanks to the success of the Government's New Deal programme, long-term unemployment in Wales now stands at 11,300 and youth unemployment in Wales now stands at 15,900, their lowest figures since 1986.

17. **Mr. Denzil Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the level of unemployment in Wales. [151064]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet the First Secretary and discuss a wide range of issues including employment in Wales.

Recent labour market statistics show that unemployment is at its lowest for 25 years under this Government. Unemployment is down to 1.005 million UK wide and down to 55,000 in Wales.

Since the New Deal was launched throughout Wales, there has been a 39 per cent. fall in the number of people aged 25 and over who have been unemployed and claiming the Job Seeker's Allowance for two years or more.

18. **Mr. Ruane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about long-term and youth unemployment in Wales. [151065]

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about long-term and youth unemployment in Wales. [151063]

Mr. Hanson: I regularly meet the First Secretary and discuss a number of issues including long-term and youth unemployment in Wales.

The latest seasonally adjusted claimant count unemployment rate in Wales was 4.4 per cent. of workforce for January 2001, its lowest level since August 1975, and long-term unemployment and youth unemployment are at their lowest levels in Wales since 1986 at 11,300 and 15,900 respectively.

In addition to this, the Government's New Deal programme has been an outstanding success in helping 27,000 people into work in Wales.

Miners' Compensation

12. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when the Welsh monitoring group on miners' compensation claims last met; and if he will make a statement. [151059]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I established the Welsh sub-group of the Coal Health Claims Monitoring Group specifically to address coal health issues in Wales and to report back to the GB-wide group. The Group had its second meeting on 12 February, attended by my hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Competitiveness in Europe, and again proved extremely constructive. I am convinced that the measures we have discussed, and the actions we have agreed, will further speed up the processing of coal health claims.

Small Businesses

13. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about small business development in Wales. [151060]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet the First Minister and discuss a wide range of issues including small businesses in Wales.

The Government launched their White Paper on Enterprise, Skills and Innovation on 13 February 2001 setting out the next steps for Government in helping individuals, communities and businesses to prosper. The Assembly were fully consulted during production of the White Paper.

Employment

14. **Mr. Martyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last discussed the level of employment in Wales with the First Secretary of the Assembly. [151061]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet the First Secretary and discuss a wide range of issues including employment in Wales.

The employment rate in Wales for the period October to December 2000 represents 69.5 per cent. of the working age population.

26. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what initiatives he is taking to increase investment and employment in Wales. [151073]

Mr. Paul Murphy: While I do not retain any executive functions which would allow me to make direct proposals in respect of investment or employment matters, I am in regular contact with Cabinet colleagues and with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss how best to shape and take forward initiatives.

I am, however, responsible for securing the Welsh block for the Assembly. This Government secured Objective 1 status and funding for Wales, and provided funding over and above the Barnett allocation as part of the comprehensive spending review. This is further evidence of this Government's commitment to regenerate some of the most deprived areas of Wales.

Steel Industry

19. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will meet the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales to discuss the impact of steel closures at Llanwern and Ebbw Vale on Monmouthshire. [151066]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I regularly meet the First Secretary and discuss a number of issues including the steel industry in Wales.

The Government and the Assembly are looking to provide help to the individuals affected and the communities in which they live. This will include new job opportunities, retraining, and economic regeneration.

We will announce proposals in due course but we do not want to cut across the talks the trade unions are having with Corus.

Student Support

20. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary on the system of student support. [151067]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the First Secretary on a regular basis to discuss a range of issues.

Tuition fees and student support policy for higher education is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for both England and Wales. I understand, however, that the Assembly is concerned about student hardship, including the impact of tuition fees on the financial position of students. The Assembly announced on 5 December that they have commissioned an independent investigation into the issue of student hardship and funding, dealing with those issues covered in the Scottish 'Cubie Report' which fall within the Assembly's remit.

Anti-drugs Strategy

21. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the First Secretary concerning the Government's anti-drugs strategy. [151068]

Mr. Hanson: My right hon. Friend and I have regular meetings with the First Secretary to discuss a range of issues.

The Assembly Health and Social Services Secretary launched the Welsh strategy "Tackling Substance Misuse in Wales: A Partnership Approach" in May 2000 in the light of the UK anti-drugs strategy. This embraces the

four key aims of the UK anti-drugs strategy within the Welsh strategic framework and covers the full range of substances that are misused in Wales, including illegal drugs and alcohol.

Copies of the Assembly's strategy have been placed in the House Libraries.

Household Incomes

22. **Mr. Jon Owen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the First Secretary about the level of household incomes in Wales. [151069]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular meetings with the First Secretary to discuss a range of issues including the impact of incomes in Wales.

The Assembly is committed to producing an annual report monitoring progress against key indicators of social exclusion. Information on household incomes by local authority area is given in the National Assembly's report entitled "Mapping Social Exclusion in Wales". A copy of this report is in the Library of the House.

Manufacturing

23. **Mr. Chope:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the most recent figures for jobs in manufacturing in Wales. [151070]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Government recognise that there have been major job losses but the latest available figures show that between autumn 1999 and autumn 2000 there were 14,500 new manufacturing jobs in Wales, 4,000 as a result of new openings and 10,500 through expansions at existing plants.

30. **Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on recent discussions he has had with the Treasury on resources for areas of Wales which have lost jobs in the manufacturing sector. [151077]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with my Cabinet colleagues, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, about a range of issues.

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he will next meet the Engineering Employers Federation to discuss manufacturing in Wales. [151057]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I am in regular contact with a broad range of manufacturing representatives in Wales and have met representatives of the Engineering Employers' Federation.

Despite recent job losses in some sectors of manufacturing in Wales, the announcement of further investment by Ford at Bridgend, together with recent positive decisions on production in the UK by Toyota and Nissan, demonstrates confidence in the economic stability and favourable business environment this Government have established.

Incinerator, Wrexham

24. **Mr. Stephen O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the assessment being made of the effects on Cheshire residents of proposals for an incinerator in Wrexham. [151071]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The National Assembly for Wales Planning Committee is responsible for making a decision on the proposal, on the basis of a report currently being prepared by the planning inspector, with specialist advice from an assessor. To that end, a public inquiry on this application opened on 11 October 2000 and closed on 10 January 2001. I understand that the inquiry took evidence from a significant number of individuals and groups on all aspects of the case and that the views of Cheshire residents were well represented.

Crime Reduction

25. **Mrs. Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he next plans to visit west Wales to discuss crime reduction. [151072]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have no immediate plans to visit west Wales to discuss crime reduction. However, I meet the chief constables of all four Welsh police authorities regularly to discuss a range of issues, including crime reduction. My most recent meeting with chief constables was on 15 January. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales and I also make regular visits to organisations across Wales to discuss a wide range of issues, including crime reduction.

27. **Mr. John Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he last met the Chief Constable of South Wales to discuss crime reduction in the Vale of Glamorgan. [151074]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I met the Chief Constable of South Wales on 15 January to discuss a range of issues affecting policing in Wales, including crime reduction. South Wales police are doing an excellent job in tackling crime, and recent crime figures published by the Home Office show that south Wales has experienced a record 16.9 per cent. fall in crime in the 12 months to September 2000—the largest fall of any police force area in England and Wales.

29. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary about crime levels in Wales and joint efforts to reduce them. [151076]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I meet the Home Secretary regularly to discuss a range of issues, including crime levels and joint efforts to reduce crime.

I welcome the work being done by statutory crime and disorder reduction partnerships across Wales in implementing local crime reduction strategies, and in particular the close co-operation between police and local authorities on crime reduction issues.

Wales has so far attracted investment of £5.6 million from the Government's Crime Reduction Programme and the programme is supported in Wales by complementary Assembly initiatives tackling a range of related issues. These joint efforts to reduce crime will be instrumental in building safer communities throughout Wales.

Mr. Michael: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he has discussed with the First Secretary of the National Assembly for Wales the role of the health service in crime reduction in Wales. [151053]

Mr. Hanson: NHS Trusts in Wales have a crucial role to play in local crime and disorder reduction partnerships. There have been some notable examples of best practice,

and both the UK Government and the Assembly are actively encouraging greater participation by NHS Trusts and the Health Service across Wales.

I know that my right hon. Friend has been closely involved with the violence reduction project focused on the Accident and Emergency Unit at University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff and that both he, as First Secretary, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary have commended it as an example of best practice.

Floods

28. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what recent discussions he has had with the Rural Affairs Secretary of the National Assembly on the recent floods in border areas; and if he will make a statement. [151075]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have regular discussions with the First Minister which have included both agriculture and flooding. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State also has discussions on a regular basis with both the Assembly Rural Affairs Secretary and the Assembly Minister for the Environment.

In November the Assembly Rural Affairs Secretary announced that farmers who have lost crops would not lose out on European Arable Area Subsidy payments and an extension to the latest sowing date from 15 May to 31 May has been agreed. Farmers in Wales will also be allowed to set aside 100 per cent. of their eligible land where it has been affected by flooding, as well as provision for flexibility in normal requirements for green cover on set-aside land.

On January 25 the Assembly Secretary for the Environment announced plans to spend nearly £25 million over three years on flood and coastal defence in Wales. Much of this work will clearly benefit farmers, as repairs to flood banks will protect agricultural land.

I welcome these initiatives to alleviate the suffering of farmers in Wales resulting from the exceptional recent flooding.

CABINET OFFICE

Executive Agencies

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to review arrangements for delivering public services through executive agencies. [152985]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Executive Agencies play a crucial role in delivering high quality public services to specific and visible targets. They have ensured and strengthened managerial accountability.

However, in consultation with my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, we have decided that it is an opportune time to review the arrangements for Executive Agencies to see what lessons can be drawn from current models. The review will be sponsored jointly by the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. In the context of Modernising Government and the Civil Service Reform Programme, it will focus on:

- what versions of the agency model have been most successful and least, and in what context, focusing on the output and services delivered by organisations, and taking into account other models of service delivery;
- how agency objectives and targets can best be aligned with PSA and SDA objectives and targets and given the right degree of stretch;
- what degree of control from parent departments and the centre and what degree of freedom to manage is appropriate;
- how appropriate the current level and scope of central scrutiny is, including quinquennial reviews, better quality services reviews and PSA/SDA monitoring;
- how joined up service delivery can best be promoted via the agency model;
- how service delivery and policy can best be integrated to ensure that policy is properly informed by practicalities;
- how to ensure that agencies have in place appropriate corporate governance including the roles of ministerial advisory boards and "Fraser" figures;
- how best to secure transparency and thoroughness in reporting on agency matters including performance to the public.

We place great importance on the involvement of the civil service unions in taking forward the modernising Government agenda. In the full spirit of our partnership agreement with the unions, officials will be involving them regularly during the course of the review.

E-strategy (Benefit Payments)

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made by her Department in ensuring that Departments of State charged with the payment of benefits comply with the Government's e-strategy. [152422]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The e-government strategy published in April 2000 committed Departments to

"report on how their current IT plans will converge"

with the Government strategy, and that in particular, Departments should publish "initial e-business strategies" by October 2000.

The office of the e-envoy has received these strategies, which represent an important first step towards putting Government services online and changing the way Government is organised to deliver those services.

Further work remains to be done and Departments will continue to develop and publish further versions of their strategies. The office of the e-envoy will be working with Departments to help deliver these strategies.

Progress by Departments of State on the delivery by 2005 of all their services contained in their Public Service Agreements and Service Delivery Agreements is monitored on a six monthly cycle and the latest report was laid before the House on 16 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 176W, and may be found on the web at: www.e-envoy.gov.uk/esd.htm.

Links to Departmental e-business strategies may be found on the web at: www.e-envoy.gov.uk/estrats.htm.

SCOTLAND

Tanker Traffic (The Minch)

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what her Department's policy is on the proposed establishment of a European Maritime Safety Agency, with specific reference to the issue of tanker traffic in the Minch; and if she will make a statement. [149427]

Mrs. Liddell: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given by the Under Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr. Hill) on 14 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 147–48W.

Winter Fuel Payments (Renfrewshire)

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the Winter Fuel Payments for the winter of 2000–01 have been made to all those eligible in Renfrewshire; and if he will make a statement. [152420]

Mr. Foulkes: Around 1 million people across Scotland have benefited from Winter Fuel Payments this winter. Automatic payments, where entitlement was established, were made before Christmas 2000.

In some cases, people have to make a claim for the Payment. All payments in respect of successful claims determined by 9 November 2000 were also made before Christmas 2000. Claims that were determined after 9 November and before 15 January are due to be paid during the first two weeks in March. The Department of Social Security will be making further payments in April 2001 and again in June 2001.

The Department of Social Security identified early on that there might be difficulties in relation to areas with tenement buildings. In some cases, there may not be individual flat numbers and the customer may not have supplied a postcode. This could mean that the correct payments might not be made. The Department of Social Security have addressed this issue. Their practice now is to look at all known tenement cases on an individual basis and pay the correct amount due, taking into account whether anyone else can be identified as living in the same household.

People with any queries about their Winter Fuel Payment should contact their local Benefits Agency office.

Salmon Anaemia

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what *(a)* direct and *(b)* consequential loss was sustained by salmon farmers between 1997 and the latest date for which data are available as a result of the implementation of destruction orders following outbreaks of infectious salmon anaemia. [152327]

Mr. Foulkes: In 2000 Hydro Seafoods GSP reported to the Competition Commission, in the context of the inquiry into the proposed acquisition by Nutreco, that exceptional costs of more than £18 million in 1997 and 1998 arose from the outbreak of ISA. We have no comparable information for other companies.

From 1 July 1999 fisheries was devolved and is a matter for the Scottish Executive. I understand that in recognition of the importance of the salmon farming industry to the rural economy in Scotland, £9 million has been made available through Highlands and Islands Enterprise to assist companies directly affected by ISA to regain their previous level of trading. Grants of £2.9 million and £1.4 million have been approved and are under consideration respectively. The scheme will remain open until Spring 2002.

PRIME MINISTER

Council of Europe and WEU

Mr. Ernie Ross: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Library the latest information bulletin on the activities of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Assembly of Western European Union covering the period May to October 2000. [152843]

The Prime Minister: I have done so today.

US National Missile Defence

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Prime Minister if his joint communiqué with the President of the United States and his subsequent statement to the press represent a change in the Government's policy towards potential US plans for National Missile Defence. [151856]

The Prime Minister: No. We continue to share US concerns about the threat posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, and we recognise the role that missile defence can play as one part of a strategy to deal with it.

Arms Control and Disarmament

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Prime Minister if he discussed strategies for reducing and eliminating the threat from weapons of mass destruction through arms control and disarmament during his recent meetings at Camp David with the President of the United States. [151858]

The Prime Minister: President Bush and I discussed a range of issues including the growing threat from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery and the need for common efforts to counter this. As made clear in our joint statement, arms control and disarmament will continue to be important elements of our strategy to combat this threat.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 8 March 2001

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Waste Regulation

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what checks the Environment Agency makes before providing individuals with waste management licences and waste carrier licences. [148730]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Under section 36(3) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, the Environment Agency may reject an application for a waste management licence if it is not satisfied the applicant is a "fit and proper person" or if rejection is necessary to prevent pollution of the environment or harm to human health. There are three components to the "fit and proper person" test: conviction for a relevant offence, technical competence and financial provision. Guidance on these provisions has been provided to the Environment Agency in Waste Management Paper No. 4 "Licensing of Waste Management Facilities"; and Waste Management Paper No. 4A "Licensing of Metal Recycling Sites".

Under section 3 of the Control of Pollution (Amendment) Act 1989, and Regulation 5 of the Controlled Waste (Registration of Carriers and Seizure of Vehicles) Regulations 1991, the Environment Agency may reject an application for registration as a carrier of controlled waste if, among other reasons, the applicant has been convicted of a prescribed offence, and in the opinion of the Agency it is undesirable for the applicant to be authorised to transport waste. Guidance on the refusal by the Environment Agency of applications for waste carrier registration has been provided in DOE Circular 11/91 (paragraphs 1.27–1.47).

The Coastguard

Mr. Letwin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy to allow the coastguard to use public funds for non-operational purposes, including publicity; and if he will make a statement. [151445]

Mr. Hill: The Maritime and Coastguard Agency is responsible for the operation of the Coastguard service. The Agency uses public funding for non-operational purposes such as publicity and educational material to raise safety awareness, promote maritime safety generally and to protect the marine environment.

Mobile Telephone Masts

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what weight will be given to health risks when deciding on planning permission for mobile telephone masts. [151656]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Health considerations and public concern can in principle be material considerations in determining applications for planning permission and prior approval. Whether such matters are material in a particular case is ultimately a matter for the courts. It is for the decision-maker (usually the local planning authority) to determine what weight to attach to such considerations in any particular case. However, it is the Government's view that if a proposed development meets the guidelines of the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) on limiting public exposure to electromagnetic fields it should not be necessary for an authority, in processing an application, to consider health effects further.

Road Works

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to review the provisions of the New Roads and Streetworks Act 1991 in relation to the control of roadworks undertaken by private telecommunications contractors. [152048]

Mr. Hill: Regulations under section 74 of the New Road and Street Works Act 1991 were laid before the House on 26 February. These will come into force on 1 April and allow highway authorities to levy charges on utilities, including telecommunications companies, who fail to complete street works by an agreed deadline. The Government also took powers in the Transport Act 2000 to make regulations permitting highway authorities to levy daily charges on utilities from the outset of works (so-called "lane rental"). The lane rental powers are being kept in reserve at this stage. However, we will activate them if it becomes clear that the section 74 powers have failed to reduce sufficiently the disruption which works cause to road users. We have also made it clear that we are prepared to introduce further measures, including revisiting other provisions of the 1991 Act.

Bus Vehicle Inspectors

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many licences have been withdrawn from bus companies by bus vehicle inspectors in each of the last three years. [152003]

Mr. Hill: Vehicle Examiners from the Vehicle Inspectorate notify the results of their maintenance inspections to Traffic Commissioners who are responsible for licensing operators of public service vehicles. The numbers of licences revoked by Traffic Commissioners as a result of operators failing to maintain their vehicles adequately are:

1997–98:—21

1998–99:—20

1999–00:—18.

All figures relate to Great Britain.

Turnham Green Tube Station

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 317W, on Turnham Green tube station, on how

many occasions Piccadilly Line trains have made special stops at Turnham Green tube station since the current engineering works began. [152156]

Mr. Hill: This is an operational issue for London Underground who inform me that between 3 February and 6 March 2001 there have been 12 special stops in the morning and five special stops in the afternoon of Piccadilly Line trains at Turnham Green tube station. The majority of these stops were made outside the peak hours.

LUL have also informed me that there have been three additional periods, two in the morning peak and one between 8pm and 10pm when Piccadilly Line trains have stopped but the actual number of trains that have stopped during each period has not been recorded for those occasions.

London Underground

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 23 January 2001 to the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman), *Official Report*, column 525W, on London Underground, what factors underlay the difference between *(a)* the original figure for London Underground's gross operating margin for 1999–2000 and the revised figure, *(b)* the original operating loss of London Underground Ltd. for 1999–2000 and the revised loss, *(c)* the original budgeted gross operating margin of London Underground Ltd. for 2000–01 and the revised figure and *(d)* the original budgeted investment programme for London Underground Ltd. in 2000–01 and the revised figure. [152370]

Mr. Hill: As was made clear in the Answer referred to in the Question, these differences result from London Underground's adoption of the accounting standard Financial Reporting Standard 15, which governs the treatment of tangible fixed assets. The underlying figures are unchanged.

Motorway Safety Signs

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the criteria governing the siting of Tiredness Kills notices on motorways. [152263]

Mr. Hill: Decisions on the provision of signs at specific locations are made locally and, based on conditions at the site concerned. In most cases, however, "Tiredness Can Kill" signs are provided no more than around two miles in advance of a motorway service area. This ensures that motorists who take the advice to have a break from driving do so at a motorway service area, where they can park safely.

Vehicle Excise Duty

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many road fund licences were unpaid in *(a)* Essex and *(b)* Kent at the end of February; what the procedure for collecting the moneys due for unpaid road fund licences is; and what the penalties for non-payment are. [152595]

Mr. Hill: A roadside survey conducted in 1999 estimated that there were 43,000 unlicensed vehicles in Essex and 44,000 in Kent.

Vehicle excise duty (VED) evaders are required to pay an out-of-court settlement or in more serious cases face prosecution. Some 612,000 were penalised last year. In addition a scheme is in place to wheelclamp, impound and dispose of unlicensed vehicles. Over 333,000 motorists have been encouraged to relicense thus far as a result of the scheme over the three and a half years it has been in operation.

The maximum fine for VED evasion is a £1,000 or five times the annual rate of duty, whichever is the greater. In addition a penalty equal to the amount of duty owed must be paid, together with costs.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action the Government are taking to enforce the requirement for all vehicles to display a valid tax disc. [152489]

Mr. Hill: Following a roadside survey in 1999, it is estimated that the level of Vehicle Excise Duty (VED) evasion has been cut for the first time from 4.1 per cent. in 1994 to 3.9 per cent., representing a saving of £17 million a year.

The payment of VED is enforced by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). Action includes offering out-of-court settlements and prosecuting where appropriate. Last year over 612,000 motorists were penalised and some £86 million in total was recovered in fines, penalties and relicensing revenue.

Part of DVLA's enforcement role is to administer a nationwide scheme to wheelclamp, impound and dispose of unlicensed vehicles. The scheme has encouraged over 333,000 motorists to relicense their vehicles voluntarily bringing in over £39 million in increased revenue over the last three and a half years. The police work closely with DVLA on VED enforcement and take part in a programme of high profile VED enforcement campaigns throughout the country. Last year, 26 such campaigns were undertaken.

A new initiative to detect and deter unlicensed vehicles will make use of mobile automatic number plate readers. A trial is due to take place shortly. It is planned to introduce this camera technology on a nationwide basis later this year.

Combined Heat and Power

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action the Government are taking to meet its target of 10,000 megawatts of CHP by 2010. [152638]

Mr. Meacher: We have introduced a range of incentives to stimulate CHP growth, including exemption of Good Quality CHP from the Climate Change Levy, subject to EU clearance and eligibility for enhanced capital allowances. Electricity generating plant and machinery will also be exempted from business rating from 1 April 2001. A comprehensive strategy will be

launched in the coming months to ensure that our 2010 target is achieved with the help of the measures already announced and other new measures designed to stimulate CHP growth further.

Construction Industry (Health and Safety)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* fatal accidents and *(b)* accidents requiring an overnight stay in hospital there were on construction sites in each Government region in the last three years. [152640]

Mr. Meacher: The following table displays, for each of the past three years[1], reported fatal and major injuries to workers and fatal and non-fatal injuries to members of the public in the construction industry.

The statistics are compiled from reports by employers and others under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases, and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR). Major and non-fatal injuries are defined as major injuries to workers (e.g. amputations, fractures and injuries which lead to 24 hours stay in hospital) and to members of the public, which lead to immediate transfer to hospital. Overnight stays in hospital are not reported.

[1] Data covers period 1 April to 31 March.

	1997–98		*1998–99*		*1999–2000*[1]	
Region	*Fatal*	*Major/Non-fatal*	*Fatal*	*Major/non-fatal*	*Fatal*	*Major/Non-fatal*
North	5	282	0	287	2	311
North West	15	576	12	546	9	559
Yorkshire and Humberside	7	430	5	484	8	426
West Midlands	7	331	7	365	3	378
East Midlands	4	347	3	336	5	284
East Anglia	0	142	4	188	3	164
South West	5	365	4	380	10	419
South East	12	761	11	799	13	824
Greater London	12	635	9	744	15	815
Wales	7	285	6	261	3	273
Scotland	12	511	7	644	14	587
Total	86	4,665	68	5,034	85	5,040

[1] The figures for 1999–2000 are provisional.

Average Mortgage Payments

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the average mortgage payment was in London *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [152192]

Mr. Raynsford: Based on data from the Family Resources Survey, the estimated average mortgage payment for owner occupiers in London with an outstanding mortgage was:

	£ per week
1996–97	64
1999–2000	82

Notes:

1. These figures are a combination of interest payments only, for those with interest-only mortgages, and interest payments plus capital repayments for those with repayment mortgages. It is not possible to separate the two.
2. Any insurance payments (eg endowment, mortgage protection or buildings insurance) are excluded.
3. The estimates are rounded to the nearest pound.
4. The period covered, in each case, is 1 April to 31 March.

Source:

Family Resources Survey (Department of Social Security)

Greater London Authority

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what level of grant he will set for the Greater London Authority for 2001. [153069]

Mr. Hill: GLA Transport grant is determined annually after consultation with the Mayor of London under section 101 of the GLA Act 1999. The Secretary of State has today determined the level of grant for 2001–02 at £707,088,000.

Transport for London

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what major land assets were transferred to Transport for London on 3 July 2000. [153068]

Mr. Hill: I have today placed a list in the Libraries of both Houses, which details all the major land assets that TfL inherited on 3 July 2000.

Heathrow

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the inspector's report on the inquiry into the fifth terminal at Heathrow will be published. [152660]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Secretary of State plans to publish the Inspector's Report when he issues the decision on Terminal 5. This is in accordance with the usual practice for planning decisions.

Regional Planning Guidance

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish his response to the recommendations of the

panel that conducted the public examination of draft regional planning guidance for Yorkshire and the Humber; and if he will make a statement. [153125]

Mr. Raynsford: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister is today publishing for public consultation Proposed Changes to the Draft Regional Planning Guidance (RPG12) for Yorkshire and the Humber. They are largely based on the recommendations of the independent Panel that held a public examination into draft RPG last summer.

In October 2000, my right hon. Friend published new guidance on regional planning in Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) Note 11. This followed the announcement of a new approach to planning for housing provision last March which was taken forward in more detail in the revised Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) Note 3. Important issues for the region to take forward are contained in the Urban and Rural White Papers, issued last November. The Proposed Changes to the draft RPG for Yorkshire and the Humber reflect the principles and priorities set out in these statements. They aim to achieve urban and rural renaissance, support economic growth and regeneration, while at the same time protecting and enhancing the region's environment.

Draft RPG was prepared by the Regional Assembly for Yorkshire and Humberside. Its overall spatial strategy aims to create a more sustainable region and achieve urban and rural renaissance by focusing development on the region's main towns and cities and making best use of previously-developed land. We support this, and, as recommended by the Panel, we are proposing changes to ensure that the strategy is more clearly expressed and so that its implications for development plans and other programmes are clearer to make a real difference on the ground.

A key issue for the region is to encourage economic growth and regeneration in a sustainable way. To achieve this we are proposing changes which set out priority areas for regeneration, a clear strategic framework for choosing where future industrial and business development will take place, and a sub-regional growth study covering West Yorkshire and Barnsley.

We are proposing that the first priority for regeneration in the region be South Yorkshire and the Coalfields, particularly the Dearne Valley. This reflects South Yorkshire's Objective 1 status and the importance of regenerating the Yorkshire Coalfields. The strategy also aims to build on the success of the Leeds economy and spread the benefits further afield. To help this process, it is proposed that the Regional Assembly leads a growth study involving the local authorities, Yorkshire Forward and other stakeholders. The study would look to examine the potential for plan-led growth, and determine the distribution of additional housing land. It offers the opportunity to take a more strategic and collaborative approach than in the past and will provide a valuable input to an early review of RPG.

We are proposing a modest increase in the amount of additional housing in the region as recommended by the Panel in order to reflect the region's aims of economic regeneration and growth. The new proposal is for 14,650 additional dwellings per year, compared with the 13,980 previously proposed by the region's local authorities. We agree with the Panel's recommendation that 60 per cent. of this should be provided on previously-developed land and by re-using existing buildings.

We are proposing some changes to the distribution of the housing provision as recommended by the Panel in order to ensure that it is concentrated on the region's main towns and cities, avoids unnecessary development in the countryside, and helps to create a better balance between where people live and work.

There will now be a twelve week consultation period on the Proposed Changes, ending on Friday 1 June 2001. Copies of the relevant documents have been placed in the House Library and provided to all of the region's MPs.

Ports Police

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on port police forces. [153353]

Mr. Hill: We are setting up a review of the current arrangements for ports police, as proposed in "Modern Ports—A UK Policy", published in November last year. My Department is aiming to review the powers, duties and functions of ports police forces; the advantages or disadvantages of alternative arrangements that have been implemented at those ports that no longer have port police; how the port police forces compare to Home Office police forces in terms of accountability i.e. management, inspection, complaints procedures, disciplinary matters and training; and report on the current situation and make recommendations for future options for the port police. We will be consulting the ports police forces, the ports industry and users and other Government Departments.

Municipal Ports

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's proposed study of municipal ports. [153354]

Mr. Hill: The ports policy paper noted our intention to look at the existing management structures and practices and financial arrangements for municipal ports to make sure that they are playing a full and accountable part in the local and regional economy. We are keen to ensure that municipal ports have an opportunity to benefit from the same changes as are now being made in the trust port sector following our review of trust ports and publication of national standards of accountability and good practice in "Modernising Trust Ports—A Guide to Good Governance" (which we launched last year).

We are now about to commence the study and will be looking at: how effectively the Best Value initiative and the Modern Local Government White Paper are impacting on municipal ports; what, if any, constraints are posed to development, accountability and effective operation by municipal ownership and how these might be addressed; the advantages of municipal ownership for non-commercial municipal ports;

The study will also seek to benchmark performance of the municipal sector against other UK ports and will examine options and opportunities for the future role and status of municipal ports in England and Wales.

There will be full consultation with the relevant local authorities, the ports sector, and port users. We aim to report the findings of this study and any recommendations by the end of the year.

Ferries

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when more rigorous safety checks for roll on/roll off passenger and high-speed ferries operating in UK waters will be introduced. [153355]

Mr. Hill: Regulations implementing Council Directive 1999/35/EC on a system of mandatory surveys for the safe operation of regular roll on/roll off and high speed passenger craft operating a service to or from the UK came into force on 16 February.

The Regulations require Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) surveyors to:

Inspect a vessel's documentation;

Verify a vessel's operating company and flag state;

Check for the presence of a voyage data recorder (required on all *roll on/roll off ferries* by January 2003);

Survey each vessel once a year, or where the vessel's circumstances have changed;

Prevent a vessel from operating if it does not meet stringent EU safety rules; or else require any safety defects to be remedied.

These new, tougher safety measures will result in greater safety on all roll on/roll off and high speed passenger ferries operating in UK waters, regardless of which flag they might fly.

Local Transport Plans

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to issue guidance to local authorities on local transport plan annual progress reports. [153356]

Mr. Hill: In order to provide the guidance on local transport plan annual reports to local authorities as early as possible, my Department is today arranging for local authorities to receive copies of the guidance by electronic mail. This will be followed shortly with printed copies and the posting of the guidance on my Department's website.

Departmental Policies (Clwyd, South)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Clwyd, South constituency, the effects on Clwyd, South of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150912]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I have been asked to reply because, prior to 1 July 1999, responsibility for most aspects of transport, environmental and local government policy in Wales fell to my Department. Since the impact of departmental policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency, it is not practicable, in most cases, to provide statistical information which is specific to Clwyd, South. However, I can say that, between 1 April 1997 and 31 March 2000, central Government grants were paid under the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme towards the cost of domestic insulation measures for some 4,200 households in my hon. Friend's constituency.

A range of all-Wales policy initiatives and other action taken during this period will also have impacted on Clwyd, South and its residents. Some of the more significant ones are listed and fuller details are contained in the Welsh Office Departmental Reports for 1998 (Cm 3915) and 1999 (Cm 4216), copies of which are in the Library:

"A Strategic Review of the Welsh Trunk Roads Programme"—setting Wales' highway needs in the context of a balanced integrated transport policy (July 1997);

"Wales for the 21st Century"—providing guidance to local authorities on the preparation of Agenda 21 plans (January 1998);

"Transporting Wales into the Future"—examining ways of developing integrated transport solutions which would meet the particular needs of Wales (July 1998); and

"Driving Wales Forward"—identifying a new core network of nationally important strategic roads and setting out key criteria to be used in assessing options for addressing problems on the road network (July 1998).

In addition, two substantial pieces of primary legislation—the Local Government Acts 1999 and 2000—have implemented the Government's vision of revitalised local government in both Wales and England. The best value provisions in the 1999 Act, and the new political management structures, ethical framework and powers to promote the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of communities in the 2000 Act, have given local authorities the tools they need to be more efficient, transparent and accountable in serving their local communities.

Other developments since 1 July 1999 are matters for the National Assembly for Wales.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Public Relations (Expenditure)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure was in his Department for the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000, and what the planned expenditure and breakdown of expenditure for 2000–01 is on (i) public opinion research, (ii) television, radio and newspaper advertising and (iii) direct mail. [149259]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* (i) Public Opinion Research: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 721W. In the present financial year, the FCO has spent £43,000 on preliminary public opinion research on consular matters.

(ii) TV, Radio and Newspaper advertising: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 721W, and to the answer given to the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Mr. Clappison) on 9 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 504W. There have been no further consular publicity campaigns on TV or Radio or in the newspapers. The FCO has advertised in the region of 200–250 recruitment campaigns since

1996. It would involve disproportionate costs to establish a breakdown of expenditure. The European Union Command advertised its Europe Day 2000 in *Metro* at a cost of £8,539.

(iii) Direct mail: Since the answer given to the hon. Member on 17 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 721W, approximately £200 has been spent on direct mail by the European Union Command.

Minority Ethnic Liaison Officer

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the cost to date of hiring a consultant minority ethnic liaison officer. [152408]

Mr. Wilson: Since 1 December 1999, £43,724, including VAT has been paid to a consultancy company for the services of the FCO's Minority Ethnic Liaison Adviser.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent representations to the Sri Lankan Government he has made about the possible introduction of capital punishment in Sri Lanka. [152480]

Mr. Wilson: The UK opposes the death penalty in all circumstances and, together with EU partners, calls upon all states to abolish the death penalty. At the World Bank Development Forum in December 2000, the EU expressed their concern about Sri Lanka's plan to bring back the death penalty. The EU Troika in Colombo are currently seeking a meeting with the Sri Lankan Minister for Justice to make a formal demarche on this matter.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what action he is taking to encourage peace in Sri Lanka. [152479]

Mr. Wilson: The Government remain fully committed to supporting the peace process in Sri Lanka. We will continue to give our wholehearted support to Norway's efforts to facilitate peace talks between the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE. We stand ready to play a role, if asked.

We urge the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE to intensify their efforts towards seeking, with the help of the Norwegian Government, a peaceful negotiated settlement to this tragic conflict which has claimed over 65,000 lives.

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152657]

Mr. Wilson: We have spent £127,333 on departmental and associated branding since 1 May 1997.

Mrs. Ingrid Chare

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will reply to a letter dated 7 November 2000 concerning Mrs. Ingrid Chare, a constituent, whose address has been supplied to him. [152457]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 7 March 2001]:* My noble Friend Baroness Scotland of Asthal, FCO Minister responsible for consular matters, replied to my hon. Friend's letter on 7 March.

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with representatives of the Saudi Arabian Government on the efforts of Mrs. Ingrid Chare to obtain compensation following the death of her husband, Mr. John Bernard Chare. [152459]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 7 March 2001]:* Our Consulate in Jeddah has raised this matter with the Saudi authorities on over six occasions in the last 12 months. Compensation matters such as these do take some time to resolve. Our Consulate will continue to press the judge for a decision on the Blood Money in this case. We are waiting for confirmation of the exact date the papers to be served on Mr. Chare's former company were passed to the Saudi authorities. Our Embassy in Riyadh and our Consulate in Jeddah are currently closed for the Eid holiday. However, my noble Friend Baroness Scotland of Asthal, FCO Minister responsible for consular matters, will write directly to my hon. Friend once we have this information.

Afghanistan

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if any goods subject to strategic export controls have recently been approved for export to Afghanistan. [153209]

Mr. Wilson: The Department of Trade and Industry recently issued two export licences for mine-clearance equipment for use by the HALO Trust to assist their demining activities in Afghanistan. These goods appear on the Military list. However, UNSCR 1333 (2000) which imposes inter alia an arms embargo on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, it provides scope for the UN Sanctions Committee to approve of non-lethal military equipment intended solely for humanitarian or protective use to Taliban-controlled territory. The Sanctions Committee has given its approval in these cases.

The granting of these export licences are fully consistent with the UN Security Council resolutions and does not affect the Government's continued support for the EU common position on arms exports to Afghanistan.

South Georgia

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what progress has been made towards establishing a fully civilian presence on South Georgia. [153210]

Mr. Battle: In 1998 the Government announced their intention to establish a fully civilian presence on South Georgia. From the end of March, the small military detachment will be withdrawn. The Commissioner for South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands and the Commander British Forces, based in the Falkland Islands,

will continue to have responsibility for ensuring the security of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

At the same time, the British Antarctic Survey will be opening a new scientific base on South Georgia. The scientific and support team will augment the existing civilian presence on the island. New accommodation and science facilities have been built. BAS will undertake a programme of scientific research, under contract to the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands. The aim will be to support the Government in environmental management and sustainable development of the Territory.

The opening of this new facility, with funding from the British Government, the Government of the Falkland Islands and the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands demonstrates our commitment to the Overseas Territories, in accordance with the Overseas Territories White Paper 1999, in particular to sound environmental management of a territory with a unique and sensitive ecosystem.

Our commitment to the maintenance of British sovereignty over South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, and to ensuring their security, remains as firm as ever.

Liberia

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what changes there have been in United Nations sanctions in relation to Liberia. [153352]

Mr. Wilson: UN Security Council resolution 1344 (2001), imposing mandatory UN sanctions in relation to Liberia, was adopted on 7 March. The resolution was co-sponsored by the UK and US, in response to the findings of the UN Expert Panel on Sierra Leone on violations of the Sierra Leone arms embargo and the link between the trade in diamonds and arms. The Security Council determined that the active support provided by the Government of Liberia for armed rebel groups in neighbouring countries, and in particular the RUF in Sierra Leone, constitutes a threat to international peace and security in the region.

The new measures are as follows:

an embargo on the export of arms and related material to Liberia, and a ban on the provision to Liberia of related technical assistance and training;

a ban on the import by UN member states of any rough diamonds from Liberia, whether or not such diamonds originated in Liberia.

a travel ban on senior members of the Liberian military and their spouses and any other individuals providing financial and military support to armed rebel groups in countries neighbouring Liberia, as designated by the UN Sanctions Committee.

The diamond embargo and the travel ban will enter into force on 7 May, unless the Security Council determines before that date that Liberia has complied with its demands. These include the key demands that the Government of Liberia should cease all financial and military support for the RUF and should cease all imports of Sierra Leone rough diamonds in breach of UN sanctions.

The arms embargo and the ban on the provision of related technical assistance and training, which entered into force immediately upon the adoption of the resolution, are established for a period of 14 months. The other measures will be established for a period of 12 months. At the end of this period, the Council will decide whether the Government of Liberia has complied with its demands and, accordingly, whether to extend these measures for a further period.

The resolution lifts the former arms embargo imposed on Liberia by UN Security Council resolution 788 (1992) in response to concerns regarding the civil war in that country.

New Orders will be made to implement the new measures in the UK, the Crown Dependencies and the Overseas Territories under the United Nations Act 1946 and by other legislative and administrative means as necessary.

Iran

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Iranian Government on the exclusion of the *(a)* Simon Wiesenthal centre and *(b)* Bahái international community from the United Nations world conference against racism, xenophobia, racial discrimination and related intolerance hosted by Iran. [152667]

Mr. Wilson: We have not made any representations to the Iranian Government in this instance. However, we and our EU partners take every opportunity to raise such issues, particularly those concerning discrimination and human rights, in Tehran and in London.

In conjunction with our EU partners we also table twice-yearly UN resolutions on human rights in Iran. The most recent resolution, reflecting both positive developments and remaining concerns, was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 4 December.

DEFENCE

Defence Events

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for major future defence public events; and if he will make a statement. [153202]

Mr. Hoon: In 1999 my predecessor announced a series of events, now under the umbrella title Defence 2000, which would follow the ending of the Royal Tournament. The spirit of the Tournament would be taken forward with an event in London and a military festival held annually outside the capital at different military locations. The Royal Military Tattoo 2000 held on Horse Guards Parade last summer was a major undertaking for the Armed Services. It was the Ministry of Defence's principal contribution to the Millennium celebrations and was an outstanding success. London will continue to be well served with military pageantry not least in terms of State occasions, the annual Beat Retreat and Queen's Birthday Parade. We intend to identify possible future occasions where an event on the scale of RMT 2000 would be both appropriate and practicable.

In 2001, the Royal Navy will host the first regional event in Portsmouth. It will build on the very successful International Festival of the Sea format, held previously in Bristol in 1996 and Portsmouth in 1998. This year's International Festival of the Sea will feature significant contributions from all three Services under the title Defence 2001. These regional events will allow our Armed Services to display their latest equipment, as well as providing a glimpse into the future. There will be no regional event in 2002 because of the involvement of the Armed Services in the celebrations for The Queen's Golden Jubilee, in particular the Royal Visit to the Armed Services at Portsmouth and the Thanksgiving Service at St. Paul's Cathedral. The Royal Air Force will host the regional event in 2003 and the Army in 2004.

Performance Targets

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Medical Supplies Agency for 2001–02. [153204]

Dr. Moonie: Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Medical Supplies Agency (MSA) for financial year 2001–02. The targets build on the progress already made by the Agency since it formed in March 1996 and are as follows:

Key Target 1—composite medical materiel

To build, completely, to schedule and within budget, by 31 March 2002, 100 per cent. of all modules on the mutually Operational Build Programme, as authorised by the Director Medical Operational Capability (D Med Op Cap).

Key Target 2—the operational requirement

To meet demands from units on active operations for blood products and scaled medical material within new and more challenging MSA Charter Response Time.

Key Target 3—the exercise and training requirement

To meet 100 per cent. of the Services requirements for modularised medical material, First Aid Kits, blood and blood products in support of exercises, training, Air Shows and other major events.

Key Target 4—response to demands

To meet the stated percentages of all demands for Category B items (commonly used items with a unit cost of less than £100 and approved by D Med Op Cap) within the agreed timescale, expressed in working days.

Key Target 5—stock issued to stock held ratio

To improve the ratio of stock issued to stock held from 2 to 2.25.

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Defence Medical Training Organisation for 2001–02. [153205]

Dr. Moonie: Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Defence Medical Training Organisation (DMTO) for financial year 2001–02. The targets build on the progress already made by the Agency since it formed in April 1997 and are as follows:

Key Target 1—academic success (quality and quantity)

To achieve the following academic success rates:

Phase 2 Training—96 per cent.

(Formerly entitled Common Core Course (CCC)).

Specialist Registrars (SpR)—96 per cent.

Pre-Registration Nurses (Pre-Reg Nurses)—96 per cent.

Key Target 2—academic success (timeliness)

The following percentage of trainees achieving academic success to be delivered on time, as agreed with the customer:

Phase 2 Training—96 per cent. (at first attempt, remainder at second attempt (which is normally within three months)).

SpR—96 per cent.

Pre-Reg Nurses—98 per cent.

Key Target 3—external individual medical services training

Confirm with customers the baseline requirement for external medical services training by 31 March 2002.

Key Target 4—corporate efficiency index

To achieve a 3 per cent. efficiency improvement demonstrated by the DMTO corporate efficiency index for 2001–02.

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Defence Dental Agency for 2001–02. [153206]

Dr. Moonie: Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Defence Dental Agency (DDA) for financial year 2001–02. The targets build on the progress already made by the Agency since it formed in March 1996 and are as follows:

Key Target 1—The Operational Requirement

From within personnel resources allocated to the DDA by single Services, to achieve 100 per cent. of personnel called forward, trained to required professional and military standards, at the specified readiness for deployment with the Joint Rapid Reaction Force (JRRF) and all operations.

Key Target 2—Overall Dental Fitness

For each Service, to achieve the dental fitness level targets, representing a significant improvement in Army dental fitness, as follows:

(a) RN—at least 75 per cent.

(b) Army—at least 70 per cent.

(c) RAF—at least 75 per cent.

Key Target 3—Treatment Needs

To reduce the Treatment Need Index (TNI) for each Service to the following:

(a) RN—at or below 470.

(b) Army—at or below 670.

(c) RAF—at or below 330.

Key Target 4—Dental Fitness Category D

To limit the number of personnel in dental fitness Category D4 (those personnel who have not received a dental inspection and charting for 12 months or more) representing a significant improvement in the Army position in particular, to the following percentage of the total Service population:

(a) RN—13 per cent.

(b) Army—16 per cent.

(c) RAF—10 per cent.

Key Target 5—Military Training

To ensure that 80 per cent. of all DDA personnel, whose medical category permits, are released to undertake annual military training as specified by respective single Services.

Key Target 6—Personnel for Exercises

To ensure that 100 per cent. of all DDA personnel nominated to established posts in the operational core requirement of their parent Service are released to attend appropriate exercises.

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Defence Secondary Care Agency for 2001–02. [153207]

Dr. Moonie: Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Defence Secondary Care Agency (DSCA) for financial year 2001–02. The targets build on the progress already made by the Agency since it formed in April 1996 and are as follows:

Key Target 1—The Operational Requirement

From within the personnel resources provided to the DSCA by the single Services, to meet 100 per cent. of the requirement of the Commanders in Chief's (CinCs) for secondary care personnel for operational deployments.

Key Target 2—Outpatient Waiting Times

To ensure that 45 per cent. of Service patients referred to the Agency are offered a first outpatient appointment within four weeks of receipt of a referral and 90 per cent. within 13 weeks.

Key Target 3—Inpatient Waiting Times

To ensure that 80 per cent. of Service patients are offered a treatment date which is within 13 weeks of the decision to give inpatient treatment.

Key Target 4—Efficiency

To review medical equipment management policies and make savings of 10 per cent. or more in the costs of procurement, support and associated training.

Key Target 5—Quality (Clinical Governance)

To demonstrate measurable improvement in military patient satisfaction and risk management and introduce the agreed NHS procedures of appraisal for doctors and clinical supervision for nurses, by 31 March 2002.

Key Target 6—Military Training

To ensure that 80 per cent. of all DSCA personnel, whose medical category permits, are released to receive their respective Service's annual mandatory military training.

Key Target 7—Personnel for Exercises

To ensure that 80 per cent. of DSCA based personnel nominated to established posts in their Service's operational core requirement are released to attend appropriate exercises.

Reserve Forces

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to call out members of the reserve forces to support UN operations in *(a)* Sierra Leone and *(b)* the Democratic Republic of the Congo. [153203]

Dr. Moonie: Our policy remains that, reservists who volunteer to serve with our regular forces on such operations will be called-out as and when required. The first call-out order made under section 56 of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 expired on 1 March, and a further order effective from that date has been made to permit members of the reserve forces to continue to be called out for operations in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Gulf War

Mr. Hendrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he plans to resume the programme of voluntary immunisation against anthrax for armed forces personnel deployed to the Gulf. [153378]

Mr. Spellar: We plan to resume the anthrax immunisation programme for personnel deployed on operations to the Gulf shortly. Immunisation was last offered in 1998, but had to be suspended due to manufacturing difficulties at our supplier. We have now received the first new supplies of licensed anthrax vaccine and will be in a position to resume the voluntary immunisation programme in April.

Anthrax immunisation is safe and effective. As in 1998, it will be offered to personnel on the basis of voluntary informed consent. By accepting it alongside other defensive measures, armed forces personnel will have the very best protection possible against anthrax used as a biological weapon.

Scottish Service Personnel

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* Scots and *(b)* non-Scots are serving in the UK armed forces. [152405]

Mr. Spellar: Examination of available personal records of currently serving personnel[1] has revealed the following information:

[1] Place of birth and nationality for personnel serving in the Naval Service is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Army details are based on nationality at birth, RAF on place of birth. The figures are for combined trained and untrained strengths.

	Number
Scots	
Army[3]	12,956
RAF[2]	5,688
Non-Scots	
Army[3]	96,953
RAF	48,221

[1] At 1 February 2001
[2] At 5 March 2001
[3] The non-Scots army figure includes 2,636 personnel with a recorded nationality at birth as 'British' with no further breakdown available.

Mines

Mr. Frank Cook: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what alternatives to anti-personnel mines are being researched by DERA; and at what cost. [152599]

Dr. Moonie: In response to the Ministry of Defence requirement, DERA has been asked to pursue research into replacing the capability previously provided by anti-personnel mines. Any such capability will comply fully with the Ottawa Treaty. The research programme is to look at various sensor systems, such as acoustic, infrared and seismic, which when combined together can detect intrusion into a defined area. The cost of the proposed work is approximately £0.25 million to £0.5 million.

Operational Tour Intervals

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the average interval between tours and the average length of operational tour was for *(a)* Army field ambulance units and *(b)* Army field hospital units in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement. [151802]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 March 2001]:* The tour length for Field Hospitals, or main elements of Field Hospitals, was extended from six months to one year in 2000. The average tour interval for Field Hospitals

between 1995 and 1999 was nine months. The usual tour length for all Field Ambulance units is six months, although in the last five years some units have deployed on short notice deployments for less than this. The average tour interval for Field Ambulance units between 1995 and 2000 was 26 months. It is not possible to break these averages down by year as requested, as many deployments span more than one calendar year and the reorganisation of nine Field Ambulance units into five Medical Regiments between 1999 and 2000 further complicates the issue.

Tour lengths and intervals for individuals do not necessarily match those for units. For example, individuals in Field Hospital units would not normally deploy for more than six months, and some only for much shorter periods, even though the unit tour length is now one year.

Depleted Uranium

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what his Department's policy is on the call by the European Parliament for a suspension of the use of depleted uranium munitions. [147411]

Mr. Spellar: Based on the results of many years of scientific study already available to us, we see no basis for any moratorium on the use of depleted uranium (DU) based ammunition. This ammunition provides a battle-winning edge. We have no intention of denying this capability to our troops, thereby placing them at unnecessary risk. DU based ammunition will therefore remain part of our arsenal for the foreseeable future.

NATO has recognised the concerns raised from the use of DU munitions and has acted swiftly in its responsibility to ensure Alliance members, Partners and other troop contributors are fully informed of DU risks. As announced by the Secretary General on 10 January, measures have been put in place to pool and share scientific analysis and information to best inform decision making, and in response the UK has contributed information for consideration and will continue to do so.

Viral Warfare

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research he undertakes on *(a)* defence against viral warfare and *(b)* the foot and mouth virus. [152057]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The remit of the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector of DERA at Porton Down is to provide safe and effective protection for the UK and its armed forces should chemical and biological weapons be used against them. In order to achieve this, research involving a range of pathogenic viruses is undertaken.

This research is aimed at understanding the hazard posed by these agents, developing rapid methods for their detection and diagnosis of the diseases they cause, identifying suitable physical protection equipment, and developing medical countermeasures against them. These later measures include the development of safe and effective vaccines and therapies for use of the UK and its armed forces.

There is currently no research being undertaken involving the virus which is the causative agent of foot and mouth disease.

Ministry of Defence Police

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will review the decision to withdraw the Ministry of Defence Police from policed sites. [152745]

Dr. Moonie: The decision to withdraw Ministry of Defence Police was taken after full consultation with the Home Office and Licensing Authorities, the Association of Chief Police Officers and the relevant Home Department Chief Constables, and after careful consideration of the security threat to the sites I can see no grounds for reviewing it.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Money Lenders

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the penalties which are applied to unlicensed money lenders. [152407]

Dr. Howells: The Consumer Credit Act 1974 set up a licensing regime for individuals, companies and firms carrying on regulated consumer credit or consumer hire business. Therefore, generally, a money lender is required to obtain a licence in order to carry on its business. Licences are issued by the Director General of Fair Trading and it is a criminal offence to engage in regulated consumer credit (or consumer hire) business without one.

Section 167 of, and Schedule 1 to, the Act set out the penalties for this offence, which are:

(a) Summarily—The prescribed sum within the meaning of the Magistrates Court Act 1980 which is currently £5,000.

(b) On indictment—Two years imprisonment or a fine or both.

Arms Exports (Iran/Iraq)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the companies which supplied artillery equipment to both Iran and Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. [151854]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Licences to export arms and other goods whose export is controlled for strategic reasons have been issued by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and his predecessors acting through the export licensing authority (currently the Export Control Organisation) within the Department of Trade and Industry since before the Iran-Iraq conflict started in 1980.

In his report entitled "Inquiry into the Export of Defence Equipment and Dual-Use Goods to Iraq" Sir Richard Scott included details of export licence applications to Iraq in the period 1984–90. The report also breaks down into categories the goods licensed to Iraq in that period, one of which is "1A: Arms and military equipment", which would include artillery equipment. It is not possible to establish precisely which of these entries

covered artillery equipment without searching the relevant paper files which would entail disproportionate cost. Also as the report notes, records of licence applications did not go back beyond 1985. We do not therefore have records from the start of the Iran-Iraq war.

It would also entail disproportionate cost to search through the paper records to establish which licences issued to Iran between 1985 and the end of the war in 1988 covered the export of artillery equipment.

Moreover, information about whom particular export licences were granted to is commercial in confidence, and the companies concerned would therefore need to be approached to establish whether they objected to the disclosure of such information.

While the Department of Trade and Industry maintains records of licence applications, it does not compile records of licensed exports. Some licences are only used in part, while others may not be used at all. The extent to which the exports permitted by a licence are made is dependent on various factors; for example the customer's requirements may be less than originally expected or the expected contract may simply not materialise.

National Missile Defence

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations have been received from BAE Systems and other British companies regarding participation in US National Missile Defence. [152669]

Mr. Alan Johnson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has not received any representations from UK industry regarding the US National Missile Defence.

Foot and Mouth

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has made to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on the spread of foot and mouth disease. [152413]

Mr. Byers: I and my Department are in regular contact with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food over this issue.

Working Time Regulations

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will estimate the number of employees in London who were not entitled to paid holidays as a result of the coming into force of the Working Time Regulations. [152206]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The available information relates to the number of employees in London who, before the introduction of the Working Time Regulations were receiving less than the minimum stated in the Regulations. When the Regulations came into force it is estimated that 270,000 employees in the London area were receiving less than three weeks' paid leave per year. A further 70,000 are estimated to have been receiving more than three weeks but less than four weeks paid leave, and would therefore benefit when the amount of paid leave was increased from three to four weeks in November 1999.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ministerial Visits

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the Ministers in her Department who visited any of the constituencies which are in the Peterborough Unitary Authority area between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001, indicating in each case *(a)* the date of the visit, *(b)* the constituencies included in the visit and *(c)* if the local hon. Member met the Minister. [151028]

Clare Short: Neither I, my hon. Friend the Member for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley (Mr. Foulkes) as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development, or my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) in his role as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development visited the Peterborough Unitary Authority between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001.

Medicines (South Africa)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she discussed with the South African Government the legal action being pursued by GlaxoSmithKline concerning the amended South African Medicines Act during her recent visit to South Africa; and if she will make a statement. [152137]

Clare Short: I did not have the opportunity to discuss this legal action with the South African Government during my recent visit to South Africa. I believe that negotiations with pharmaceutical companies on price and licensing offers the best way of balancing the need for affordable access to drugs with the need for intellectual property protection to encourage future research. The legal action is regrettable, but it is a matter between the pharmaceutical companies and the Government of South Africa.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what meetings she had during her recent visit to South Africa with the pharmaceutical companies pursuing a legal action against the amended South African Medicines Act; and if she will make a statement. [152138]

Clare Short: I did not have the opportunity to meet pharmaceutical companies during my recent visit to South Africa. I believe that negotiations with pharmaceutical companies on price and licensing offers the best way of balancing the need for affordable access to drugs with the need for intellectual property protection to encourage future research. The legal action is regrettable, but it is a matter between the pharmaceutical companies and the Government of South Africa.

WALES

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if the special advisers working for him will relinquish their posts when the next general election is called. [149306]

Mr. Paul Murphy: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 13 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 130W.

Departmental Policies (Clwyd, South)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Clwyd, South constituency, the effects on Clwyd, South of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150914]

Mr. Paul Murphy: As this question was originally addressed to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, my response relates to the effects of Government policies and actions on industry and the economy. Such effects are not normally measured by reference to constituencies, so it is not practicable to give information in the form requested. However, prior to the transfer of functions to the National Assembly on 1 July 1999, a range of all-Wales policy initiatives and other actions taken by my Department will have impacted on Clwyd, South and its residents. Details of these are set out in the Welsh Office departmental reports for 1998 (Cm 3915) and 1999 (Cm 4216), copies of which are in the Library.

Part of my hon. Friend's constituency is included in the west Wales and the valleys area, for which the Government secured objective 1 status at the Berlin European Council in 1999. Subsequently, in the July 2000 spending review, we made available additional funding, outside the Barnett formula, for the Welsh structural funds programmes. This also included provision for objective 3, which applies in the parts of Clwyd, South not covered by objective 1, and objective 2 which also applies in some parts of Clwyd, South.

Our new Assisted Areas map for the UK, which was formally approved by the European Commission in July 2000, also includes tier 1 coverage for that part of my hon. Friend's constituency which falls in Denbighshire.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Clwyd, South constituency, the effects on Clwyd, South of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150913]

Mr. Paul Murphy: As this question was originally addressed to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, my response concentrates on the effects of my Department's policies and actions on health services prior to 1 July 1999, when responsibility for their provision transferred to the National Assembly for Wales.

Because of the way in which health services are organised, it is not practicable to provide information which is specific to my hon. Friend's constituency. The timing of financial and statistical exercises also means that some of the figures quoted relate to periods ending shortly before or shortly after 30 June 1999.

In October 1997, an additional £2.2 million was made available to North Wales Health Authority, over and above its financial allocation for the year, to provide enhanced patient care. The authority's basic allocation for 1998–99, at £381.3 million, represented a year-on-year cash increase of £14.2 million. This was further enhanced by £4.1 million in April 1998 to address waiting list issues, and £2.6 million in November for dealing with winter pressures.

Between annual counts taken in September 1997 and September 1999, the number of directly employed NHS nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff in the area of the North Wales Health Authority increased by 267.4 in full-time equivalent terms. Over the same period, medical and dental staff increased by 29.8.

Health services in the Clwyd, South constituency will also have benefited from a range of important all-Wales policy initiatives which were developed between May 1997 and June 1999. These included:

Delivering Care—Meeting Need—a comprehensive package of measures for primary and community health care (1997);

Putting Patients First—which promoted a series of reforms for the NHS in Wales, such as the abolition of the internal market and GP fundholding, and the introduction of new structures such as Local Health Groups and Health Improvement Programmes (1998);

Better Health, Better Wales—a strategy for improving public health (1998);

Quality Care and Clinical Excellence—a programme for clinical effectiveness (1998);

Reconfiguration of NHS Trusts—a programme of mergers which reduced the total number of NHS Trusts from 29 to 16 (1999).

Forestry

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the transfer of responsibilities for forestry to the National Assembly for Wales. [150647]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Policy responsibility for Forestry Commission activities in Wales transferred to the National Assembly for Wales on 1 July 1999.

Expenditure (Wales)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the total sums projected to be spent in Wales in *(a)* this financial year and *(b)* each of the next two financial years (i) by the Welsh Assembly and (ii) through direct spending by the Government of the UK. [152092]

Mr. Paul Murphy: It is currently estimated that total expenditure by the National Assembly for Wales will be £8,957.9 million in this financial year, £9,689.5 million in 2001–02, and £10,396.7 million in 2002–03, in resource terms.

There are no current estimates of the total direct UK Government expenditure in Wales during these years, but historical information for aggregate identifiable government spending by country/region is published in the annual public expenditure statistical analyses, which are placed in the Library of the House.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Correspondence

Dr. Godman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the hon. Member for Greenock

and Inverclyde will receive a response to his letter of 9 February, concerning the Winter Fuel Payment scheme. [152424]

Mr. Rooker: A reply was issued on 6 March 2001.

Lone Parent Families

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many children in lone parent families were on Income Support in *(a)* London and *(b)* each London borough (i) in 1996 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [152198]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Number of children in lone parent families on Income Support—Greater London

Thousand

	May 1996	*November 2000*
City of London	'0.1	'0.1
Barking and Dagenham	8.6	8.9
Barnet	8.6	8.4
Bexley	6.8	6.5
Brent	14.5	11.1
Bromley	6.7	6.3
Camden	9.6	8.3
Croydon	14.6	12.9
Ealing	12.5	11.0
Enfield	12.7	11.0
Greenwich	13.7	13.2
Hackney	17.6	15.3
Hammersmith and Fulham	7.8	7.3
Haringey	14.1	14.3
Harrow	5.7	5.4
Havering	5.9	5.7
Hillingdon	7.7	8.9
Hounslow	8.9	8.2
Islington	12.5	12.2
Kensington and Chelsea	4.3	3.5
Kingston upon Thames	2.8	3.1
Lambeth	19.4	17.1
Lewisham	16.1	14.0
Merton	6.4	5.3
Newham	20.1	19.4
Redbridge	7.1	6.9
Richmond upon Thames	2.7	2.5
Southwark	19.1	16.3
Sutton	5.2	4.0
Tower Hamlets	12.7	10.7
Waltham Forest	13.6	10.5
Wandsworth	10.4	8.9
Westminster	6.5	5.1
Total	335.1	302.1

' Figures below 500 are subject to a high degree of sampling error.

Notes:

1. Lone parents are defined as single claimants with dependants who are not receiving the disability or pensioner premiums.
2. Based on 5 per cent. sample, therefore subject to sampling error.
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.
4. Children are defined as aged 0–15 years.

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents on Income Support there were in *(a)* London and *(b)* each London borough (i) in 1996 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [152202]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Number of lone parents on Income Support—Greater London

	May 1996	*November 2000*
City of London	'0.1	'0.0
Barking and Dagenham	4.6	4.8
Barnet	5.4	5.1
Bexley	4.1	3.4
Brent	8.4	6.2
Bromley	4.0	3.9
Camden	5.9	4.7
Croydon	8.0	7.2
Ealing	7.1	6.0
Enfield	7.3	6.5
Greenwich	7.7	7.1
Hackney	10.2	8.6
Hammersmith and Fulham	4.7	3.8
Haringey	8.4	8.1
Harrow	3.1	2.9
Havering	3.7	3.2
Hillingdon	4.6	4.5
Hounslow	5.1	4.7
Islington	7.5	6.9
Kensington and Chelsea	2.7	2.2
Kingston upon Thames	1.7	1.8
Lambeth	11.6	9.8
Lewisham	9.2	7.8
Merton	3.7	2.8
Newham	10.7	9.6
Redbridge	4.0	3.8
Richmond upon Thames	1.7	1.6
Southwark	11.3	9.5
Sutton	2.9	2.1
Tower Hamlets	6.8	6.0
Waltham Forest	7.5	5.5
Wandsworth	6.1	5.0
Westminster	4.0	3.1
Total	193.7	168.3

' Figures are below 500 and are subject to a high degree of sampling error.

Notes:

1. Lone parents are defined as single claimants with dependants who are not receiving the disability or pensioner premiums.
2. Based on 5 per cent. sample, therefore subject to sampling error.
3. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.

War Veterans

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the War Pensions Agency made an assessment of the report produced by the US Institute of Medicine in 1993 entitled "Veterans at Risk—the health effects of mustard gas and lewisite". [152000]

Mr. Bayley: The War Pensions Agency received and considered the report in 1994.

Cohabitation

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what definition of cohabitation his Department uses for the purpose of deciding whether a widow's pension should cease. [152027]

Angela Eagle: Widow's Benefit is not payable if a person is in a relationship which constitutes "living together as husband and wife". The term "living together as husband and wife" is not defined in legislation. Guidance on what points need to be considered by a Decision Maker when deciding whether a relationship between a man and a woman is the same as that of

husband and wife is set out in Volume 3 of the Decision Makers Guide, copies of which are available in the Library, or on the internet at www.dss.gov.uk/hq/dmg/.

Invalid Care Allowance

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he plans to take to ensure that carers who will become entitled to Invalid Care Allowance as a result of the new package of measures for carers being introduced in April are made aware of their potential entitlement and encouraged to claim Invalid Care Allowance. [152331]

Mr. Bayley: There are two elements of the carer package which will be implemented in April—the increase in the carer premium and the increase in the Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) earnings limit.

The increase in the carer premium which is paid with Income Related Benefits has been publicised along with the details of benefit uprating. This will be paid automatically and additional claims will not be required.

The earnings limit in ICA will increase to £72 a week, after allowable expenses, in April. This will enable more carers to retain their benefit while working. The change in the limit was announced last autumn and a further reminder to carers will be issued in a Press Release nearer the date of the change.

In addition, all working carers who make claims for ICA in the six months period from 2 January 2001 to 2 July 2001 and are disallowed, regardless of the reason, are being advised of the earnings limit increase.

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what steps he is taking to ensure that carers who have an underlying entitlement to Invalid Care Allowance but who do not receive any payment due to the overlapping benefits rules are made aware that they may qualify for income support as a result of being eligible for the carer's premium. [152332]

Mr. Bayley: Since its inception in 1976, Invalid Care Allowance (ICA) has been subject to the overlapping benefits rules and will continue to be so.

Customers who are entitled to ICA but have another income maintenance benefit which overlaps, are advised in the decision letter that they may be entitled to carer premium paid as part of the income related benefits, and that it could be in their interest to claim such benefits, even if recently refused.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the *(a)* target and *(b)* actual clearance times were for Disability Living Allowance appeals in each of the nine appeals service centres in each quarter from 1996 to October 1999, and monthly from November 1999 to date. [152024]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of Disability Living Allowance appeals is a matter for Neil Ward, Chief Executive of the Appeals Service. He will write to the right hon. Member.

Letter from Neil Ward to Mr. Dafydd Wigley, dated 8 March 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question. You asked what the (a) target and (b) actual clearance times were for disability living allowance appeals in each of the nine appeals service centres in each quarter from 1996 to October 1999, and monthly from November 1999 to date.

There are no targets for clearance times. Information on average clearance times only is available from 1 October 1997 to 30 September 2000 and is below.

Average clearance time between date of receipt at the Appeals Service and date cleared expressed in weeks

	Leeds	*Cardiff*	*Birmingham*	*Glasgow*	*Liverpool*	*Salford*	*Nottingham*	*Newcastle*	*Sutton*
1 October to 1 December 1997	16.7	24.5	20.8	20.0	34.0	50.5	22.1	16.7	14.1
1 January to 31 March 1998	20.1	26.1	29.9	25.6	30.5	38.0	28.3	20.9	22.9
1 April to 30 June 1998	21.0	33.6	30.5	30.7	37.5	42.7	31.4	25.7	24.6
1 July to 30 September 1998	22.6	35.8	32.5	29.8	34.0	37.8	36.6	27.4	27.5
1 October to 31 December 1998	24.7	32.4	32.9	32.6	33.7	37.1	35.4	26.3	34.3
1 January to 1 March 1999	23.4	33.7	36.4	33.8	32.9	35.3	41.8	26.4	45.6
1 April to 30 June 1999	22.3	32.3	33.8	36.1	31.1	36.3	42.1	25.6	39.1
1 July to 30 September 1999	16.9	30.1	30.7	35.7	25.3	31.5	35.9	24.3	34.1
1 October to 31 October 1999	14.3	32.0	22.5	31.2	20.6	32.8	41.6	18.6	34.7
1 November to 30 November 1999	14.1	33.2	25.5	30.8	18.4	35.3	30.6	20.8	29.6
1 December to 31 December 1999	11.2	30.5	27.9	32.9	16.3	24.8	31.3	18.8	32.0
1 January to 31 January 2000	14.2	29.4	29.8	27.6	21.6	20.3	33.1	20.0	30.6
1 February to 28 February 2000	12.9	27.6	27.7	28.8	15.0	20.5	29.6	18.8	25.5
1 March to 31 March 2000	9.7	24.9	26.8	24.5	13.1	28.1	26.2	20.1	23.5
1 April to 30 April 2000	10.1	21.4	20.1	24.0	11.4	19.7	25.1	16.2	27.1
1 May to 31 May 2000	10.2	27.9	17.5	21.8	14.0	18.5	20.7	15.2	22.3
1 June to 30 June 2000	11.1	19.1	16.0	20.4	16.1	18.2	20.1	18.2	20.3
1 July to 31 July 2000	11.5	21.0	15.3	16.7	15.7	18.7	20.1	14.5	24.4
1 August to 31 August 2000	11.6	20.3	16.3	17.1	15.6	18.7	22.8	12.5	19.4
1 September to 30 September 2000	11.7	21.7	15.1	15.1	15.1	17.2	17.1	13.3	17.4

Notes:

1. Source: 100 per cent. download from the Appeals Service GAPS computer system.
2. All figures are provisional and are subject to change.
3. The statistics do not cover the period from the date the appeal was lodged at the first tier agency or from issue of decision to the date the first tier agency received it.
4. Clearance times include appeals that took more than one hearing to reach a decision.

I hope this information is useful.

Social Fund Payments

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the value was of Social Fund payments made in each of the last four years. [152262]

Angela Eagle: Social Fund expenditure is given in the Secretary of State's Annual Reports on the Social Fund. The reports are available in the Library.

Benefit Fraud Inspectorate

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of the City of Bradford metropolitan district council. [153400]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of City of Bradford metropolitan district council and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the authority address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

Inspectors report the authority introduced the Verification Framework to improve its poor verification of claims, and early indications are that levels of verification have improved. The report also notes the authority is struggling to cope with backlogs of assessment work, and inspectors consider it is important that it not only clear arrears, but prevents them from recurring. The authority has introduced measures to resolve the backlogs but these measures need to be consolidated into one overall plan.

Inspectors were particularly pleased with the number of high quality customer service initiatives, including good use of the Internet, the sharing of good practices with other local authorities and many good examples of joint working with the BA and other organisations.

The authority needs to improve its administration with regard to Rent Officer referrals, notices of determination, the setting of benefit period's timescales for appeals and review boards and benefit appeals.

Counter fraud work was reported to be good, including commendable risk analysis of local fraud. Investigations were well conducted in a sound, ordered and methodical way. The authority has a sound prosecution policy and has successfully issued administrative penalties. The authority needs to increase the use of its inspectors' powers.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the Authority for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the inspection report of the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate in respect of the Metropolitan borough of Wirral. [153402]

Mr. Rooker: The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report was published today in respect of the Metropolitan borough of Wirral and copies of the report have been placed in the Library.

The report makes recommendations to help the authority address weaknesses and to improve the administration of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, as well as its counter fraud activities.

Inspectors found the authority had a customer orientated benefits service with strong focus on claimant's rights. Significant changes had been made to the benefits section which together with a loss of experienced staff, had caused backlogs of work. This had significantly reduced the responsiveness of the benefits service and the level of assurance the authority could give on the accuracy and validity of its benefit payments.

The BFI reports that standards of verification for new and renewal claims was very poor. There was scope for improvement in liaison arrangements with private sector landlords.

The report notes that counter fraud activity had taken a back seat to changes made in the benefits section. Investigation work was found to be of poor quality and insufficient to tackle the estimated level of fraud in the authority's area. The control and management of overpayment recovery was also found to be poor leading to a low recovery rate.

Despite having a number of well-written strategic and policy documents, these had not been put into practice. Inspectors recommend the authority reviews its internal audit coverage of administration and counter fraud activities as they were found to be insufficient to give an assurance on the integrity of the benefits system.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is now considering the report and will be asking the authority for its proposals in response to the findings and recommendations of the BFI.

Discretionary Social Fund

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what changes he plans to make to the discretionary social fund. [153401]

Angela Eagle: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be making minor changes to the discretionary social fund, with effect from 19 March 2001 and 2 April 2001, to take account of new legislation in other benefit areas being introduced on those dates. A number of other minor improvements, identified during the course of routine monitoring, will also be included in this annual amendment to directions and guidance.

Details of the changes have been placed in the Library.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Warrington Local Education Authority

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what resources have been allocated to Warrington local education authority for provision for under fives in each year since 1997. [149486]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* The table shows the amount of funding made available through the Nursery Education Grant, Childcare Grant,

European Social Fund and the 0–5 sub-block of the Education Standard Spending Assessment to Warrington LEA since April 1998.

	£
1998–99	5,918,135
1999–2000	[1]5,579,655
2000–01	6,693,733

[1] The drop in funding between 1998–99 and 1999–2000 is due to a fall in the amount of Nursery Education Grant that the authority was able to claim for new places created in local authority provision. This funding would have been compensated for by a relative increase in the funding available through Education Standard Spending in the following year

As Warrington became a new unitary authority only from April 1998, it is not possible to provide data for the 1997–98 financial year.

From September 1998, all four-year-olds have been able to access a free, part-time, early education place. By April 2001, all three-year-olds in Warrington will also have access to a free early education place. Up to December 2000 Warrington Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership reported the creation of 1,327 new child care places.

Wildcat Corporation

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 13 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 95W, what the origins were of the private funds used to make payments to the Wildcat Corporation to provide consultancy services to his Department; what the amount of each payment was; and on what terms the payments were made. [150957]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The employer-led New Deal Task Force has been working in partnership with the Wildcat Corporation to develop a demand-led strategy. To date a total of £175,000 has been received from employers and paid to Wildcat to test this innovative approach. Funding came from companies within the financial sector in this country who had seen the results that the Wildcat Corporation had achieved in the US and who were keen to see the same methods applied in this country.

Departmental Policies (Clwyd, South)

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Clwyd, South constituency, the effects on Clwyd, South of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [151910]

Mr. Wills: Outlined are details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Clwyd, South constituency. The Welsh Assembly will be able to provide details of education policies.

Modern Apprenticeships

Since 2 May 1997, we know of 444 starts on Modern Apprenticeships in the Clwyd, South constituency (as at 30 November 2000). Broken down by financial year these are:

Financial year	*Foundation modern apprenticeships*[1]	*Advanced modern apprenticeships*[2]	*Total*
1997–98	1	106	107
1998–99	60	130	190
1999–2000	49	39	88
2000–01[3]	38	21	59
Total	148	296	444

[1] Foundation Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as National Traineeships, were introduced nationally in September 1997.
[2] Advanced Modern Apprenticeships, formerly known as Modern Apprenticeships, were introduced nationally in September 1995.
[3] To date.
Notes:
1. The Trainee Database System (TDS), from which these data are taken, is less complete than Management Information Supplied to the Department by Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) (around 95 per cent.).
2. In addition, the postcode information on the TDS, from which parliamentary constituency data are compiled, are 95 per cent. complete.
3. TEC Management Information does not provide information at parliamentary constituency level.
Source:
WBTYP trainee database

New Deal for Young People

In the Clwyd, South constituency, 562 young people have joined the New Deal to end December 2000. 292 have found jobs, 239 of which are sustained.

Labour market statistics

The working age employment rate in Denbighshire unitary authority in autumn 2000 was 72.7 per cent. below the UK rate of 74.7 per cent. The rate in autumn 1997 was 72.2 per cent.

The claimant unemployment rate has fallen from 9.5 per cent. in January 1997 to 5.4 per cent. in January 2001 in the Clwyd, South constituency.

Employment zone

The North West Wales Employment Zone began operating in May 2000. The zone covers 5,236 square kilometres of North West Wales including areas of Anglesey, Gwynedd, Conwy and Denbighshire.

From May until December 2000, 881 people started on the Employment Zone. Of these people 36 had entered employment in December.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much certified timber has been purchased by his Department over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152144]

Mr. Wills: The information requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

SATs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average cost of a SATs test per pupil tested *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in East Sussex. [151853]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The average cost of a National Curriculum assessment test per pupil per subject nationally in 2000 was £5.30. This covers the costs of developing, printing and distributing test papers across Key Stages 1–3; and costs of external marking and data collection for tests at Key Stage 2 and 3. The figure excludes the cost of supply cover for teachers administering the national curriculum tests, audit costs and the administration costs incurred by schools.

It is not possible to identify costs below national level.

Capital Investment (Primary Schools)

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much capital investment there has been in primary schools since 1996 in *(a)* London and *(b)* each London borough. [152194]

Jacqui Smith: This information is not readily available. The following tables show the total central Government support to capital investment in all schools made in London and each London borough since 1996–97.

Central Government support to capital investment in London schools 1996–97 to 2000–01

£000

	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	Total
Barking	3,812	1,376	3,163	3,537	5,501	17,389
Barnet	3,055	1,763	5,417	3,894	10,695	24,824
Bexley	1,789	4,299	6,304	6,598	9,169	28,159
Brent	194	889	3,047	3,316	8,353	15,799
Bromley	1,614	1,400	2,591	3,776	8,921	18,302
Camden	350	623	1,859	2,497	5,331	10,660
City of London	37	1	1	40	73	152
Croydon	2,380	2,697	5,483	6,643	11,257	28,460
Ealing	719	5,164	9,515	7,042	10,019	32,459
Enfield	7,350	8,807	7,210	7,459	9,611	40,437
Greenwich	1,658	4,394	5,310	4,444	6,554	22,360
Hackney	993	2,369	3,615	4,170	5,940	17,087
Hammersmith	1,088	1,443	3,219	3,837	3,764	13,351
Haringey	2,713	4,729	7,291	6,202	8,519	29,454
Harrow	3,529	1,739	2,240	3,885	6,087	17,480
Havering	291	1,012	2,021	2,355	7,521	13,200
Hillingdon	3,879	2,828	4,573	5,361	10,734	27,375
Hounslow	3,104	3,786	4,489	3,791	7,287	22,457
Islington	250	869	2,443	2,760	7,306	13,628
Kensington and Chelsea	581	471	1,253	829	2,158	5,292
Kingston upon Thames	1,023	4,060	4,483	5,772	6,680	22,018
Lambeth	761	1,662	4,281	3,121	6,371	16,196
Lewisham	2,804	4,614	6,690	5,084	8,373	27,565
Merton	345	583	1,987	3,291	5,888	12,094
Newham	4,435	3,631	6,770	10,611	14,940	40,387
Redbridge	9,876	9,374	5,008	5,201	11,637	41,096
Richmond	221	628	2,876	3,595	6,110	13,430
Southwark	593	2,501	2,251	2,986	8,268	16,599
Sutton	4,174	5,691	5,269	4,673	9,572	29,379
Tower Hamlets	11,169	7,963	5,789	4,330	6,662	35,913
Waltham Forest	2,451	1,838	2,798	4,640	7,392	19,119
Wandsworth	1,182	861	1,897	3,476	6,980	14,396
Westminster	1,206	1,741	2,126	1,572	4,454	11,099
London Total	79,626	95,806	133,269	140,788	248,127	697,616

Central Government support for private finance initiative investment in London schools 1997–98 to 2000–01

£000

	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	Total
Lewisham	4,000	—	—	—	4,000
Enfield	—	16,000	—	—	16,000
Hillingdon	—	19,000	—	—	19,000
Westminster	—	25,000	—	—	25,000
Brent	—	—	23,000	—	23,000
Haringey	—	—	62,500	—	62,500
Lambeth	—	—	11,500	—	11,500
Tower Hamlets	—	—	68,500	—	68,500
Waltham Forest	—	—	18,500	—	18,500
Brent	—	—	—	9,000	9,000
	4,000	60,000	184,000	9,000	257,000

Infant Classes

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many children there were in infant classes with over 30 children *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available in (i) each London borough and (ii) London. [152197]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is shown in the table.

Class size data were published in a Statistical Bulletin "Class Sizes and Pupil Teacher Ratios in England 2000" on 20 December 2000, copies of which are available from the Library, or alternatively can be accessed from the

Department for Education and Employment statistical website: www.dfee.gov.uk/statistics. Figures from this release show that in September 2000, there were just 30,000 infants in classes of over 30 compared with 485,000 in January 1998. Just 2 per cent. of infants are now in such classes compared with 29 per cent. in January 1998.

Number of pupils in infant classes over 30

	January 1996	*January 2000*	*September 2000*
London	47,752	22,110	3,642
Inner London	6,004	2,766	757
Camden	127	93	93
City of London	0	0	0
Hackney	413	93	95
Hammersmith and Fulham	313	93	0
Haringey	566	124	32
Islington	443	162	159
Kensington and Chelsea	62	62	31
Lambeth	381	249	63
Lewisham	567	344	64
Newham	734	503	0
Southwark	707	409	31
Tower Hamlets	349	35	31
Wandsworth	1,118	568	[1]158
Westminster	224	31	0
Outer London	41,748	19,344	2,885
Barking and Dagenham	734	284	31
Barnet	730	217	62
Bexley	3,984	1,135	379
Brent	786	515	0
Bromley	5,121	2,139	188
Croydon	3,497	1,065	93
Ealing	2,499	968	124
Enfield	3,621	1,782	382
Greenwich	470	406	0
Harrow	1,929	746	224
Havering	2,439	1,804	604
Hillingdon	1,378	317	0
Hounslow	2,354	1,051	296
Kingston upon Thames	3,430	1,935	62
Merton	1,958	1,469	0
Redbridge	3,307	1,342	[1]96
Richmond upon Thames	1,414	888	282
Sutton	1,077	680	31
Waltham Forest	1,020	601	31

[1] Less than 95 per cent. of expected returns were received from these Local Education Authorities

Pupil Literacy

Mr. Tony Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of pupils gained the expected level of literacy in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 2000. [152497]

Ms Estelle Morris: In the 2000 Key Stage 2 tests, 75 per cent. of 11-year-olds achieved the expected standard for their age in English, an increase of 12 percentage points since 1997. The 2000 results are clear evidence of the success of the National Literacy Strategy.

City Academies

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the names and location of city academies *(a)* established to date and *(b)* in the process of being established together with, for each city academy, (i) the private sector investors, (ii) the total private sector financial contribution, (iii) the total public expenditure contribution and (iv) the total number of pupils in attendance and the admission limit. [152502]

Ms Estelle Morris: To date we have announced City Academy partnerships in Brent, Lambeth, Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Haringey and Hillingdon. Further announcements will be made shortly. Private and voluntary sector sponsors announced to date are Frank Lowe of the Lowe Group of Advertising Agencies and Octagon sports management, Barry Townsley, of stockbrokers Insinger Townsley, BT, Marconi, Amey plc, the Church of England and the Grieg Trust. These partnerships are developing detailed project plans to establish City Academies. The total public sector and private and voluntary sector financial contributions, and the total number of pupils and the admission limits, will depend on the plans developed for each City Academy.

Free School Meals

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many and what percentage of pupils are eligible for free school meals in each English local education authority. [152503]

Ms Estelle Morris: The numbers of full-time pupils of up to maximum compulsory school age 'known to be eligible for free school meals' and expressed as a percentage of all full-time pupils of that age group in mainstream, maintained schools in each English local education authority are shown in the table. The data are as collected by the Department's Annual Schools' Census.

Mainstream, maintained schools in England—January 2000

	Full-time pupils of up to maximum compulsory school age known to be eligible for a free school meal	
Local education authority	*Number*	*Percentage*[1]
Barking and Dagenham	7,230	27.9
Barnet	7,480	18.0
Barnsley	8,450	26.6
Bath and North East Somerset	2,500	10.8
Bedfordshire	6,630	12.0
Bexley	5,400	15.2
Birmingham	55,900	34.6
Blackburn with Darwen	6,850	28.7
Blackpool	4,960	25.4
Bolton	8,130	18.9
Bournemouth	2,270	11.6
Bracknell Forest	1,010	7.4
Bradford	21,310	27.8
Brent	9,580	28.8
Brighton and Hove	5,880	21.5
Bristol, City of	10,950	23.5
Bromley	5,880	14.2
Buckinghamshire	4,350	6.7
Bury	4,520	16.0
Calderdale	5,860	18.6
Cambridgeshire	7,030	9.8
Camden	7,780	39.7
Cheshire	12,840	13.2
City of London	80	36.9
Cornwall	9,770	14.7
Coventry	9,340	20.8
Croydon	10,400	22.9
Cumbria	11,100	15.8
Darlington	2,910	19.6
Derby	7,750	22.6
Derbyshire	14,150	13.5
Devon	10,670	11.9
Doncaster	10,440	22.8
Dorset	3,350	6.7

Mainstream, maintained schools in England—January 2000

Local education authority	*Full-time pupils of up to maximum compulsory school age known to be eligible for a free school meal*	
	Number	*Percentage*[1]
Dudley	7,780	16.6
Durham	15,100	21.2
Ealing	10,850	29.3
East Riding of Yorkshire	5,120	11.3
East Sussex	9,300	15.4
Enfield	10,220	24.2
Essex	22,620	12.3
Gateshead	7,050	26.1
Gloucestershire	7,730	9.8
Greenwich	12,130	39.1
Hackney	11,270	46.5
Halton	5,600	28.1
Hammersmith and Fulham	6,390	43.0
Hampshire	14,270	8.3
Haringey	12,840	42.9
Harrow	3,940	14.2
Hartlepool	4,480	29.3
Havering	4,470	12.8
Herefordshire	1,750	7.6
Hertfordshire	14,660	9.8
Hillingdon	5,160	15.1
Hounslow	7,620	24.9
Isle of Wight	3,510	19.8
Isles of Scilly	10	5.2
Islington	10,310	45.4
Kensington and Chelsea	3,910	39.7
Kent	25,250	13.3
Kingston upon Hull, City of	11,700	29.8
Kingston upon Thames	1,540	9.0
Kirklees	12,300	20.8
Knowsley	12,250	46.8
Lambeth	10,910	43.8
Lancashire	29,560	17.3
Leeds	22,290	21.7
Leicester	10,990	24.9
Leicestershire	7,120	8.2
Lewisham	11,740	37.4
Lincolnshire	7,330	8.1
Liverpool	29,080	41.5
Luton	7,280	25.3
Manchester	29,570	45.4
Medway	5,590	13.6
Merton	3,890	19.3
Middlesbrough	7,810	34.9
Milton Keynes	4,380	14.6
Newcastle upon Tyne	11,550	32.3
Newham	19,310	43.9
Norfolk	15,090	14.5
North East Lincolnshire	6,330	24.0
North Lincolnshire	3,640	15.0
North Somerset	2,560	10.1
North Tyneside	6,330	23.0
North Yorkshire	7,360	9.2
Northamptonshire	11,300	11.9
Northumberland	6,520	14.6
Nottingham	14,320	39.2
Nottinghamshire	16,920	15.8
Oldham	9,860	25.3
Oxfordshire	7,590	10.1
Peterborough	5,930	22.3
Plymouth	7,320	20.2
Poole	1,530	8.5
Portsmouth	4,520	17.8
Reading	2,400	16.1
Redbridge	6,620	18.4
Redcar and Cleveland	6,560	27.8
Richmond upon Thames	2,530	13.8
Rochdale	9,170	27.2
Rotherham	8,810	21.7
Rutland	260	5.5
Salford	10,130	29.2
Sandwell	12,330	26.3
Sefton	9,780	22.8

Mainstream, maintained schools in England—January 2000

Local education authority	*Full-time pupils of up to maximum compulsory school age known to be eligible for a free school meal*	
	Number	*Percentage*[1]
Sheffield	16,420	23.9
Shropshire	3,830	10.2
Slough	3,080	18.6
Solihull	4,610	13.4
Somerset	7,150	10.7
South Gloucestershire	3,220	8.7
South Tyneside	6,840	29.0
Southampton	6,510	22.1
Southend-on-Sea	4,370	19.0
Southwark	14,470	45.6
St. Helens	6,020	22.2
Staffordshire	14,580	12.1
Stockport	6,070	14.7
Stockton-on-Tees	6,900	23.5
Stoke-on-Trent	10,350	27.9
Suffolk	11,750	13.1
Sunderland	13,550	30.4
Surrey	10,140	8.1
Sutton	3,010	12.2
Swindon	3,410	12.0
Tameside	7,570	21.3
Telford and the Wrekin	5,350	22.4
Thurrock	3,620	17.3
Torbay	3,480	20.4
Tower Hamlets	20,970	62.6
Trafford	6,350	19.3
Wakefield	9,640	20.3
Walsall	9,010	20.9
Waltham Forest	9,860	30.9
Wandsworth	7,920	31.7
Warrington	3,650	12.2
Warwickshire	7,070	10.0
West Berkshire	1,390	6.6
West Sussex	8,520	8.9
Westminster	6,380	39.6
Wigan	8,210	17.2
Wiltshire	5,130	8.5
Windsor and Maidenhead	1,170	7.0
Wirral	15,240	31.1
Wokingham	960	4.5
Wolverhampton	8,820	24.1
Worcestershire	7,510	10.1
York	2,650	11.7

[1] Numbers of full-time pupils of up to maximum compulsory school age 'known to be eligible for free school meals' expressed as a percentage of all full-time pupils of that age group

Source:

DfEE Annual Schools' Census, January 2000

Ex-GM Schools Funding

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those former grant-maintained schools which *(a)* have and *(b)* do not have protected funding. [151239]

Ms Estelle Morris: All former grant-maintained schools have protected levels of funding per pupil, which were raised by 2.5 per cent. in 2000–01 and again for 2001–02. Those schools whose formula budgets are lower than their protected levels of funding receive transitional funding, which is supported by a grant from the Department. The names of schools which are and are not in receipt of transitional funding in 2000–01 are listed in a table, copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Worcester)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Worcester parliamentary constituency, the effect of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997 on this constituency. [151860]

Mr. Wills: The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

Departmental Policies (Ilford, North)

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what initiatives embarked upon since May 1997 have benefited Ilford, North; and if he will make a statement. [152035]

Mr. Wills: The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

Specialist Schools

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list, for each English local education authority, how many *(a)* applications have been received for specialist school status and *(b)* which schools are designated as specialist schools, with the date of designation, the specialism, the percentage of children eligible for free school meals, the percentage of children with five or more GCSE grades A-C, the status of the school, the admissions policy of the school and if the school is designated as a Beacon School. [152478]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information on *(a)* the number of specialist school applications received since 1994 is not readily available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The information requested in section *(b)* with the exception of data on Free School Meals is contained in tables, copies of which have been placed in the Library. Information on the percentage of children known to be eligible for Free School Meals in individual schools is regarded as confidential and not published centrally by the Department.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the detention centres being used for holding asylum seekers. [152678]

Mrs. Roche: Immigration detainees, including those people who have sought asylum, are currently accommodated in the following dedicated immigration detention and reception centres:

Campsfield House
Tinsley House
Harmondsworth
Oakington Reception Centre.

Dedicated Prison Service facilities are also utilised at:

Rochester
Lindholme
Haslar.

As a short-term measure, until additional dedicated immigration detention centres come on line later this year, immigration detainees are being accommodated in the following Prison Service establishments:

Belmarsh
Liverpool
Holme House
High Down
Wandsworth
Winchester
Bullingdon
Lincoln
Cardiff
Elmley.

Crime Reduction Fund

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list each initiative to date in each year since the start of the Crime Reduction Fund indicating *(a)* the current amount budgeted in each year to date, *(b)* the initial amount budgeted in each year to date and *(c)* the total expended in each year of the initiative to date; and if he will make a statement. [151624]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Announced annual provision and expenditure on the Crime Reduction Programme are as follows:

£ million

	Provision for three-year programme for 1999–2002	*Budgeted provision for 1999–2000*[1]	*Actual expenditure for 1999–2000*	*Budgeted provision for 2000–01*[1]
Reducing Burglary	59.88	13.8	2.067	19.83
Locks for the over-60s	8	0	0	5.15
Summer Schemes	1.5	0	0	1.5
Prostitution—What Works	0.5	0	0	0.5
Targeted Policing	32.45	6	0.509	12.45
'On Track'	31	0.5	0.169	12.5
Innovation Fund	9	0	0	9
Vehicle Crime Publicity	8	0	0	8
Treatment of Offenders	20.8	5.3	2.298	8
Drug Arrest Referrals	20	2	0.306	9
Schools Intervention	12	4	0.205	6
Violence Against Women	7	0	0.090	5
Vehicle Crime	6	0	0	4
Youth Inclusion	5.5	0	0	2.75
Sentencing Practices	4.65	0.675	0.332	0.575
Neighbourhood Wardens	4.5	0	0	1.5

£ million

	Provision for three-year programme for 1999–2002	Budgeted provision for 1999–2000[1]	Actual expenditure for 1999–2000	Budgeted provision for 2000–01[1]
Design Against Crime	3	0.5	0.589	1.5
Arson Control Forum	0.165	0	0	0.165
Offenders Index	0.150	0.075	0.075	0.075
Suzy Lamplugh Trust	0.455	0	0	0.205
CCTV Initiative[2]	150	20	0.005	60
Total[3]	384.55	52.85	6.645	167.7

[1] The voted provision for 1999–2000 and 2000–01—as published in the Home Office Annual Report for 2000—was £60 million and £160 million respectively. The figures in the table differ from those in the report because they reflect updated profiles of planned expenditure
[2] Provision comes from the Capital Modernisation Fund
[3] The total figure excludes central and regional programme support costs, which are not allocated to particular initiatives
Note:
The third year of the programme (2001–02) is covered by Spending Review 2000

The table shows actual expenditure for the first year of the programme (1999–2000) and the budgeted provision for the second year (2000–01). Although not reflected in these expenditure figures, over £250 million has now been committed to over 1,100 projects under all programme initiatives and further bids are under consideration. Action is continuing to expedite the allocation of the remaining funds and implementation of projects through the Crime Reduction Directors and other measures in support of partnerships.

Criminal Investigations

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many criminal investigations are current where the crime in question was committed more than five years ago. [151760]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not available.

The National Crime Faculty at the Bramshill Police Staff College has a Serious Crime Analysis Section which collates details of both solved and unsolved serious crime in the United Kingdom (mainly murders, rapes and abductions). The crimes are recorded on a database, and the details of new crimes are searched against the existing crimes on the database to look for commonalties. This ensures that unsolved crimes are at least being reviewed regularly. Currently, there are 418 crimes committed before 31 December 1995 on the database. In the same way, crime scene stains on the National DNA Database are regularly compared against new suspect samples as they are loaded onto the system.

Examples of old cases where advances in DNA technology have recently resulted in convictions include the murder of Louise Sellars in 1995, whose killer was convicted after DNA was obtained from a cigarette butt, and the murder of Mary Gregson, which had occurred in 1977.

The Association of Chief Police Officers issued Major Incident Room Standardised Administrative Procedures (MIRSAP) guidelines in April 2000. These gave guidance on the review process in relation to murder investigations, and where appropriate, other major crime inquiries. Each undetected murder is reviewed after 28 days and thereafter at least once every two years. Each force therefore has its own policy for dealing with reviews based on these guidelines, including cold case reviews.

Police (Cardboard Cut-outs)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police forces have used cardboard cut-outs of police officers and police cars as an aid to crime fighting. [149461]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not collected centrally by the Home Office. I understand that mock-ups are used on a limited basis in some crime prevention initiatives, but that mock-up vehicles at the roadside have not been judged practical by the Association of Chief Police Officers Road Policing Committee.

The police have a wide range of equipment to ensure speed limits are rigorously enforced. The Vehicles (Crime) Bill, now proceeding through Parliament provides for a new funding mechanism for speed and red-light cameras. Better investment in this area of road safety will ensure even greater compliance with speed limits and will therefore contribute directly to the prevention of deaths on the road.

London Crime

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many reported crimes there were in *(a)* each London borough and *(b)* London as a whole in each category in (i) 1996 and (ii) the latest year for which figures are available. [152207]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The available information, for the calendar years 1996 and 2000, has been provided by the Metropolitan police, and is given in the tables. The 1996 figures may differ from the previously published overall and offence group totals because they have been compiled using a new computer system (CRIS) which interprets historical data differently from the previous system.

It should be noted that there was a change in counting rules for recorded crime on 1 April 1998. This expanded the coverage of offences; changed the basis of counting more towards one crime per victim, and introduced the new category of drugs offences. Previously drugs trafficking was the only drugs offence recorded in these statistics, and it was included in the "Other" category. Also, the outer boundary of the Metropolitan police area changed on 1 April 2000, so as to be coterminous with the boundary of the Greater London area. These changes mean that recorded crime statistics for these two years are not directly comparable.

Calendar year 1996

	Major category description (pre-April 1998)								
Borough	*Violence against the person*	*Sexual offences*	*Robbery*	*Burglary and going equipped*	*Theft and handling*	*Fraud and forgery*	*Criminal damage*	*Other notifiable offences*	*Grand total*
Barking and Dagenham	693	170	238	3,192	6,077	439	3,713	129	14,651
Barnet	957	152	516	4,955	10,312	913	4,508	158	22,471
Bexley	856	136	183	4,191	6,992	624	3,459	177	16,618
Brent	1,611	210	2,043	5,185	9,324	1,360	4,473	265	24,471
Bromley	897	147	391	4,624	10,689	791	4,766	191	22,496
Broxbourne[1]	60	6	16	581	1,052	29	431	7	2,182
Camden	1,691	256	1,271	6,020	18,509	1,857	5,714	586	35,904
Croydon	1,899	332	936	6,480	12,618	1,354	6,002	245	29,868
Ealing	2,092	236	1,059	5,530	11,506	1,677	5,937	293	28,330
Elmbridge[1]	137	35	19	762	1,612	116	915	19	3,615
Enfield	964	145	603	6,224	11,211	790	4,440	119	24,496
Epping Forest[1]	247	25	29	811	1,744	121	988	32	3,997
Epsom and Ewell[1]	251	40	39	1,209	1,768	165	1,315	35	4,822
Greenwich	1,920	355	643	5,678	11,182	1,339	6,173	354	27,644
Hackney	1,868	331	2,108	5,862	12,254	1,034	4,628	379	28,464
Hammersmith and Fulham	1,105	140	852	3,840	10,268	786	3,659	206	20,876
Haringey	1,434	252	1,918	5,922	11,258	1,422	4,621	285	27,112
Harrow	791	101	357	3,202	6,349	775	3,389	97	15,061
Havering	604	93	121	2,924	7,848	648	3,495	141	15,874
Heathrow	30	7	3	68	3,870	748	261	942	5,929
Hertsmere[1]	259	76	39	1,124	3,022	332	1,590	52	6,494
Hillingdon	1,618	240	277	5,223	9,325	741	5,392	141	22,957
Hounslow	1,162	178	380	3,999	9,315	1,934	4,281	261	21,510
Islington	2,122	212	1,170	5,187	12,587	884	5,027	463	27,652
Kensington and Chelsea	920	116	864	4,052	15,330	1,290	2,865	223	25,660
Kingston upon Thames	604	117	137	2,299	6,055	568	2,539	109	12,428
Lambeth	2,700	340	2,733	8,594	15,541	1,558	6,296	558	38,318
Lewisham	1,418	269	1,371	6,213	11,211	1,169	5,187	362	27,200
Merton	747	75	217	2,973	6,580	744	3,509	145	14,990
Newham	1,327	247	1,147	5,750	11,713	1,015	5,038	234	26,471
Redbridge	652	115	381	3,410	7,520	881	3,150	167	18,478
Reigate and Banstead[1]	78	14	24	476	794	60	430	16	1,892
Richmond upon Thames	515	77	128	3,281	6,420	561	2,631	95	13,708
Southwark	3,054	384	1,706	7,261	16,462	2,432	7,188	682	39,169
Spelthorne[1]	328	74	41	1,046	3,354	255	1,567	40	6,705
Squads[2]	—	—	—	3	47	82	7	29	168
Sutton	653	119	130	2,304	5,218	434	2,864	84	11,806
Tower Hamlets	1,137	175	803	4,460	10,962	755	4,300	284	22,876
Waltham Forest	1,116	144	744	4,808	8,442	1,008	3,830	176	20,268
Wandsworth	1,437	212	1,025	5,240	14,106	1,424	5,364	321	28,129
Welwyn and Hatfield[1]	—	—	4	18	36	1	11	—	70
Westminster	1,776	280	2,083	7,890	39,024	2,616	5,066	593	59,328
Total	43,930	6,633	28,749	162,871	379,527	37,730	151,019	9,695	820,154

[1] Areas outside Greater London policed by the Metropolitan police
[2] 'Squads' refers to crimes that were reported by Specialist Operations groups such as the flying squad

Calendar year 2000

	Major category									
Borough	*Violence against the person*	*Sexual offences*	*Robbery*	*Burglary*	*Theft and handling*	*Fraud or forgery*	*Criminal damage*	*Drugs*	*Other notifiable offences*	*Total*
Barking and Dagenham	3,596	203	679	2,058	6,894	2,202	3,871	403	175	20,081
Barnet	4,654	251	1,011	4,190	11,451	3,311	5,078	495	315	30,756
Bexley	3,291	165	370	2,734	7,862	1,234	4,700	411	204	20,971
Brent	5,693	370	1,900	4,534	10,486	4,502	4,335	832	328	32,980
Bromley	3,554	174	644	3,346	10,633	1,541	5,771	452	216	26,331
Camden	5,316	357	1,814	5,184	24,051	3,602	4,725	1,433	351	46,833
Croydon	6,250	354	1,516	4,073	13,017	3,273	6,680	708	262	36,133
Ealing	6,465	354	1,597	4,787	14,962	3,554	6,453	873	386	39,431
Enfield	4,750	238	1,225	4,376	10,510	3,049	3,836	607	309	28,900
Greenwich	6,417	358	480	3,138	10,638	1,405	5,191	968	258	28,853
Hackney	6,383	364	2,361	4,443	16,175	2,463	4,759	992	372	38,312
Hammersmith and Fulham	4,341	219	851	2,997	12,980	1,715	3,617	712	309	27,741
Haringey	5,223	467	2,373	4,363	12,741	2,213	4,662	1,105	370	33,517
Harrow	2,431	153	603	2,815	5,943	1,793	2,790	460	191	17,179
Havering	2,838	175	358	2,341	7,973	1,719	3,356	462	156	19,378

Calendar year 2000

	Major category									
Borough	*Violence against the person*	*Sexual offences*	*Robbery*	*Burglary*	*Theft and handling*	*Fraud or forgery*	*Criminal damage*	*Drugs*	*Other notifiable offences*	*Total*
Heathrow Airport	326	30	10	54	4,428	607	173	37	982	6,647
Hillingdon	3,924	224	485	4,264	10,685	1,761	5,048	398	251	27,040
Hounslow	5,407	234	680	3,646	11,586	2,431	5,112	554	243	29,893
Islington	5,336	297	1,530	4,319	16,347	2,963	4,615	864	375	36,646
Kensington and Chelsea	3,416	155	882	3,477	16,865	3,190	2,466	571	290	31,312
Kingston upon Thames	2,363	123	227	1,365	5,337	1,432	2,589	485	147	14,068
Lambeth	8,055	553	4,498	6,118	19,988	4,278	6,713	1,456	429	52,088
Lewisham	5,269	418	1,541	3,624	10,196	1,915	4,690	686	280	28,619
Merton	2,957	123	387	1,716	5,689	1,642	3,553	248	156	16,471
Newham	7,483	342	2,091	3,470	15,046	3,345	6,455	605	401	39,238
Redbridge	3,752	205	817	3,036	10,527	3,118	3,659	378	231	25,723
Richmond Upon Thames	1,959	94	201	2,311	5,755	1,017	2,970	252	154	14,713
Squads	6	5	—	—	32	517	2	1	37	600
Southwark	7,289	431	2,180	4,379	15,050	3,870	5,279	1,443	419	40,340
Sutton	2,102	106	262	1,463	5,167	1,102	3,477	299	121	14,099
Tower Hamlets	5,850	371	1,731	3,648	14,803	3,088	4,704	987	385	35,567
Waltham Forest	4,842	241	1,186	3,257	9,131	2,917	3,495	541	261	25,871
Wandsworth	4,921	271	1,322	4,155	14,907	4,109	4,614	661	255	35,215
Westminster	8,660	529	2,341	5,350	53,538	7,402	5,277	2,723	880	86,700
Total	155,119	8,954	40,153	115,031	421,393	88,280	144,715	24,102	10,499	1,008,246

Malicious Communications Act

Mr. David Heath: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions prosecutions have been brought against persons or companies under the Malicious Communications Act 1988 for communications distributed in respect of commercial purposes. [151414]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Number of persons or companies prosecuted under the Malicious Communications Act 1988 for communications distributed for commercial purposes are not separately identified on the Home Office's Court Proceedings and Cautions Database.

Involuntary Manslaughter

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to bring forward legislation on involuntary manslaughter. [152670]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government published their proposals for the reform of the law on involuntary manslaughter in May 2000. Among the proposals was the creation of an offence of corporate killing to hold undertakings to account for serious wrongdoing. We are considering in detail the responses to the consultation exercise and will publish our final proposals shortly. We will legislate as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

Driver Prosecutions

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will take steps to ensure that drivers prosecuted as a result of crashes in which there has been a fatality are tried in a Crown court. [151416]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Drivers who cause a fatality by grossly negligent driving, dangerous driving or careless driving while under the influence of drink or drugs must currently be tried in the Crown court. If convicted of manslaughter they are liable to a maximum penalty of life imprisonment; the other relevant offences carry a maximum penalty of 10 years' imprisonment. Where a vehicle is taken without the owner's consent and causes a fatality the driver must also be tried in the Crown court and is liable, if convicted, to a maximum penalty of five years imprisonment.

There is currently no offence which reflects a fatality occurring as a result of careless driving. In these circumstances the driver would be charged with the summary-only offence of careless driving which attracts a level 4 fine (currently £2,500).

The Government are aware of concerns about the powers of the court to deal with fatalities that occur on the roads. Accordingly, the Transport Research Laboratory has carried out research on behalf of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions into the way in which "bad" driving cases proceed through the criminal justice system. The report is due to be published in the near future. We will then be in a better position to judge whether any changes in this area of law and its operation are necessary.

Magistrates Courts

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, for each of the last five years for which figures are available, the results of trials in magistrates courts, including cases that were withdrawn or dismissed. [152691]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information covering the period 1994 to 1999, showing the number of defendants prosecuted at magistrates courts by type of offence and result is published in Table 6.3 of "Criminal Statistics England and Wales 1999" (Cm 5001).

A copy is available in the Library.

Homicides

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* murders and

(b) other homicides were committed in England and Wales, broken down by specific offence, in each of the last 10 years for which figures are available. [152748]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The available information relates to initially recorded offences of homicide (murder, manslaughter and infanticide) in England and Wales and is given in the table. Those offences subsequently decided at court to be murder, manslaughter and infanticide are also shown. The latest figures are an unreliable guide as in a large number of cases court proceedings were still pending as at 11 September 2000 when recording was closed for publication purposes. The outcome may result in some offences being reclassified when final data are available.

Offences of homicide initially recorded by the police and the outcome of those subsequently decided at court:

		Convicted of homicide[2]			
Year	Offences initially recorded as homicide[1]	Total	Murder	Section 2 manslaughter	Other manslaughter	Infanticide
1990	661	443	186	70	183	4
1991	725	502	197	76	224	5
1992	681	504	215	78	205	6
1993	675	501	224	62	210	5
1994	727	491	228	69	191	3
1995	753	553	272	54	224	3
1996	679	530	258	50	218	4
1997	735	499	247	46	203	3
1997–98	731	506	228	47	227	4
1998–99	745	490	241	38	204	7
1999–2000	761	232	121	13	98	–

[1] A separate offence is recorded for each victim of homicide, so that in an incident in which several people are killed, the number of homicides counted is the total number of persons killed.
[2] As at 11 September 2000; figures are subject to revision as cases are dealt with by the police and by the courts, or as further information becomes available.

The initially recorded figure includes all homicides because when an offence is discovered and recorded by the police, it is not generally known whether an offence of murder, manslaughter or infanticide has been committed.

Press Releases

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many press releases were issued by his Department in the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000; how many have been issued in the current financial year; and what his estimate is of the total number for the current financial year. [149247]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* The information for my Department is as follows:

Year	Home Office	Prison Service	Forensic Science Service	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation
1996–97	411	78	—	—	—
1997–98	399	89	16	—	—
1998–99	512	93	13	—	—
1999–2000	417	78	9	11	1

Current financial year to 6 March 2001

	Number
Home Office	402
Prison Service	93
Inspectorates	31

It is difficult to estimate the total number of press releases likely to be issued by the end of this financial year but on current projections we would anticipate it to be in excess of 400 for the Home Office, 110 for the Prison Service and 35 on behalf of the Inspectorates.

Dr. Ali Dizaei

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the *(a)* most serious and *(b)* least serious discipline matter is for which Dr. Ali Dizaei has been warned of action. [152387]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis considers that it could potentially be prejudicial to reveal in this, or in any other case, the details of alleged misconduct before any decision has been taken to institute disciplinary proceedings.

Superintendent Dizaei himself has been informed of the nature of the allegations against him.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in relation to the investigation of Dr. Ali Dizaei, how many of those interviewed are *(a)* white and *(b)* non-white. [152393]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that a total of 185 persons have been interviewed and statements taken: *(a)* 144 were white and *(b)* 41 were non-white.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what the requirements of suspicion are for a section 8 warrant; [152392]

(2) which papers of Dr. Ali Dizaei relating to his position as legal adviser to members of the National Black Police Association in cases relating to possible unfair treatment by an employing police service have been *(a)* seen and *(b)* taken by the police; who authorised such action; and what protocols have governed the confidentiality of the documents; [152390]

(3) what warrants have been *(a)* applied for, *(b)* refused and *(c)* executed in relation to the investigation of Dr. Ali Dizaei, indicating the dates and the authority signing each warrant. [152391]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In order to obtain a warrant under section 8 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 to enter and search premises, a constable must satisfy a Justice of the Peace that there are reasonable grounds for believing:

(a) that a serious arrestable offence has been committed; and

(b) that there is material on premises specified in the application which is likely to be of substantial value (whether by itself or together with other material) to the investigation of the offence; and

(c) that the material is likely to be relevant evidence; and

(d) that it does not consist of or include items subject to legal privilege, excluded material or special procedure material; and

(e) that any of the following conditions applies.

The conditions referred to in (e) above are:

(a) that it is not practicable to communicate with any person entitled to grant entry to the premises;

(b) that it is practicable to communicate with a person entitled to grant entry to the premises but it is not practicable to communicate with any person entitled to grant access to the evidence;

(c) that entry to the premises will not be granted unless a warrant is produced;

(d) that the purpose of the search may be frustrated or seriously prejudiced unless a constable arriving at the premises can secure immediate entry to them.

The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that 14 warrants were applied for. Of these, 12 were issued at Bow street magistrates court on 15 January 2001 by District Judge Mr. Workman, one was issued at Horseferry road magistrates court on 20 January 2001 by District Judge Mr. Pratt, and one was issued at Bow street magistrates court, on 8 February 2001 by District Judge Mr. Evans. No warrants were refused. 13 warrants were executed with one warrant returned to Bow street magistrates court unexecuted.

Dr. Dizaei's home address and office at Kensington police station were both searched and papers, computer and discs were seized. The offices of the Black Police Association were not searched. The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that no matters subject to legal privilege or other matters relating to Dr. Dizaei's position as legal adviser to the National Black Police Association have been taken by police.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what criminal offences were alleged against Dr. Ali Dizaei; and if he has been arrested. [152394]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me Superintendent Dizaei has been served with notices outlining criminal allegations against him. These include attempting to pervert the course of justice, deception, pecuniary advantage and fraud. Superintendent Dizaei has not been arrested.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department who is responsible for the investigation into Dr. Ali Dizaei. [152395]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that the allegations into misconduct are being investigated by Commander Hayman, Director of the Directorate of Professional Standards of the Metropolitan Police Service; and criminal allegations are being investigated by Detective Superintendent Norman, Head of Intelligence in the Directorate of Professional Standards of the Metropolitan Police Service.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many officers have been working on the surveillance and investigation into the case of Dr. Ali Dizaei. [152386]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me eight police officers have been employed on the investigation during the year 2000. However the surveillance operation would have involved an additional 13 police officers. Since January 2001, when Superintendent Dizaei was suspended, a further 21 officers have been engaged in the investigation. It is anticipated that half those police officers will resume other investigations after Easter 2001.

Jill Dando Murder Inquiry

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many officers have been working on the Jill Dando murder. [152385]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis informs me that the number of officers engaged in the investigation of the Jill Dando murder has fluctuated according to the progress of the investigation and the particular demands at the time. I refer the hon. Member to the answers given on 15 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 319W, 2 November 1999, *Official Report*, column 114W and 21 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 484W. There is no record of the overall number of police officers who have been involved in the case from the start of the investigation.

A total of 10 officers are currently involved in the preparation of the court case. In addition, two officers have been dedicated to assisting witnesses and dealing with the publicity surrounding the trial.

Conviction Rates

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many convictions there were *(a)* in each police force area and *(b)* in total in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [152371]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information taken from the Home Office's Court Proceedings Database showing the number of persons convicted in *(a)* each police force area and *(b)* in total during 1999 is given in the table.

Offenders convicted[1] by offence type and police force area, England and Wales 1999

	Offence type			
Police force	*Indictable offences*	*Summary non-motoring offences*	*Summary motoring offences*	*Total all offences*
Avon and Somerset	7,531	10,921	18,467	36,919
Bedfordshire	2,905	3,967	6,054	12,926
Cambridgeshire	3,689	1,573	7,027	12,289
Cheshire	6,641	6,607	11,098	24,346
City of London	581	1,753	4,122	6,456
Cleveland	5,742	6,646	5,185	17,573
Cumbria	3,662	4,971	7,337	15,970
Derbyshire	4,701	6,559	12,187	23,447
Devon and Cornwall	6,930	10,178	13,908	31,016
Dorset	3,572	4,259	5,486	13,317
Durham	4,329	3,805	6,763	14,897

Offenders convicted[1] by offence type and police force area, England and Wales 1999

Police force	Offence type: Indictable offences	Summary non-motoring offences	Summary motoring offences	Total all offences
Essex	7,062	16,198	20,691	43,951
Gloucestershire	2,901	3,700	6,036	12,637
Greater Manchester	22,360	27,307	54,835	104,502
Hampshire	11,068	14,631	22,577	48,276
Hertfordshire	3,331	7,324	10,203	20,858
Humberside	6,327	8,736	9,056	24,119
Kent	8,817	4,653	11,445	24,915
Lancashire	12,044	13,495	21,249	46,788
Leicestershire	5,561	8,509	14,245	28,315
Lincolnshire	3,682	5,355	10,589	19,626
Merseyside	11,200	11,552	13,499	36,251
Metropolitan Police	51,538	79,401	63,387	194,326
Norfolk	4,293	4,410	7,627	16,330
North Yorkshire	4,558	5,037	7,317	16,912
Northamptonshire	3,969	5,705	6,614	16,288
Northumbria	12,712	16,629	16,375	45,716
Nottinghamshire	7,747	10,160	8,504	26,411
South Yorkshire	10,459	9,846	15,564	35,869
Staffordshire	5,535	4,040	19,987	29,562
Suffolk	3,362	4,337	7,202	14,901
Surrey	2,687	3,018	8,766	14,471
Sussex	6,693	8,732	12,241	27,666
Thames Valley	8,020	6,217	26,307	40,544
Warwickshire	2,216	3,193	7,316	12,725
West Mercia	5,814	6,519	11,727	24,060
West Midlands	21,835	27,071	33,391	82,297
West Yorkshire	19,976	22,176	34,916	77,068
Wiltshire	2,983	4,190	11,579	18,752
England	319,033	403,380	590,879	1,313,292
Dyfed Powys	3,527	4,828	5,428	13,783
Gwent	4,482	6,279	12,662	23,423
North Wales	4,325	5,266	6,524	16,115
South Wales	10,628	13,857	17,363	41,848
Wales	22,962	30,230	41,977	95,169
England and Wales	341,995	433,610	632,856	1,408,461

[1] Data in this table are based on a person's principal offence as persons may be convicted of more than one offence.

Clear-up Rates

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the crime clear-up rate was *(a)* in each police force area and *(b)* in total in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [152372]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information, which has been published in "Criminal Statistics England and Wales 1999", is given in the table. It should be noted that the basis for the collection of clear-ups changed on 1 April 1999, and consequently no direct comparison should be made between these figures and those for previous years. The major changes were in respect of offences "taken into consideration", with only those offences of which the police were previously aware now being counted, and clear-ups resulting from admissions of prisoners serving a sentence for another offence no longer being counted.

Recorded crime: clear-up rate by police force area England and Wales—year ending March 2000

Police force area	Percentages
Avon and Somerset	22
Bedfordshire	25
Cambridgeshire	25
Cheshire	31
Cleveland	22
Cumbria	39
Derbyshire	28
Devon and Cornwall	35
Dorset	26
Durham	32
Essex	30
Gloucestershire	31
Greater Manchester	23
Hampshire	32
Hertfordshire	27
Humberside	19
Kent	33
Lancashire	29
Leicestershire	30
Lincolnshire	28
London, City of	32
Merseyside	26
Metropolitan Police	16
Norfolk	30
Northamptonshire	33
Northumbria	31
North Yorkshire	31
Nottinghamshire	21
South Yorkshire	25
Staffordshire	22
Suffolk	36
Surrey	32
Sussex	25
Thames Valley	20
Warwickshire	22
West Mercia	29
West Midlands	27
West Yorkshire	25
Wiltshire	33
Dyfed-Powys	65
Gwent	53
North Wales	36
South Wales	31
England and Wales	25

Child Abuse

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if a representative of the Government will participate in the Second World Congress on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children to be held in Japan in December; and what preparations Her Majesty's Government are making in advance of the Congress. [152101]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government attach particular importance to the Second World Congress and will be represented at ministerial or official level. I understand, however, that formal invitations to the World Congress have not yet been issued. The Home Office, Department of Health and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have preparations for the Congress in hand, which will include publication of a National Plan for Safeguarding Children from Commercial Sexual Exploitation.

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to launch a national public information campaign to heighten awareness of child abuse in the UK. [152099]

Mr. Hutton: I have been asked to reply.

We are committed to improving safeguards for children and have taken firm action to help and protect the most vulnerable children in our society. This commitment is evidenced by the wide ranging programme of new child protection legislation that we have enacted and our ground breaking £885 million Quality Protects Programme to transform the management and delivery of children's social services. In addition, we welcome the work that is done by the voluntary sector to heighten awareness of child abuse in the United Kingdom.

The recently reissued "Working Together to Safeguard Children" guidance raises awareness of child abuse among all those with child protection responsibilities, and gives them the framework they need to improve safeguards for children.

We have no current plans for a national public information campaign to heighten awareness of child abuse.

Sexual Offences

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to take forward the Sexual Offences Review following the end of the consultation period in March. [152100]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have to date received over 650 responses to the publication "Setting the Boundaries" which set out the recommendations of the Sex Offences Review to Government. Over the coming months we will be considering in detail each of the 62 recommendations contained in Volume 1 of "Setting the Boundaries" in the light of those responses.

Following this we intend to bring forward proposals for legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152105]

Mr. Straw: The key information on the Department's procurement of timber will be published in the Green Ministers' Annual Report.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much certified timber has been purchased by his Department over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152145]

Mr. Straw: The Home Office does not have a system in place to provide data on the proportion of certified timber purchased.

The inter-departmental working group on timber is working to develop a common reporting template, which will form the basis of future reporting on timber procurement.

Lay Visitors

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what proportion of *(a)* lay visitors to police stations and *(b)* members of lay observers' panels in England and Wales were aged (i) under 30, (ii) between 30 and 40, (iii) between 40 and 50, (iv) between 50 and 60 and (v) over 60 years in each of the past five years. [152592]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information is not collected centrally about the proportion of lay visitors within each given category.

As at 1 March 2001 there are no lay observers under 30 years of age. 2 per cent. are aged between 30 and 40; 8 per cent. between 40 and 50; 25 per cent. between 50 and 60; and the remaining 65 per cent. are over 60 years of age. Historical data about the composition of the lay observers panels are not kept and it is not possible to provide information in respect of the years 1997 to 2000.

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of places on schemes for lay visitors to visit police stations are not filled; [152590]

(2) what the *(a)* gender and *(b)* ethnic breakdown was of lay visitors to police stations in England and Wales in each of the last five years. [152591]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not collected centrally. Updated Home Office guidance to police authorities on the organisation and operation of lay visiting schemes will be issued shortly and strengthened administrative arrangements should enable better monitoring and record keeping.

Lay Observers

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what proportion of places on lay observers' panels are not filled; [152593]

(2) what the *(a)* gender and *(b)* ethnic breakdown is for members of lay observers' panels in England and Wales in each of the past five years. [152594]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As at 1 March 2001 the eight Lay Observers Panels covering all of England and Wales had a total of 169 members. There were also 12 vacancies.

The membership comprises 122 males and 47 females. 10 Lay Observers are from the minority ethnic communities. Of these eight are of Afro/Caribbean background and the remaining two are Asian.

Historical data about the composition of the Lay Observers Panels are not kept and it is not possible to provide information in respect of the years 1997 to 2000.

Crown Court Trials

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the results of trials in the Crown court where the defendant made a plea of not guilty to all counts, for each of the last five years for which figures are available. [152692]

Mr. Lock: I have been asked to reply.

Figures showing the results of trials where the defendant made a plea of not guilty to all counts are set out in the table.

Results of trials in the Crown court where the defendant pleaded not guilty to all counts

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Acquitted					
Discharged by judge	6,232	6,844	8,404	8,800	9,563
Directed acquittal	2,469	2,455	2,517	2,490	2,404
Jury acquittal	5,466	5,812	5,815	5,663	5,588
Total acquittals	14,167	15,111	16,736	16,953	17,555
Convicted					
Changed plea to guilty	212	143	157	126	115
Unanimous verdict	7,944	7,908	7,482	7,029	6,714
1 dissentient	827	826	727	777	696
2 dissentients	1,274	1,282	1,202	1,157	1,195
Total convictions	10,257	10,159	9,568	9,089	8,720

HEALTH

Correspondence

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter of 13 December 1999, acknowledged on 16 December 1999 (Ref. POH(2)5303/85) faxed to his Department on 20 November 2000, on the subject of midwives' pay. [150565]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 15 February 2001]:* A reply to the hon. Member's letter was sent on 2 March 2001.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the hon. Member for Ludlow's letters of 27 July 2000, 11 November 2000 and 6 December 2000. [150870]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* A reply to the hon. Member's letter was sent on 5 March 2001.

Mrs. Roe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letters from the hon. Member for Broxbourne of 4 December 2000, 3 January 2001, 1 February 2001 and 1 March 2001, relating to her constituent, Mrs. M. Childs of Hoddesdon. [152746]

Mr. Hutton: I replied to the hon. Member's letter of 4 December 2000 on 22 January 2001.

Tinnitus

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what support his Department is giving to the establishment of a UK tinnitus research centre; and if he will make a statement. [152151]

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to set up a tinnitus research centre. [152157]

Mr. Hutton: The Department was asked for advice concerning sources of support for a tinnitus research unit in July 2000. Given the emphasis of the proposal on identifying neuronal and molecular changes and translation research the Department advised that the researchers involved should approach the Medical Research Council (MRC) with this proposal. The MRC is the main Government agency for research into the causes of and treatments for disease and it receives its funding via the Department of Trade and Industry.

Radiographers

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies there are for radiographers in each health authority. [152499]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is shown in the table.

Department of Health Vacancies Survey—Three month vacancies[1] for Radiographers, within National Health Service trusts, for each health authority area, as at 31 March 2000

	Total radiographers	Diagnostic radiographers	Therapeutic radiographers
England	430	330	100
Northern and Yorkshire	20	[2]—	20
Bradford HA	0	0	0
Calderdale and Kirklees HA	0	0	0
County Durham HA	0	0	0
East Riding HA	10	0	10
Gateshead and South Tyneside HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Leeds HA	10	0	10
Newcastle and North Tyneside HA	[2]—	0	[2]—
North Cumbria HA	0	0	0
North Yorkshire HA	0	0	0
Northumberland HA	[2]—	0	[2]—
Sunderland HA	0	0	0
Tees HA	0	0	0
Wakefield HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Trent	30	20	10
Barnsley HA	0	0	0
Doncaster HA	[2]—	0	[2]—
Leicestershire HA	10	[2]—	[2]—
Lincolnshire HA	0	0	0
North Derbyshire HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
North Nottinghamshire HA	0	0	0

Department of Health Vacancies Survey—Three month vacancies[1] for Radiographers, within National Health Service trusts, for each health authority area, as at 31 March 2000

	Total radiographers	*Diagnostic radiographers*	*Therapeutic radiographers*
Nottingham HA	10	10	[2]—
Rotherham HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Sheffield HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
South Humber HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Southern Derbyshire HA	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
West Midlands	40	30	10
Birmingham HA	20	10	[2]—
Coventry HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Dudley HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Herefordshire HA	0	0	0
North Staffordshire HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Sandwell HA	0	0	0
Shropshire HA	10	[2]—	[2]—
Solihull HA	0	0	0
South Staffordshire HA	0	0	0
Walsall HA	0	0	0
Warwickshire HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Wolverhampton HA	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Worcestershire HA	0	0	0
North West	40	40	[2]—
Bury and Rochdale HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
East Lancashire HA	0	0	0
Liverpool HA	10	10	0
Manchester HA	10	10	0
Morecambe Bay HA	0	0	0
North Cheshire HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
North West Lancashire HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Salford and Trafford HA	0	0	0
Sefton HA	0	0	0
South Cheshire HA	0	0	0
South Lancashire HA	0	0	0
St. Helens and Knowsley HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Stockport HA	0	0	0
West Pennine HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Wigan and Bolton HA	0	0	0
Wirral HA	10	10	[2]—
Eastern	50	40	20
Bedfordshire HA	0	0	0
Cambridge HA	20	10	10
East and North Hertfordshire HA	10	10	0
Norfolk HA	10	10	[2]—
North Essex HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
South Essex HA	0	0	0
Suffolk HA	10	[2]—	[2]—
West Hertfordshire HA	10	[2]—	[2]—
London	130	100	30
Barking and Havering HA	10	[2]—	[2]—
Barnet HA	10	10	0
Bexley and Greenwich HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Brent and Harrow HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Bromley HA	0	0	0
Camden and Islington HA	20	10	10
Croydon HA	10	10	0
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow HA	10	10	[2]—
East London and The City HA	10	10	[2]—
Enfield and Haringey HA	[2]—	0	[2]—
Hillingdon HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster HA	20	10	10
Kingston and Richmond HA	10	10	0
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham HA	10	10	10
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth HA	10	10	0
Redbridge and Waltham Forest HA	10	10	0
South East	90	70	20
Berkshire HA	10	[2]—	[2]—
Buckinghamshire HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
East Kent HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
East Surrey HA	0	0	0
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Isle Of Wight HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
North and Mid Hampshire HA	10	10	0

Department of Health Vacancies Survey—Three month vacancies[1] for Radiographers, within National Health Service trusts, for each health authority area, as at 31 March 2000

	Total radiographers	Diagnostic radiographers	Therapeutic radiographers
Northamptonshire HA	0	0	0
Oxfordshire HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire HA	10	[2]—	[2]—
Southampton and South West Hampshire HA	10	10	[2]—
West Kent HA	20	20	10
West Surrey HA	20	20	0
West Sussex HA	10	10	0
South West	30	30	[2]—
Avon HA	10	10	0
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly HA	0	0	0
Dorset HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Gloucestershire HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
North and East Devon HA	[2]—	[2]—	0
Somerset HA	0	0	0
South and West Devon HA	10	10	[2]—
Wiltshire HA	[2]—	[2]—	0

[1] Posts that had been vacant for three months or more as at 31 March of each year
[2] Denotes less than 5 or greater than zero
Notes:
1. Figures are whole-time equivalents rounded to the nearest 10
2. Due to rounding totals may not equal the sum of component parts
Source:
Department of Health 2000 Vacancies survey

Paediatric Pathologists

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many specialist paediatric pathologists are employed by each health authority; and how many specialist paediatric pathologist posts are vacant in each authority. [151945]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The information requested is not held centrally.

Body and Organ Disposal

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will give guidance to health authorities on the disposal of bodies and organs in the health service. [152425]

Mr. Denham: Following the publication of the Royal Liverpool Children's Inquiry Report, the Retained Organs Commission has been established to oversee the cataloguing and return of organs and tissue retained at post mortem. Guidance will be issued to National Health Service trusts shortly which will enable them to begin to provide information to relatives once the Commission has validated their information systems.

Air Quality

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his Department's total spend has been in the last three years on research into the health impact of outdoor air quality. [152541]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has contributed around £1.4 million to research on the health impact of outdoor air pollution over the last three years.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), Air and Environment Quality Division have also contributed around £25 million to research on air pollution over the past three years. Other Divisions within DETR, as well as other Government Departments, have also contributed to air pollution research programmes.

Asthma

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many deaths were caused by traffic-related air pollution in the last year for which figures are available; and, of those, how many were related to *(a)* asthma and *(b)* other respiratory disease. [152543]

Yvette Cooper: The Department's Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollutants (COMEAP) published a report "Quantification of the Effects of Air Pollution on Health in the United Kingdom" in 1998 that included estimates of the number of people affected by the effects of air pollution each year. One of the pollutants studied in the report was particulate matter (PM_{10}), a major pollutant related to traffic. The report concluded that 8,100 people in 1995 were likely to have their deaths brought forward as a result of exposure to this pollutant. Levels of particles have fallen since 1995 and not all particulate matter is derived from traffic so this will be an overestimate of current effects.

The above calculations relate to deaths from all causes. COMEAP did not recommend separate calculations for different causes of death.

New Lymington Hospital

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria will be used to determine whether the New Lymington hospital project proceeds as a wholly publicly funded or a PFI project. [151383]

Mr. Denham: Before a decision on the funding of a new hospital can be made we must determine which approach presents the best option for the local community. We must consider whether a scheme would be better value for the National Health Service and the taxpayer

under private finance initiative than it would be under the equivalent publicly funded alternative. Support for the scheme from key local stakeholders and the ability of local health authorities and those that commission services to meet the overall cost of that scheme would also be key factors.

A project board has been established to oversee the process of reviewing the service and funding options for the new hospital.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Athletics Facility (Pickett's Lock)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what timetable he envisages for the completion by autumn 2004 of a new international athletics facility at Pickett's Lock. [152518]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The Lee Valley Athletics Centre is timetabled to be ready in good time for the 2005 World Athletics Championships.

Athletics Championships (Funding)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he last met representatives of Manchester 2002 Ltd. to discuss the funding of the Commonwealth Games 2002. [152517]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not had any meetings with Manchester 2002 Ltd. specifically to discuss funding. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Cabinet Office heads the Government's liaison with Manchester 2002 Ltd., the organisers of the Games. He is in regular contact on a wide range of issues. I have met the Chairman of Manchester 2002 to discuss sporting aspects of the Commonwealth Games.

Wembley Project

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money the Government have contributed to the new Wembley project through *(a)* Sport England or *(b)* National Lottery money. [152511]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* No exchequer funding has been committed to Wembley National Stadium Ltd. Sport England have awarded £120 million from the Lottery Sports Fund to the stadium project. Wembley National Stadium Ltd. and the Football Association have agreed to return £20 million of the lottery funding following the removal of the obligations to stage athletics events.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what role Ministers played in the appointment of the Wembley board. [152631]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* None; the Wembley National Stadium Ltd. board comprises 12 non-executive directors, seven of whom are nominated by the Football Association with the remaining five nominated by the English National Stadium Trust.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions his Department has had, with which organisations, about the re-opening of Wembley Stadium for future major sporting events. [152512]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I met Sir Rodney Walker on 10 January and 1 February and on each occasion received a progress report from him on the redevelopment of Wembley Stadium.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if his Department was consulted in relation to financial payments being made to the new Chairman of the Wembley Holding Company; and if he will make a statement. [152510]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* My Department was not consulted about payments to the new Chairman of Wembley National Stadium Ltd.

Television Licences

Mr. Browne: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when regulations will be laid to bring into effect the television licence fee increases due to come into force on 1 April. [153351]

Mr. Chris Smith: On 26 October 2000, *Official Report*, columns 176–77W, the Government announced that, from 1 April 2001, the fee for a colour television licence would increase from £104 to £109 and the black and white licence fee would rise from £34.50 to £36.50. I have today laid before the House the regulations necessary to bring these fees into force.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

National Audit Office

Mr. Love: To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission if the Commission has appointed new auditors for the National Audit Office. [152876]

Mr. Sheldon: Yes. The Commission has appointed the firm of BKR Haines Watts. The appointment will be for a fixed term of three years from 1 April 2001. The appointment is renewable for a further two years at the discretion of the Commission.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

People's Peerages

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council how many meetings of the Appointments Commission have been held since its establishment; and how may of these were used to interview applicants for a people's peerage. [151660]

Mrs. Beckett: I understand that the Appointments Commission has held 10 formal full meetings since its establishment in May 2000. Interviews have not taken place at formal full meetings of the Commission.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council, pursuant to her answer of 28 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 714W, on people's peers, for what

reason the provision of information including the first part of the post codes of applications would breach the requirement to treat applications in confidence. [152277]

Mrs. Beckett: I have nothing to add to my answer of 28 February.

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council if she will list *(a)* the publications and *(b)* the costs of the advertisements soliciting applications for a people's peerage and the responses generated by each title. [152501]

Mrs. Beckett: The Appointments Commission decided to use other methods than newspaper advertising for publicising its work and soliciting applications. It set up an easily accessible website and produced 15,000 information packs, many of which were distributed to organisations and individuals who might be interested in making a nomination, at a cost of approximately £25,000. It also undertook four regional roadshows, at a cost of about £12,000. There were just over 3,000 applications by the deadline of 17 November.

TREASURY

Unemployment (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the percentage was of the workforce in *(a)* London and *(b)* each London borough which was unemployed (i) in 1996 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available; [152199]

(2) how many people were *(a)* unemployed and *(b)* unemployed for over two years in (i) London and (ii) each London borough (A) in 1996 and (B) at the latest date for which figures are available. [152201]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Ms Harriet Harman, dated 8 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent questions about the percentage of the workforce that is unemployed in London and unemployment figures for London and London Boroughs. (152199, 152201). I am replying in his absence.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the main source of labour market data on individuals used by National Statistics. The tables below show the International Labour Organisation (ILO) unemployment rates and the number of people unemployed in Greater London and by Borough. Both tables show the averages of December 1995 to November 1996-to represent 1996-and December 1999 to November 2000-to provide the latest available annual average.

The measure of unemployment derived from the LFS is defined on a consistent and internationally recognised basis set out by the ILO. It counts as unemployed people who are (a) without a paid job, (b) available to start work within the next two weeks and (c) have either looked for work in the last four weeks or are waiting to start a job already obtained.

Table 1: ILO unemployment rates for people in Greater London by Borough

Percentage[1]

	Average December 1995 to November 1996	*Average December 1999 to November 2000*
Greater London	11.3	7.2
Barking and Dagenham	11.7	[2]—
Barnet	10.0	6.3
Bexley	8.7	[2]—
Brent	12.3	11.4
Bromley	6.5	4.5
Camden	11.9	8.1
Croydon	9.7	5.2
Ealing	11.0	7.7
Enfield	8.1	6.4
Greenwich	13.9	9.6
Hackney	22.1	15.2
Hammersmith and Fulham	11.6	[2]—
Haringey	13.4	10.9
Harrow	8.0	5.3
Havering	8.0	[2]—
Hillingdon	5.6	4.5
Hounslow	12.3	[2]—
Islington	14.7	[2]—
Kensington and Chelsea	9.9	9.8
Kingston upon Thames	[2]—	[2]—
Lambeth	18.3	8.7
Lewisham	15.5	5.5
Merton	[2]—	[2]—
Newham	20.2	16.4
Redbridge	8.7	7.3
Richmond upon Thames	[2]—	[2]—
Southwark	22.6	12.9
Sutton	6.3	[2]—
Tower Hamlets	19.3	12.3
Waltham Forest	11.8	7.3
Wandsworth	9.7	4.6
Westminster	13.9	7.6

[1] Not seasonally adjusted
[2] Figure too small for reliable estimate
Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Table 2: Number of ILO unemployed in Greater London by borough

Thousands[1]

	Average December 1995 to November 1996		*Average December 1999 to November 2000*	
	All unemployed	*Unemployed for more than 2 years*	*All unemployed*	*Unemployed for more than 2 years*
Greater London	403	106	262	40
Barking and Dagenham	9	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Barnet	16	[2]—	11	[2]—
Bexley	10	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Brent	15	[2]—	15	[2]—
Bromley	10	[2]—	7	[2]—
Camden	12	[2]—	7	[2]—
Croydon	17	[2]—	9	[2]—
Ealing	16	[2]—	11	[2]—
Enfield	11	[2]—	9	[2]—

Table 2: Number of ILO unemployed in Greater London by borough

Thousands[1]

	Average December 1995 to November 1996		Average December 1999 to November 2000	
	All unemployed	*Unemployed for more than 2 years*	*All unemployed*	*Unemployed for more than 2 years*
Greenwich	14	[2]—	10	[2]—
Hackney	17	7	13	[2]—
Hammersmith and Fulham	10	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Haringey	13	[2]—	12	[2]—
Harrow	9	[2]—	6	[2]—
Havering	10	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Hillingdon	7	[2]—	6	[2]—
Hounslow	12	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Islington	13	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Kensington and Chelsea	8	[2]—	8	[2]—
Kingston upon Thames	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Lambeth	28	7	12	[2]—
Lewisham	20	[2]—	7	[2]—
Merton	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Newham	19	[2]—	15	[2]—
Redbridge	10	[2]—	8	[2]—
Richmond upon Thames	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Southwark	23	8	15	[2]—
Sutton	6	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—
Tower Hamlets	14	[2]—	10	[2]—
Waltham Forest	13	[2]—	9	[2]—
Wandsworth	14	[2]—	7	[2]—
Westminster	14	[2]—	9	[2]—

[1] Not seasonally adjusted
[2] Figure too small for reliable estimate
Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Pay (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average pay was in London *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available. [152203]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Ms Harriet Harman, dated 8 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question on average pay in London (152203). I am replying in his absence.

The NES shows that in London, the average weekly pay was £455.5 in 1996 and £529.8 in 2000, the latest date for which figures are available. The figures provided are for full-time employees on adult rates of pay, whose pay for the survey period was not affected by absence.

The New Earnings Survey (NES), carried out in April of each year, is the most comprehensive source of earnings information in Great Britain. However, it underestimates the number of low pay jobs since it does not provide a comprehensive picture of the lower end of the earnings distribution.

Jobs (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many jobs there were *(a)* in 1996 and *(b)* at the latest date for which figures are available in (i) London and (ii) each London borough. [152193]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Ms Harriet Harman, dated 8 March 2001:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the number of jobs in the economy in London and each London borough in 1996 and at the latest date for which figures are available.

The Annual Employment Survey (AES) gives an estimate of the number of employee jobs in September of each year. Estimates for 1996 and 1998 (the latest year for which comparable figures are available) may be obtained from the NOMIS database in the House of Commons Library.

Children (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many children aged under 16 years there are in *(a)* London and *(b)* each London borough. [152195]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Ms Harriet Harman, dated 8 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question concerning the number of children in London (152195). I am replying in his absence.

An electronic copy of the data that you require can be found at the Office for National Statistics website: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/nsbase/downloads/theme—population /PE2POPEsts99book.pdf

A paper copy of the data can be found in Table 8 in the ONS volume 'Population Estimates, Mid-1999, England and Wales' (Series PE No.2; ISBN 1 85774 381 4). This publication is in the House of Commons library.

Financial Services Authority

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to include *(a)* term assurance, *(b)* mortgage protection and *(c)* clinical illness cover within the remit of the FSA. [152950]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Companies that provide these forms of insurance in the UK are prudentially regulated by the Financial Services Authority.

Duty Free

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will publish the findings of the post implementation review of the duty free successor regime for intra-EU journeys; and if he will make a statement. [153212]

Dawn Primarolo: Sales of duty-free alcohol and tobacco on intra-EU journeys, for passengers to take away, were abolished from 1 July 1999. On 24 October 2000 I announced that a post implementation review of the successor regime would take place. Customs have completed that review and copies of the findings have now been placed in the House Libraries.

The review focused on how well the successor regime was working and what further technical improvements could be made. The report makes a number of deregulatory recommendations, which I support. The administrative and operational simplifications to the system will make the regime easier for Customs and the trade to administer.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service

33. **Mr. McCabe:** To ask the Solicitor-General in what ways the additional funding recently announced for the Crown Prosecution Service will affect the funding of local offices. [151421]

The Solicitor-General: The additional finding for the Crown Prosecution Service, from the Spending Review settlement and the Criminal Justice Reserve represents a significant increase in the resources available to the CPS's 42 Areas in 2001–02. On average the local offices will receive an additional 19 per cent. from April as well as benefiting from the central CPS initiatives on which the remaining extra money will be spent. Areas will be able to recruit up to 500 more front-line lawyers, caseworkers and administrative staff. There will be more training so staff will be better equipped and they will have modern IT facilities to do the job. The additional resources mean that the CPS will be able to deal with more cases, improve its performance and deliver key initiatives including informing victims about prosecution decisions.

34. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the impact of his plans to fund the Crown Prosecution Service on reducing the length of time for bringing prosecutions. [151422]

The Solicitor-General: The increase in funding for the CPS from April of 23 per cent. in real terms is likely to have a substantial effect on the time taken to bring prosecutions. In particular more resources will be focused:

towards the delivery of Youth court targets;

in attendance at an increased number of Early First Hearings and Early Administrative Hearings in the magistrates courts;

on better administrative support at the Crown court;

and in the wider deployment of Higher Court Advocates to improve the throughput of Crown court cases.

Additional resources from the Treasury's Capital Modernisation Fund are being used to assist in the establishment of Criminal Justice Units. A Performance Improvement Programme fund aimed principally at improving individual Area performance concerning quality and timeliness has been established.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Solicitor-General what assessment he has made of the Crown Prosecution Service's performance in giving advice on criminal charges to the police. [151423]

The Solicitor-General: A thematic report on the provision of advice to the police by Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) was published in September 1998 and concluded that the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) provides good quality written advice. There is also no ongoing programme of Area inspections, each of which covers the issue. I consider each report prepared by the Inspectorate.

Apart from this, the Attorney-General and I regularly see CPS files which enables us to assess the performance of the CPS in giving advice on criminal charges to the police. Often, the files contain good quality and timely case specific advice as well as tackling wider issues such as explaining general prosecution policies. I have also been impressed on my frequent visits to CPS offices by the involvement of CPS lawyers at the pre-charge stages of police investigations, often in large and complex cases.

Treasury Solicitor's Department

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Solicitor-General what plans he has to review the work of the Treasury Solicitor's Department. [153211]

The Solicitor-General: I am pleased to announce that, in accordance with the Government's commitment that all agencies should be reviewed regularly, a review of the work of the Treasury Solicitor's Department is now being launched. The review, which will be conducted in accordance with the Cabinet Office Guidance published in January 2000, will be in two stages: first to assess the Department's performance as an agency and to consider whether agency status is the right organisational model and second to assess the scope for improving performance. The review will be supervised by a Steering group chaired by Mr. George Staple and conducted by Sir Quentin Thomas.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Hill Farming

10. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to increase the incomes of hill farmers; and if he will make a statement. [151395]

Ms Quin: Hill farmers benefit from the full range of CAP support payments, including agrimonetary compensation. Later this month they will receive payments of Hill Farm Allowance totalling almost £44 million. They also have access to the ERDP whose funding will build up steadily over the next few years.

Agrimonetary Compensation

12. **Mr. Simon Thomas:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on agrimonetary compensation. [151397]

Ms Quin: Last week this Government announced that they intend to draw down £171 million in agrimonetary compensation for the beef, sheep and dairy sectors, including all of the £156 million in optional compensation. These funds have become available as a result of movements in the euro/sterling exchange rate during 2000.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much agrimonetary compensation was provided in each year since 1997 for each sector; and, for each figure, how much was funded by *(a)* Her Majesty's Treasury and *(b)* the EU. [150334]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 13 February 2001]:* The figures are set out in the table. The 2001 figures include the compensation announced on 27 February which is subject to Commission approval.

£ million

	Year eligible					
	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*	*2001*	*Total*
Beef						
EU[1]	72.5	48	62	44	46	272.5
UK	—	—	—	—	21	21
Total	72.5	48	62	44	67	293.5
Sheep						
EU[1]	12.5	—	32	32	22.5	99.0
UK	—	—	—	—	2.5	2.5
Total	12.5	—	32	32	25	101.5
Arable						
EU[1]	—	—	170	74	28	272
UK	—	—	—	17	—	17
Total	—	—	170	91	28	289
Dairy						
EU[1]	—	—	—	11	39.5	50.5
UK	—	—	—	11	39.5	50.5
Total	—	—	—	22	79	101
All sectors						
EU[1]	85	48	264	161	136	694
UK	—	—	—	28	63	91
Total	85	48	264	189	199	785

[1] EU figures include UK Exchequer contribution of around 71 per cent.

Note:
Agrimonetary compensation paid/to be paid.

Agricultural Imports

13. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on agricultural imports from France. [151398]

15. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on recent trends in food imports from France. [151401]

Organic Farming

14. **Mrs. Betty Williams:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received concerning an organic stewardship scheme. [151400]

Mr. Morley: As my hon. Friend will know, the Agriculture Committee has recommended that the Government devise proposals for such a scheme. I have also received representations to that effect from within the organic sector.

Animal Welfare

16. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on his policy priorities with regard to animal welfare. [151402]

Mr. Morley: One of MAFF's objectives is to ensure that farmed animals and fish are protected by high welfare standards and do not suffer unnecessary pain or distress. Our policy priority is to negotiate for high welfare standards on an EU-wide basis.

BSE

17. **Mrs. Mahon:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he has taken to ensure that scientific advice to Ministers relating to BSE is placed in the public domain. [151403]

Ms Quin: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to the hon. Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) on 1 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 290W.

24. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what investment he has made into research for a diagnostic test for BSE. [151410]

Ms Quin: Since 1992 my Department has spent £17.7 million on research projects on producing diagnostic tests for TSEs. This includes work on background science which may lead to the development of a new test, collaborative work in which the approaches of scientists overseas are being further developed and evaluated, and the production and collection of tissues from animals infected with TSEs for use by researchers who are developing diagnostic tests.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many *(a)* contracts have been let, *(b)* different contractors have been let contracts and *(c)* contracts have been withdrawn by the Government for the disposal of rendered specified risk material and over-30-months scheme material. [152070]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Four contracts have been let to three contractors (Fibrogen Ltd., Prosper de Mulder Ltd. and Shanks Chemical Services Ltd. (two)) to burn meat and bone meal (MBM) arising from the rendering of material, including SRM from the OTMS. None have been withdrawn.

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the total UK stocks of rendered specified risk material and over-thirty-months scheme material were on *(a)* 1 May 1997, *(b)* 1 January 1998, *(c)* 1 January 1999, *(d)* 1 January 2000 and *(e)* 1 January 2001; and how much was disposed of, and by what method, in the years (i) 1998, (ii) 1999, and (iii) 2000. [152068]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The total UK stocks of rendered OTMS material (which includes SRM from over thirty month cattle) on the dates in question were as follows:

Tonnes

Year	*MBM*	*Tallow*
1 May 1997	198,173	115,026
1 January 1998	297,098	159,457
1 January 1999	372,369	190,955
1 January 2000	450,815	205,821
1 January 2001	444,480	214,615

Rendered OTMS material is disposed of only by incineration at authorised premises. The totals incinerated for the years in question are as follows:

Tonnes

Year	*MBM*	*Tallow*
1998	15,640	15,896
1999	15,165	28,187
2000	84,455	37,607

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much money has been paid to date by *(a)* the EU and *(b)* the UK Government to farmers as compensation for BSE; and if he will make a statement. [152164]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The information is provided in the table.

£ million

	1996–97		*1997–98*		*1998–99*		*1999–2000*	
	UK	*EU*	*UK*	*EU*	*UK*	*EU*	*UK*	*EU*
UK slaughter programmes:								
BSE suspected/confirmed cases compensation	5	0	3	0	2	0	1	0
Calf slaughter scheme	51	0	53	0	51	0	10	—
OTMS	205	469	86	202	79	185	79.5	185.5
Selective cull[1]	0	0	115	0	19	0	1	0
Total excluding[1]	261	469	142	202	132	185	90.5	185.5
Additional EU compensation:								
Suckler cow premium	31	46	3	4	0	0	0	0
Beef special premium	17	26	–3	–4	0	0	0	0
Beef marketing payment	23	35	0	0	0	0	0	0
Veal marketing payment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Promotion	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0
Total	71	107	1	2	0	0	0	0
Gross total excluding[1]	332	576	143	204	132	185	90.5	185.5

[1] Not possible to provide the EU/UK split in given time

Note:
Final figures for 2000–2001 not available

EU Enlargement

18. **Fiona Mactaggart:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with his counterparts in central and eastern Europe concerning the effect of enlargement of the European Union on agriculture. [151404]

Ms Quin: Over the past 12 months, my ministerial colleagues and I have held discussions with our counterparts from Poland, Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Latvia, Bulgaria and Romania. Further meetings are planned.

Dairy Supply Chain

19. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the work of the dairy supply chain working group. [151405]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister set up the Milk Task Force in November last year to look at ways of improving efficiency and co-operation within the dairy supply chain. We have asked the Task Force to report with recommendations by the end of March.

Fish Stocks (Conservation)

20. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the

effectiveness of the fish stock conservation measures required under the European Union's common fisheries policy. [151406]

Mr. Morley: Under the Common Fisheries Policy a range of measures are available to assist with fish stock conservation: the annual setting of Total Allowance Catches for the main commercial stocks based on the best available science; technical conservation measures on mesh sizes and gear selectivity to improve protection for juvenile fish; constraints on fleet capacity and effort; and, more recently, stock recovery plans, including closed areas at spawning time, for stocks at risk of collapse. Taken together these measures can, when properly enforced, make an effective contribution to stock conservation.

Livestock Products (Exports)

21. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the value of livestock products exported to the European Union was in the last financial year. [151407]

Ms Quin: Overseas Trade Statistics show that between April 1999 and March 2000 the total value of livestock products exported to the European Union was £1,250 million.

Beef Exports

22. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress his Department has made in promoting British beef in export markets. [151408]

Ms Quin: We have been actively engaged in raising the profile of British beef at a number of Food Shows in Europe, during Ministerial visits to a number of countries, by making representations to third countries' Ambassadors to get import bans lifted. This is a part of an ongoing strategy to raise the profile of British beef.

Fruit and Vegetables

23. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what total tonnage of fruit and vegetables was destroyed under EU regulations in 2000. [151409]

Ms Quin: Provisional figures show that just over 1,300,000 tonnes of fruit and vegetables were withdrawn from the EU market in 2000. Some 10,000 tonnes were withdrawn in the UK, 10 per cent. of which was used for animal feed distributed free.

CAP (Dairy Regime)

25. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has for the reform of the dairy regime of the common agricultural policy. [151411]

Ms Quin: We will continue to seek an orderly end to the milk quota system which unfairly constrains our producers.

Organophosphates

26. **Mrs. Gorman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent research he has commissioned into the effects of organophosphates in farming. [151412]

Mr. Morley: A database of Government funded OP research generally since 1995 has been prepared and is available on-line to the public at www.csl.gov.uk/ops (passwords are 'public' then 'access'.).

Farm Woodlands

27. **Mr. Burgon:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to promote farm woodlands in the Yorkshire and Humber area. [151413]

Mr. Morley: There are a number of initiatives in the area to promote farm woodlands, including grants under the England Rural Development Programme (ERDP) for new woodlands and for short rotation coppice. The latter, for example, is planned to provide supplies for the UK's first wood fuelled electricity plant at Eggborough. Further details are in the ERDP, Appendix for Yorkshire and the Humber Region, published by MAFF in October 2000.

Farmers' Administrative Load

Caroline Flint: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the increase in paperwork issued by his Department to farmers since 1990; and what steps he is taking to reduce the administrative load on farmers. [149076]

Ms Quin: No official estimate has been made of the increase in the level of paperwork since 1990 and the burden depends on the nature and size of individual enterprises. Furthermore, the number, scope and type of schemes have changed to meet new needs and priorities, and continue to do so.

The Department is committed to reducing paperwork. All forms issued by the Department are reviewed for need and content at least once every three years. In many cases this is done in consultation with industry. All new forms require ministerial approval, and are trialled with users before being issued.

Implementation of the Red Tape Review recommendations, made in response to concerns identified by farmers themselves, have already achieved reductions worth £3 million as well as reduced time spent on form filling. Further savings, for example, through the introduction of electronic forms and co-ordinated inspections are well under way. We continue to work both at home and in Brussels to secure further regulatory reform where possible consistent with the need to protect public and animal health, the environment and taxpayers money.

Over-30-months Scheme

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effects

of his decision to lift the weight limit in respect of Over-30-months Scheme payments. [150989]

Mr. Nick Brown: Removal of the weight limit on payments under the Over-30-months Scheme delivered a key measure in the Government's Action Plan For Farming. It has provided important financial relief for UK beef and dairy farmers.

Beet Sugar

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the *(a)* production and *(b)* consumption of beet sugar was in each EU country in each of the last three years. [150986]

Mr. Nick Brown: Beet sugar production for the years 1998–99 to 2000–01, and sugar consumption for the years 1997–98 to 1999–2000, for each member state, are as follows.

000 tonnes

	Beet sugar production			*Sugar consumption*		
	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Austria	466	477	387	326	310	309
Belgium/Luxembourg	794	1,091	917	519	521	544
Denmark	531	553	504	237	238	245
Finland	120	166	153	192	210	223
France	4,266	4,522	4,270	2,161	2,166	2,177
Germany	4,016	4,380	4,341	2,706	2,711	2,752
Greece	199	232	367	320	310	306
Ireland	219	216	219	134	136	135
Italy	1,596	1,705	1,544	1,481	1,475	1,411
Netherlands	825	1,117	1,061	623	622	642
Portugal	66	76	57	330	332	327
Spain	1,149	1,097	1,075	1,211	1,240	1,268
Sweden	399	430	412	323	378	375
UK	1,442	1,546	1,300	2,076	2,124	2,187
Total EU 15	16,088	17,608	16,607	12,639	12,773	12,901

Notes:
1. Production includes over-quota production but excludes all sugar made from EU-grown or imported cane and molasses.
2. Beet sugar production figures for 2000–01 are estimates.
3. Breakdown between consumption of beet and cane sugar not available.

Source:
European Commission (February 2001)

England Rural Development Plan

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, pursuant to his oral statement of 1 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 518, on ERDP funding, on what basis the figure of £300 million was calculated. [150988]

Mr. Nick Brown: The £300 million was calculated on the basis of matching the estimated receipts from modulation in England.

Composting

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what powers he has to regulate the use in compost of *(a)* cooked crab waste, *(b)* cooked shell fish and fish waste, *(c)* uncooked shell fish and fish waste, *(d)* cooked meat waste, *(e)* uncooked meat waste, *(f)* mixed cooked catering waste, *(g)* mixed uncooked catering waste and *(h)* domestic kitchen waste for use on *(i)* grazing and (ii) growing land. [151740]

Ms Quin: The use of those materials listed in the question which contain products of animal origin (including fish and crustaceans) is regulated by the Animal By-Products Order 1999 which is enforced by local authorities.

In addition, the recovery and disposal of waste are subject to control under the Framework Directive on waste. Section 33 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 requires that waste is recovered or disposed of in accordance with the conditions of a waste management licence, or within the terms of an exemption, and in a way which does not cause pollution of the environment or harm to human health. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions is responsible for the Directive and the Act and the Environment Agency is responsible for enforcement.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions regarding the Government's Waste Strategy, with regard to composting and the implications of the Animal By-products Order 1999. [151744]

Ms Quin: No such discussions have taken place. However, officials of the two Departments are in regular contact over the relationship between the Animal By-Products Order 1999 and environmental controls. On 31 January 2001, this Department issued a guidance note on the disposal of animal by-products and catering waste. The note was prepared in liaison with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and other interests. It explains that, in general, the composting of such material is not a permitted disposal route.

Pig Industry

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received concerning the impact on marketing and sale of British pork

products of the decision by the Advertising Standards Agency to ban Meat and Livestock Commission newspaper advertisements for the British pig industry. [151669]

Ms Quin: No representations on this specific issue have been received, although there has been general comment on the Advertising Standards Authority's ruling in this case.

Abattoir Closures

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his estimate is of the number of abattoirs closed since 1984; and what the effects of these closures are on the average kill and throughput at surviving abattoirs and the average journey time to slaughter of animals. [151873]

Ms Quin: The information available relates to England. The numbers of abattoirs in 1984 and 2000, together with the total numbers of animals slaughtered in those years is as follows:

	Number of abattoirs[1]	*Slaughtering*[2] *(Thousand)*
1984	860	
Cattle		[3]2,934
Sheep		11,207
Pigs		12,929
2000	316	
Cattle		[4]1,476
Sheep		11,485
Pigs		10,645

[1] Source: Food Standards Agency
[2] Source: MAFF Slaughterhouse survey
[3] Excludes cattle slaughtered under the OTMS and the Selective Cull
[4] Provisional

Information on average journey times is not collected.

GM Crops

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will publish the report his Department has completed on the review of separation distances for GM field trials. [151540]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The only report produced in connection with the separation distance review was that by the National Institute of Agricultural Botany setting out the available scientific evidence. This was deposited in the House Library last August and is available on the Ministry website at www.maff.gov.uk.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the National Institute of Agricultural Botany report presented to his Department as part of their review on separation distances has been peer-reviewed. [151541]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* This is being done.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he will publish the report received from the Canadian authorities on the causes of the Advanta seed contamination last year; and if the Government have used the information in the report to reach conclusions in its review of separation distances. [151542]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The Canadian authorities have yet to publish their report on this matter. When they do, we will consider very carefully any information the report contains of relevance to the separation distances applied here for GM trials.

Farm Inputs

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action he is taking to promote cost-effective utilisation of farm inputs. [151393]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Minister announced on 23 November the setting up of a Government/industry task force to examine the scope for increasing the effective use of farm inputs and reducing input costs. This is one of several task force initiatives which we have taken in partnership with farming and food interests. The inputs task force published an interim report in late January. Its work is now focused on the issue of market transparency and differences in business practice and regulatory frameworks. The task force expects to report in late March.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 9 March 2001

PRIME MINISTER

Hammond Inquiry

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Prime Minister when he intends to publish Sir Anthony Hammond's review into the circumstances surrounding the application for naturalisation by Mr. S. P. Hinduja. [152448]

The Prime Minister: I am publishing Sir Anthony Hammond's report today. I am most grateful to Sir Anthony Hammond for all his work.

Sir Anthony Hammond is satisfied that nothing improper has occurred in relation to the application for naturalisation by Mr. S. P. Hinduja. Sir Anthony Hammond has found that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Mr. O'Brien), the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr. Mandelson) behaved entirely properly throughout.

Sir Anthony Hammond also recommends improvements to administrative practice which the Government will implement in full.

I have placed a copy of the report in the Libraries of both Houses. Copies are available from the Vote Office.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Sexual Harassment

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many complaints there have been of sexual harassment and abuse in Royal Mail sorting offices in each of the last five years. [152089]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I am advised by the Post Office that it does not hold this information for the last five years. However, the Post Office has provided figures for the number of Employment Tribunal cases involving sexual discrimination and harassment for the last three years as set out in the table.

Financial year	*Number of Employment Tribunal cases*
1998–99	13
1999–2000	23
2001–01[1]	25

[1] To December

Medicines Act (South Africa)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what outcome of the legal action being pursued by GlaxoSmithKline over the South African Government's amended Medicines Act would accord with Government policy. [152268]

Mr. Caborn: The Government do not speculate on the outcome of legal cases whether in the UK or overseas.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 13 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 141W, on HIV/AIDS, if he has supported the use of compulsory licensing and parallel importing of medicines by poor countries. [152267]

Mr. Caborn: The Government support the existing flexibilities within the WTO TRIPS Agreement. This allows WTO members to implement domestic IPR regimes which take adequate account of their national circumstances. There is nothing in the TRIPS Agreement to prevent Governments from allowing the importation of goods from the cheapest legitimate international sources (parallel importing). This is a matter for the judgment of individual Governments. The TRIPS Agreement (Article 31) also allows Governments to authorise production without the consent of patent holders, subject to adequate compensation (compulsory licensing) in a range of circumstances.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what contact his Department has had with the South African Government regarding its Medicines Act. [152270]

Mr. Caborn: The Department of Trade and Industry has had contacts with the South African Government concerning part of one article of its revised Medicines Act. We have made clear our support for South Africa's access to affordable medicines, consistent with national obligations under the TRIPs Agreement.

Compulsory Licences

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the compulsory licences applied for to his Department in the last 10 years and the outcomes. [152136]

Mr. Caborn: Seven applications have been made for compulsory patent licences under Section 48 of the Patents Act 1977 in the last 10 years. Details are in the table.

Date of application under Section 48	Patent number	Patentee	Applicant for licence	Outcome
10 March 1995	GB 2133069	Therma-Tru Corp	Cohmor Holdings Plc	Application refused by decision dated 5 June 1996 [1]
9 June 1995	EP 0083360	Baxter International Ltd.	M. L. Laboratories	Application withdrawn 26 June 1996
9 November 1995	GB 2065080	Arnold Kastner	Rizla Ltd.	Application withdrawn 26 April 1996
12 January 1996	EP 0182442	Biogen Inc	Medeva Plc; Evans Medical Ltd.	Application withdrawn 8 July 1997
23 May 1996	GB 2150431	Janet Parker	Merville Modular Ltd.	Application withdrawn 10 April 1997
25 July 1996	EP 0163933	R. L. Reynolds	Emward Fastenings Ltd.	Application refused by decision dated 29 December 1997
27 January 1997	GB 2133069	Therma-Tru Corp	Evergreen Door Ltd.	Application withdrawn 4 March 1998

[1] Confirmed on appeal

Source:
Patent Office Annual Reports, 1990–91 to 1999–2000

Litigation (GlaxoSmithKline)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he has been in contact with GlaxoSmithKline concerning its legal action against the South African Government; and if he will make a statement. [152269]

Mr. Caborn: I have been in contact with GlaxoSmithKline on a range of matters, including the conditions for business in South Africa. The pursuit of legal action is a matter for GSK and the other companies concerned.

Medicines (Costs)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which countries have issued compulsory licences to reduce the cost of medicines in the last 10 years. [152271]

Mr. Caborn: Compulsory licences are subject to national laws. The UK has not issued any compulsory licences in the last 10 years. The Government do not have information on compulsory licences issued by other countries.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which countries have used parallel importing to reduce the cost of medicines in the last 10 years. [152272]

Mr. Caborn: Parallel importing can and does occur between EU member states, but information as to its occurrence elsewhere is not available. We have no information on other countries introducing legislation on the international exhaustion of patents with the explicit aim of reducing the cost of medicines.

Fixed Term Work Directive

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his plans to implement the European Directive on fixed term work. [153492]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I am today publishing a consultation paper setting out options for implementing this directive. Copies are being placed in the Library of the House. The consultation period will last for 12 weeks, until 31 May, and I look forward to receiving views from as many interested parties as possible by this date.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much certified timber has been purchased by her Department over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152117]

Clare Short: DFID will report data on all timber purchases to DETR for incorporation in the Green Ministers' annual report. Guidance on data collection is being prepared by DETR. In advance of agreed systems DFID could not currently collate this information without disproportionate cost. We encourage all our suppliers to procure goods from sustainable sources and to comply with international trade agreements.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if her Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152110]

Clare Short: DFID will report timber usage annually to DETR for publication in the Green Ministers' annual report.

GATS

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of the impact on the world's poorest countries of the possible extension of GATS; and if she will make a statement. [153043]

Clare Short: It is up to developing countries to decide to what extent they want to open their markets further under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). The Government believe that services are potentially a significant source of economic growth for developing countries. The development of services domestically, particularly in the finance and telecommunications sectors, is necessary to facilitate the growth in other parts of the economy to reduce poverty. Services liberalisation can act as a spur to domestic reform. It can provide access to new markets overseas and can encourage foreign investment.

Medicines Act (South Africa)

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what her policy is on the use

by South Africa of compulsory licensing and parallel importing of medicines as TRIPS compliant measures. [152139]

Mr. Caborn: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him today, column 348W, on the use of compulsory licensing and parallel importing by poor countries.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the European Commission's policy is on the relationship between South Africa's amended Medicines Act and its obligations under TRIPS. [152140]

Mr. Caborn: I have been asked to reply.

I refer my hon. Friend to the press release issued by the Delegation of the European Commission in South Africa on 6 March about this issue. I have arranged for copies of this press release to be placed in the Libraries of the House.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Surplus Places

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what his policy is on surplus places in schools; and if he will publish the numbers and percentages of surplus places in each local education authority in England. [153208]

Ms Estelle Morris: Raising education standards informs all our policies. Resources which are locked into maintaining surplus places in schools should wherever possible be freed up and directed towards improving standards. In planning school provision, local education authorities should look for opportunities for removing surplus capacity, with a view to bringing supply and demand for school places into better balance. Their initial focus should be on those schools with 25 per cent. or more of their places unfilled, having particular regard to standards at those schools. The overall aim should be to maximise parental preference and to provide good quality education in the most cost-effective way. The Department's annual survey of surplus places allows us to monitor how local education authorities are meeting this challenge.

The table is based on the returns made by local education authorities in respect of all maintained primary and secondary schools in their area. They set out the numbers of surplus places as at January 2000 for each local authority area, listing primary and secondary separately, together with the proportion that these represent of total capacity. They also highlight the numbers of schools which at that date had surplus of 25 per cent. or more, and at least 30 surplus places, together with the proportion that these represent of the total number of schools. The returns from local education authorities indicate that there were 709,989 surplus school places in January 2000, representing 9 per cent. of the total capacity of 7.8 million places. This is an overall reduction of 22,377 places on 1999 figures.

The proportion of all schools with a quarter or more of their places unfilled remains the same at 11 per cent., although actual numbers have increased from 2,391 in 1999 to 2,406 in 2000. This is attributable to falling primary rolls, which also affect the figure for overall surplus capacity in that sector. The number of secondary schools with 25 per cent. or more surplus capacity continues to fall from 461 in 1999 (13 per cent.) to 393 in 2000 (11 per cent.).

The returns also provide the Department with details of the action authorities propose to take on schools with 25 per cent. or more surplus. The returns indicate that in many cases action is being taken, or is planned. Where planning strategies are unclear in areas with particularly high levels of surplus, the Department will be following up with the authorities concerned.

Surplus places by local authority area at January 2000

	Primary[1]				*Secondary*			
	Actual surplus[2]		*Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more*[3]		*Actual surplus*[2]		*Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more*[3]	
LEA	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
301 Barking and Dagenham	1,318	8	3	6	683	6	0	0
302 Barnet	953	4	0	0	737	4	0	0
370 Barnsley	1,863	9	5	6	982	7	1	7
800 Bath and North East Somerset	1,051	8	5	7	837	7	1	8
820 Bedfordshire	3,832	14	23	16	4,157	10	10	18
303 Bexley	831	4	2	3	1,032	6	0	0
330 Birmingham	7,533	7	33	10	5,017	7	8	10
889 Blackburn with Darwen	869	6	2	3	586	6	0	0
890 Blackpool	499	4	1	3	434	6	1	13
850 Bolton	1,971	8	9	9	1,053	6	1	6
837 Bournemouth	280	3	1	4	837	8	1	10
867 Bracknell Forest	1,092	11	5	15	744	11	1	17
380 Bradford	3,484	8	14	9	10,045	21	42	51
304 Brent	1,649	8	5	8	1,212	8	1	8
846 Brighton and Hove	2,191	12	7	12	1,227	10	2	20
801 Bristol, City of	2,821	9	14	12	3,211	16	2	9
305 Bromley	409	2	0	0	339	2	0	0
825 Buckinghamshire	6,343	14	42	22	1,404	4	2	6
351 Bury	887	6	3	4	219	2	1	7
381 Calderdale	1,828	9	12	13	737	5	0	0
873 Cambridgeshire	4,152	9	20	10	1,161	4	1	3
202 Camden	845	8	4	10	868	8	1	10
875 Cheshire	6,961	11	41	14	3,518	7	5	11
201 City of London	6	3	0	0	—	—	—	—

Surplus places by local authority area at January 2000

LEA	Primary[1]				Secondary			
	Actual surplus[2]		Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more[3]		Actual surplus[2]		Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more[3]	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
908 Cornwall	3,221	8	20	8	238	1	0	0
331 Coventry	2,415	8	11	12	1,979	9	2	11
306 Croydon	1,542	5	4	4	1,621	9	1	5
909 Cumbria	5,700	12	38	13	4,233	12	9	21
841 Darlington	739	8	6	16	376	6	0	0
831 Derby	1,541	7	3	4	2,362	14	4	29
830 Derbyshire	5,859	9	43	12	4,545	9	8	17
878 Devon	5,284	9	23	7	1,328	3	0	0
371 Doncaster	5,015	16	23	20	1,175	5	0	0
835 Dorset	2,325	9	14	10	2,162	7	2	5
332 Dudley	3,072	10	12	15	970	5	1	5
840 Durham	6,354	13	53	21	2,702	8	4	11
307 Ealing	2,600	10	7	11	218	2	0	0
811 East Riding of Yorkshire	3,011	11	14	10	935	4	1	6
845 East Sussex	2,540	7	10	6	1,113	4	1	4
308 Enfield	865	4	3	5	1,378	7	0	0
881 Essex	10,236	9	41	8	7,719	9	9	11
390 Gateshead	1,771	10	8	11	557	5	0	0
916 Gloucestershire	4,911	10	21	8	2,138	6	2	5
203 Greenwich	2,498	12	8	12	1,477	10	2	14
204 Hackney	2,035	12	6	10	928	11	1	11
876 Halton	3,422	23	20	36	1,034	11	2	22
205 Hammersmith and Fulham	906	10	5	14	557	8	0	0
850 Hampshire	10,135	9	36	8	5,393	7	6	8
309 Haringey	1,131	6	2	3	780	7	0	0
310 Harrow	1,314	7	1	2	819	9	0	0
805 Hartlepool	701	7	2	7	573	8	0	0
311 Havering	2,152	10	6	9	1,317	8	2	11
884 Herefordshire	1,926	12	10	12	1,201	12	3	21
919 Hertfordshire	8,549	9	42	10	9,448	11	12	14
312 Hillingdon	1,340	6	1	1	1,131	7	2	12
313 Hounslow	1,701	9	4	6	410	3	0	0
921 Isle of Wight	419	6	1	2	584	5	0	0
420 Isles of Scilly	92	38	1	25	52	33	1	100
206 Islington	1,747	11	6	12	902	11	1	11
207 Kensington and Chelsea	1,020	14	6	23	662	16	1	25
886 Kent	6,063	5	23	5	8,383	9	10	9
810 Kingston upon Hull, City of	4,965	17	16	20	2,087	12	3	19
314 Kingston upon Thames	382	4	1	3	832	9	1	10
382 Kirklees	3,101	8	14	9	2,220	8	3	9
340 Knowsley	2,919	16	14	23	1,617	14	1	9
208 Lambeth	2,463	13	8	12	1,728	20	2	20
888 Lancashire	11,318	10	72	14	4,870	6	7	8
383 Leeds	10,737	15	50	20	4,205	8	7	16
856 Leicester	4,019	14	16	18	959	5	0	0
855 Leicestershire	2,671	5	13	6	3,694	8	5	9
209 Lewisham	1,116	5	2	3	1,934	15	2	15
925 Lincolnshire	5,306	9	37	13	4,030	9	9	14
341 Liverpool	7,155	15	31	20	3,550	10	2	6
821 Luton	2,340	11	7	11	526	4	0	0
352 Manchester	6,143	14	27	18	3,985	15	6	24
887 Medway	1,748	7	8	9	2,143	10	2	10
315 Merton	796	6	5	10	1,291	15	2	18
806 Middlesbrough	1,594	11	5	11	673	7	1	9
826 Milton Keynes	3,569	14	14	16	1,571	12	3	27
391 Newcastle upon Tyne	3,698	17	23	30	2,128	11	4	19
316 Newham	1,700	6	3	5	1,521	8	1	7
926 Norfolk	5,056	7	21	5	3,533	8	5	10
812 North East Lincolnshire	2,804	16	11	18	814	7	0	0
813 North Lincolnshire	1,586	10	8	12	1,174	10	3	21
802 North Somerset	771	5	1	2	781	6	0	0
392 North Tyneside	2,508	15	13	23	2,486	15	6	26
815 North Yorkshire	5,540	11	37	11	2,126	5	2	4
928 Northamptonshire	5,266	9	27	10	4,569	9	9	15
929 Northumberland	3,388	15	24	17	4,146	12	14	23
892 Nottingham	2,961	11	16	16	4,977	27	8	38
891 Nottinghamshire	6,256	9	29	9	8,489	14	12	21
353 Oldham	1,838	8	4	4	1,241	7	2	13
931 Oxfordshire	4,776	10	25	11	5,124	12	5	11
874 Peterborough	1,843	11	9	16	1,172	8	3	23
879 Plymouth	4,387	18	21	26	1,858	9	3	17
836 Poole	674	6	2	7	482	6	0	0
851 Portsmouth	1,268	8	3	6	133	1	0	0
870 Reading	476	5	1	3	1,001	14	2	25

Surplus places by local authority area at January 2000

	Primary [1]				Secondary			
	Actual surplus [2]		Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more [3]		Actual surplus [2]		Schools with surplus of 25 per cent. or more [3]	
LEA	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
317 Redbridge	831	4	2	4	853	5	0	0
807 Redcar and Cleveland	1,438	10	6	11	1,427	12	2	15
318 Richmond upon Thames	309	3	0	0	626	8	1	13
354 Rochdale	1,671	8	7	9	1,528	10	2	14
372 Rotherham	2,318	9	7	6	1,494	7	1	6
857 Rutland	710	22	5	28	237	10	1	33
355 Salford	4,661	19	29	34	2,614	18	5	29
333 Sandwell	2,037	7	8	8	2,488	12	3	15
343 Sefton	3,069	11	14	15	1,492	7	2	9
373 Sheffield	4,255	9	17	11	1,718	6	0	0
893 Shropshire	2,694	11	19	13	1,056	6	1	5
871 Slough	800	7	2	6	368	5	1	9
334 Solihull	1,477	7	5	7	540	3	0	0
933 Somerset	2,802	7	11	5	3,428	10	6	15
803 South Gloucestershire	1,757	7	7	7	1,173	7	1	7
393 South Tyneside	1,642	11	8	14	1,112	10	1	9
852 Southampton	2,354	12	11	16	893	7	0	0
882 Southend-on-Sea	913	6	1	2	829	7	1	8
210 Southwark	1,927	8	6	8	589	6	0	0
342 St. Helens	1,986	11	9	15	1,008	8	0	0
860 Staffordshire	6,868	9	35	11	999	2	1	1
356 Stockport	2,885	11	11	11	1,392	8	0	0
808 Stockton-on-Tees	1,239	7	2	3	1,249	9	2	15
861 Stoke-on-Trent	4,308	17	22	25	1,406	9	2	12
935 Suffolk	5,684	11	28	11	4,962	9	4	5
394 Sunderland	4,328	14	24	25	1,304	6	2	12
936 Surrey	10,306	12	54	17	4,222	7	4	8
319 Sutton	561	4	1	2	396	3	0	0
866 Swindon	2,330	12	11	16	1,139	9	1	9
357 Tameside	1,121	5	4	5	1,044	7	2	11
894 Telford and the Wrekin	1,327	8	3	5	937	9	3	23
883 Thurrock	1,466	10	3	6	1,040	12	1	10
880 Torbay	478	5	3	9	163	2	0	0
211 Tower Hamlets	2,715	12	10	14	1,167	8	1	7
358 Trafford	1,544	8	7	9	1,018	6	1	6
384 Wakefield	2,974	9	14	11	1,126	5	2	11
335 Walsall	2,395	9	5	5	1,285	6	1	5
320 Waltham Forest	1,565	7	5	8	979	7	1	6
212 Wandsworth	1,627	10	7	12	526	5	1	11
877 Warrington	2,673	13	16	21	609	4	0	0
937 Warwickshire	4,845	11	22	11	2,843	8	5	14
869 West Berkshire	1,564	12	7	10	405	4	0	0
938 West Sussex	6,493	10	27	11	4,788	10	5	13
213 Westminster	397	4	1	3	758	9	0	0
359 Wigan	2,217	8	10	9	942	5	2	10
865 Wiltshire	4,312	11	33	15	2,167	7	4	12
868 Windsor and Maidenhead	451	5	3	7	891	8	2	14
344 Wirral	4,373	14	20	20	2,144	8	2	9
872 Wokingham	494	4	2	4	103	1	0	0
336 Wolverhampton	3,176	13	18	20	1,428	8	2	11
885 Worcestershire	4,470	10	18	9	4,227	10	10	16
816 York	1,855	12	10	17	1,097	10	1	8
Total	431,650	10	2,013	11	278,339	8	393	11

[1] Primary figures show surplus after taking account of any summer entry
[2] Actual surplus is defined as the difference between capacity and number on roll for all schools where capacity exceeds number on roll
[3] Schools with less than 30 surplus places are not included

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Hill Farm Allowance

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if farmers who previously received hill livestock compensatory allowance but now do not qualify for hill farm allowance will receive transitional support this year. [151743]

Ms Quin: No. However, such farmers are eligible to apply for schemes under the England Rural Development Programme.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many farmers previously eligible for hill livestock compensatory allowance he estimates will not qualify for hill farm allowance. [151741]

Ms Quin: Preliminary estimates indicate that across the country 1,200 to 1,300 farmers who received HLCA in 2000 will not receive HFA because they have less than 10 hectares of eligible forage area in the less favoured areas. Officials recently wrote to 3,400 producers, asking for additional information in order to ensure that all those who qualify receive payment.

Those who are ineligible for HFA will be eligible to apply for schemes under the England Rural Development Programme.

Livestock Diseases

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the outbreaks of *(a)* foot and mouth, *(b)* swine fever and *(c)* anthrax disease which have occurred in the United Kingdom since 1966, specifying in each case the species and number of animals slaughtered, the premises affected, the length of the outbreak and the number of abattoirs in operation at the time. [151644]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The information requested is available in the Libraries of the House.

Industrial Fishing

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) on what species the Anglo-Danish scientific study of the impact of industrial fishing is to be based; [152837]

(2) what are *(a)* the objectives of the Anglo-Danish study on the impact of industrial fishing and *(b)* the criteria to be used. [152838]

Mr. Morley: I reached agreement in the margins of the Fisheries Council on 14–15 December on initiating bilateral discussions with Denmark on the sandeels fishery with a view to reducing the Total Allowable Catch for sandeels, re-examining bycatch arrangements and considering related issues. A first meeting was held in Edinburgh on 26 February, focusing principally on sandeels. This reviewed existing scientific effort in the UK and Denmark on estimating local sandeel abundance, examining predator-prey relationships and evaluating the impact of the closure of the sandeel fishery off the north-east coast. The meeting also examined bycatch arrangements in relation to ICES forecasts of haddock and whiting catches in the industrial fishery; EU technical conservation rules on permissible bycatches in the sandeel and other small mesh fisheries; and in Danish sampling and control arrangements for estimating bycatches in industrial fisheries.

DEFENCE

Depleted Uranium

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence at which of his Department's test locations in the United Kingdom the firing of depleted uranium projectiles has taken place; how many test firings have been made at each location; what arrangements are in place for the protection and monitoring of people and the environment; and if he will make a statement. [144771]

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if depleted uranium has been a component of munitions used on *(a)* Salisbury Plain training area, *(b)* Porton Down, *(c)* Lulworth ranges and (b) Shoeburyness. [145945]

Mr. Hoon *[pursuant to his reply, 15 February 2001, c. 42W]:* While the previous answer was believed to be correct at the time on the basis of the information available, additional information has now come to light which suggests that AWE firings may have continued until 1986. This information is contained in 1980's notebooks held at DERA Fort Halstead which logged the movement of experimental DU munitions from that site to the then AWE site at Foulness. There were no matching records at DERA Shoeburyness since in the 1980s the AWE site at Foulness was a separate establishment.

Balkan Casualties

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many UK troops have been injured in *(a)* Bosnia and *(b)* Kosovo in the last two years; how many have been removed from the country where they were serving owing to the serious nature of their wounds; how many have been killed; and if he will make a statement. [152598]

Mr. Spellar: During the period of 1 January 1999 to 31 December 2000, eight service personnel have died in Bosnia as the result of injuries sustained, and four in Kosovo. During the same period, 203 casualty evacuations of service personnel took place from Bosnia, and 308 from Kosovo.

A complete record of service personnel who have sustained injuries in the respective theatres is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Road Accidents (Balkans)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many road accidents there have been in moving UK troops in *(a)* Bosnia and *(b)* Kosovo in the last two years which resulted in major injury to UK military personnel; how many military personnel were killed in them; how many resulted in severe damage to vehicles; and if he will make a statement. [152597]

Mr. Spellar: In the two years up to the end of 2000, four UK service personnel serving with SFOR have been killed as the result of road traffic accidents, and one serving with KFOR. Road traffic accidents also resulted in reports of serious injury to 10 personnel serving with SFOR and 32 with KFOR, and to 10 and 11 vehicles respectively being damaged beyond economic repair.

Royal Irish Regiment

Mr. John D. Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the strength of the part-time section of the Royal Irish Regiment is; how many new recruits there were and how many part-time members resigned from the regiment in 2000; and if he will make a statement about recruitment into the part-time section of the Royal Irish Regiment. [152152]

Mr. Spellar: The strength of the part-time element of the Royal Irish Regiment at 31 January 2001 was 1,693. During the period 1 January to 31 December 2000, 124 members enlisted into the part-time element of the Regiment and 141 resigned.

Part-time members of the Royal Irish Regiment provide essential support to the police in a variety of roles. We have recently launched an advertising campaign to encourage individuals to apply to join the Regiment and take advantage of the career and employment opportunities which exist there.

2 Parachute Regiment

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the damages awarded against his Department to Mr. Ian Bannister, a former member of the 2 Parachute Regiment. [153060]

Mr. Spellar: Claims for compensation are considered by my Department on the basis of whether or not the Ministry of Defence has a legal liability to pay damages. Where there is a legal liability to pay compensation we do so. In Mr. Bannister's case, a claim was brought for injuries he received as a result of a training accident. Liability was admitted following a thorough investigation of the case and the claim settled on 18 February 1999. In view of the confidential nature of the level of damages paid to Mr. Bannister, it would be inappropriate to disclose the amount. I am therefore withholding the information under exemption 4 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Strategic Sealift

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on progress on the provision of strategic sealift. [153493]

Mr. Hoon: On 26 October last year, I announced that AWSR Shipping Ltd. had been selected as the preferred bidder for the strategic sealift (RoRo) service. Since then negotiations have been under way to place the PFI contract with AWSR.

The negotiations have reached an advanced stage. AWSR has placed sub-contracts with Flensburger of Germany for four ships and Harland and Wolff for two. However, progress has been slowed by difficulties over the detailed commercial arrangements. In view of these complexities, which could threaten the timely completion of the PFI negotiations and early delivery of the service to MOD, I have decided that the Ministry of Defence should take over the commercial shipbuilding contract with Harland and Wolff, as part of the overall PFI arrangements. The contract will be managed by AWSR. On delivery of the ships to them, AWSR will provide the full six ship strategic sealift service on PFI terms.

As I announced on 26 October last year, I expect the full strategic sealift capability to be available by 2003.

Bosnia

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the levels of pay for personnel on active service in the armed forces in Bosnia; and if he will make a statement. [153071]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the Thirtieth Report 2001 of the independent Armed Forces Pay Review Body (AFPRB) (Cm4993), published on 9 February 2001, the recommendations of which have been accepted by the Government and become effective from 1 April 2001. Copies of the Report have been placed in the Library of the House.

UK service personnel receive the same level of basic pay regardless of where they are serving. Levels of service pay are based on the recommendations of the AFPRB who work on the principle of broad comparability with the pay of civilian jobs of similar weight and responsibility (derived by job evaluation) against a number of factors. An additional element called "the X-factor" (currently 13 per cent. of basic pay) is then added to basic pay in order to reflect the differences between conditions of service experienced by members of the armed forces and conditions in civilian life which cannot be taken into account when assessing pay comparability. X-factor is paid to all ranks, except the most senior officers, regardless of unit or location and is also pensionable.

It is recognised, however, that service personnel can only be compensated for a certain amount of separation from their base through the X-Factor. Therefore, service personnel who have served for more than three years and who are deployed, for example, to Bosnia, for over 10 consecutive days will also qualify for the Longer Separated Service Allowance (LSSA). LSSA is a taxable allowance, the level of which varies depending on the number of days spent away from home. Rates of LSSA effective from 1 April 2001 are also outlined in the AFPRB's 2001 Report.

In addition to pay, there is also a package of measures to cover the welfare of troops deployed to Bosnia. These include the provision of publicly funded books, newspapers, telephone calls home, concessionary parcel rates, family travel and leave.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Clifton Marsh Tip

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he has received from the Environment Agency on breaches of licence conditions at Clifton Marsh tip, Lancashire, by BNFL in connection with their disposal of any forms of radioactive waste. [146710]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* Following concerns raised in an article published in *The Guardian* newspaper on 16 January 2001, the Environment Agency has carried out an initial investigation into claims that depleted uranium from BNFL's Springfields site is being deposited at Clifton Marsh landfill in a dangerous manner. As a result of preliminary investigations at both the Clifton Marsh site and the Springfields site, the agency has found nothing to suggest that radioactive materials have been deposited at the site above the limits permitted in the site's authorisation under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993.

The authorisation makes provision for the disposal of very low levels of solid radioactive waste at the landfill. This type of waste is subject to regular random checks by the site operators, Lancashire Waste Services, and the results of these checks are available to the agency for examination at any time. The agency is continuing to

investigate the claims made in the recent news articles, and any further information will be made available at the earliest opportunity.

British Railways Board Records Centre

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of arrangements for the closure of the British Railways Board Records Centre as regards access to documents required for the running of the railways; and if he will make a statement. [151666]

Mr. Hill: The great majority of the British Railways Board's (BRB's) responsibilities have been assumed by the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) as a consequence of the Transport Act 2000. The management of the BRB records is, therefore, a matter for the SRA. With the ending of the BRB's operational responsibilities, a decision was made in 1997 to rationalise the archive and to retain only those documents necessary to meet the on-going requirements of the board to deal with its continuing legal liabilities. Under an appraisal process agreed by the Public Record Office (PRO) and the Railway Heritage Committee, records of historical importance are being deposited with the PRO or County Record Offices. Railtrack (and where appropriate any other successor body) are being advised of those records in which they may have an interest for the on-going running of the railway and can make appropriate arrangements for access.

Cycling

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the compliance of London boroughs with measures proposed by his Department in design manuals to assist in achieving high standards of cycling safety in London. [152350]

Mr. Hill: None. The Secretary of State issues guidance on the design of facilities for cyclists mainly through Traffic Advisory Leaflets and Local Transport Notes. In London, the London Cycle Network (LCN) has its own design manual. The LCN also has its own audit arrangements governing the safety of schemes. Responsibility for the LCN has now transferred to the Mayor.

Planning

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the Government programmes which allow for the use of section 106 contributions as matching finance; and if he will make a statement. [152492]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, as substituted by section 12 of the Planning and Compensation Act 1991, enables local authorities and developers to enter into a planning obligation. This can comprise both negotiated planning agreements and unilateral undertakings by a developer. Current Government policy on the use of planning obligations is set out in Circular 1/97. This sets out a tightly defined set of tests which apply to the use of planning obligations. Planning obligations should be necessary; relevant to planning; directly related to the proposed development; fairly and reasonably related in scale and kind to the proposed development; and reasonable in all other respects.

Planning obligations are not designed to be used as a means of securing matching finance for Government programmes. They are designed to remedy genuine planning problems and to enhance the quality of development. They should only be sought where they are necessary to make a planning proposal acceptable in land-use planning terms.

We intend to issue shortly a consultation paper with proposals for improving the current arrangements for planning obligations.

Housing

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the criteria he will use to determine which housing authorities are banded as 'excellent' for the purpose of qualifying for arm's length housing companies. [152494]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The proposed required for an excellent rating is one of a number of criteria which authorities working to qualify for additional resources must achieve in addition to setting up arm's length management arrangements. The assessment of the quality of the services will be undertaken by the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate as part of their best value duties. I understand that the Commission will shortly consider issuing a consultation paper on a framework for excellence in housing management to assist authorities interested in this new approach.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the criteria to be used in assessing bids under the Neighbourhood Renewal Programmes Community Development Fund are. [152493]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I believe my hon. Friend is referring to the Community Empowerment Fund (CEF) which is being set up as part of the Government's New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal as announced on 15 January 2001.

Detailed proposals for the administration of the Community Empowerment Fund are currently being developed by officials. Once they have been agreed, the details will be included in the Local Strategic Partnerships Guidance which is expected to be published shortly.

Planning Officers

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what measures he *(a)* proposes and *(b)* has in place to prevent planning officers from misleading elected representatives;. [152469]

(2) what regulations are in place to require planning officers to present planning committees with objectors' and developers' views in the same manner. [152470]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Section 54A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 requires that all planning applications must be determined in accordance with the

development plan for the area unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Reports to planning committees should provide all relevant information to enable the committee to reach a decision. Failure on the part of a planning committee to take account of all relevant considerations may constitute maladministration and the decision of the committee may be subject to challenge by judicial review.

The Local Government Association's 'Probity in Planning' contains good practice guidelines for officer reports to planning committees. It advises that reports should be accurate and cover, among other things, the substance of objections and the views of those consulted. Relevant points will include: a clear exposition of the development plan, site or related history, and any other material considerations; a written recommendation of action; and a technical appraisal which clearly justifies the recommendation. If the report's recommendation is contrary to policies in the development plan, the material considerations which justify this must be clearly stated.

Construction Skills Certification Scheme

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what ways the construction skills certification scheme is enforced; what impact it has had; and what penalties have been used for non-compliance. [152483]

Ms Beverley Hughes: In the first instance, it is up to contractors to decide whether or not to require their managers, supervisors and operatives to be registered under the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) or similar scheme. However, the Confederation of Construction Clients announced at the construction "safety summit" on 27 February that their members, and clients who are signatories to the Clients Charter, would require 100 per cent. of the work force on sites for which they are clients to be registered by end 2002. The Office of Government Commerce are discussing with central Government Departments and agencies procurement guidance which will suggest that they should make similar commitments to require the work force on construction contracts for which they are the client to be registered.

Fishing Vessels (Safety)

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will publish the Code of Practice for the Safety of Small Fishing Vessels; if he will deposit in the Library the draft Code; if he will list the consultees to the Code; what representations he has received on the draft Code; and if he will make a statement. [152093]

Mr. Hill: The Code of Practice for the Safety of Small Fishing Vessels will be formally published later this month as an integral part of a Merchant Shipping Notice reference MSN 1756 (F). The Merchant Shipping Notice will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and will also be available on the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) website.

The MCA is sending a copy of the Merchant Shipping Notice including the Code to every owner of under 12 metre fishing vessels to advise them of the effect of the code.

The list of consultees has been placed in the Libraries of the House. As part of the consultation process the MCA received various representations on the Code.

Construction Industry (Health and Safety)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with representatives of the construction industry concerning health and safety issues in the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [152604]

Mr. Meacher: I met with major industry employers and trade union representatives at the construction summit on 27 February, jointly organised by the Health and Safety Commission and my Department. DETR Ministers also met with employers and unions in the run up to the summit. The summit set targets and a number of action plans to improve health and safety standards in the industry which we intend to ensure are carried forward as soon as practicable.

Transport Schemes

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what public consultation will be required on the appraisal summary tables for major road schemes included in full local transport plans where *(a)* they were given provisional approval and *(b)* more work was considered necessary before the Government make a decision on whether to fund them. [152642]

Mr. Hill: There is no requirement for the public to be consulted on appraisal summary tables. However, local transport plans are themselves subject to public consultation and there is also an opportunity for the public to comment on major road schemes as they go through the statutory approval process.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many of the appraisal summary tables for major schemes in full local transport plans included an assessment for traffic generation. [152643]

Mr. Hill: Advice on assessment for traffic generation was issued by the former Department of Transport in 1994 following publication of the report "Trunk Roads and the Generation of Traffic" by the Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment and is contained in Volume 12 of the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges. Assessment for traffic generation should be an integral part of the traffic modelling for major schemes. The expected level of generated traffic should be assessed and taken into account in the traffic forecasts that underlie the impacts set out in the appraisal summary tables. There is no requirement for the assessment of traffic generation to be recorded on the appraisal summary tables for major schemes.

Mobile Telephone Masts

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will issue new guidelines to planning authorities on the health risks associated with mobile phone masts. [152831]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My right hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning wrote to Council Leaders in June 2000 to explain the action the Government had in hand to take forward the planning recommendations of the Stewart report ("Mobile Phones and Health") published in May 2000. The letter said that health considerations and public concern can in principle be material considerations in determining applications for planning permission and prior approval. Whether such matters are material in a particular case is ultimately a matter for the courts. It is for the decision-maker (usually the local planning authority) to determine what weight to attach to such considerations in any particular case. It is the Government's view that if a proposed development meets the guidelines of the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) on limiting public exposure to electromagnetic fields, it should not be necessary for an authority, in processing an application, to consider health effects further.

This was repeated in the draft of Planning Policy Guidance note 8 (PPG8) issued for consultation on 31 July 2000. The consultation exercise, which also sought views on possible changes to the planning laws relating to mobile phone masts, ended on 31 October 2000. The Department is currently considering the responses. We shall announce our conclusions as soon as practically possible.

Refrigerants

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) to what extent his Department's headquarters building in London uses hydrofluorocarbons for *(a)* refrigeration and *(b)* air conditioning; what amounts of hydrofluorocarbons have been purchased by his Department in each year since 1995; and what plans he has to phase out his Department's (i) purchase and (ii) use of hydrofluorocarbons; [153048]

(2) what his Department's policy is regarding the purchase of *(a)* hydrocarbons and *(b)* other environmentally benign refrigerants to meet the refrigeration and other energy needs of buildings and premises (i) owned and (ii) leased by his Department; and if he will made a statement. [153047]

Ms Beverley Hughes: *(a)* Two of DETR's London headquarters buildings use hydrofluorocarbons as refrigerants in their air-conditioning systems.

(b) The amount of hydrofluorocarbons purchased in each year since 1995 is:

Year	*Kg*
1995–96[1]	—
1997	0
1998	0
1999	0
2000	1,095
2001	1,054

[1] Buildings not occupied

Our policy is to switch, where possible, from hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorobutane and sulphur hexafluoride to environmentally preferable substitutes and to ensure that we do not buy any products which contain chlorofluorocarbons, halons, carbon tetrachloride, 111 trichloroethane, or hydrochlorofluorocarbons where suitable alternatives exist.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the buildings and premises *(a)* owned and *(b)* leased by his Department which use (i) chlorofluorocarbons and (ii) hydrochlorofluorocarbons for refrigeration and other energy needs; and if he will give details of such use and the reasons for it. [153046]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Property management is delegated to the Department's local property centres and such details are not recorded centrally. Of the three London headquarters buildings only Great Minster House has an HCFC refrigerant (R22). We are evaluating the options for replacing this. My Department's policy is to ensure that we do not purchase any products which use chlorofluorocarbons and hydrochlorofluorocarbons where there are suitable alternatives.

IMO Building, Albert Embankment

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent representations he has received relating to the International Maritime Organisation building at 4 Albert Embankment; and if he will make a statement. [153022]

Mr. Hill: No recent representations relating to the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) building have been made to Ministers. However, officials in the Department maintain a regular dialogue with the IMO. Discussions cover a range of issues including those connected with the building itself. The Department owns the building, and leases it to the IMO, and has responsibilities under the terms of the lease for its maintenance and upkeep.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the total budget for regional development agencies in 2001–02 and how it is to be allocated between the nine agencies. [153474]

Ms Armstrong: The table sets out the total budget for 2001–02 showing the distribution between Regional Development Agencies. The total figure represents in effect an increase of 15 per cent. on the 2000–01 budget.

Except for ring fenced administration and rural funding, RDAs will also have the flexibility to transfer up to 20 per cent. of budgets to other programmes, which together with the facility to create a strategic programme to progress initiatives which do not fall conveniently within existing programme rules, offers significant improvements for RDA financial management.

The considerable extra funding, and these additional flexibilities for 2001–02 (the transitional year before the single budget) will help RDAs to deliver their regional priorities and targets for the year.

£000

Programme	One North East	North West DA	Yorkshire Forward	East Midlands DA	Advantage West Midlands	East of England DA	South East of England DA	South West RDA	London DA	Total
Administration	10,103	14,044	9,989	7,488	8,793	5,836	6,643	9,099	9,470	81,465
Land and Property	45,700	85,000	43,700	30,900	41,100	18,200	23,600	34,900	48,100	371,200
Single Regeneration Budget	100,169	159,915	147,425	38,398	92,446	22,127	58,237	28,156	225,955	872,828
Rural Development	3,578	1,991	4,237	4,588	2,625	4,018	2,477	9,388	0	32,902
Skills Development Fund	2,746	6,448	4,792	4,195	5,664	5,053	6,531	4,275	7,246	46,950
Skills Administration	207	326	268	238	285	259	323	259	335	2,500
Inward Investment	1,765	1,493	1,515	1,124	1,454	1,165	1,165	1,604	1,145	12,430
Regional Innovation Fund	8,900	7,400	10,000	4,300	6,300	3,500	3,200	4,700	5,800	54,100
Grand Total[1]	173,168	276,617	221,926	91,231	158,667	60,158	102,176	92,381	298,051	1,474,375
Land and Property Capital	−11,610	−10,230	−4,660	−7,360	−8,730	−2,280	−6,100	−20,520	−20,270	−91,760
Rural Development	−236	−270	−453	−590	−183	−145	−142	−575	0	−2,594
Land and Property	−11,667	−9,400	−4,650	−1,900	−880	−486	−98	−3,175	−639	−32,895
Current Total Receipts	−23,513	−19,900	−9,763	−9,850	−9,793	−2,911	−6,340	−24,270	−20,909	−127,249
Net Total[1]	149,655	256,717	212,163	81,381	148,874	57,247	95,836	68,111	277,142	1,347,126

[1] This does not include the budget for notional resource items

Valerie Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he proposes to take to ensure that the regional chambers have sufficient resources to meet their duty to monitor the work of the Regional Development Agencies. [153491]

Ms Armstrong: I am today announcing proposals to establish a new fund for supporting the regional chambers, worth £5 million a year in total. This will enable the chambers to enhance their capacity to scrutinise the work of the Regional Development Agencies, as they progress towards their targets and delivery of their regional strategies, and to develop their role as a strategic focal point for their regions. Details of my proposals are contained in a consultation paper inviting views from the chambers and other interested parties, copies of which have been place in the House Library.

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what targets he has set the Regional Development Agencies for the single budget from 2002–03. [153512]

Ms Armstrong: Challenging high level objectives and outcome targets will be set for each Regional Development Agency (RDA), as part of the framework of targets for the single budget from 1 April 2002. These are set out in the table. We expect these targets to be delivered by the RDAs in exchange for the greater flexibility they will have under the single budget. Additional flexibilities for the RDAs for the 2001–02 transitional year are being set out in the 2001–02 allocations announcement today.

The objectives will provide the overall context for all activity undertaken by the RDAs. The high level outcome targets add measurability to these objectives, and will be used to measure the direct impact of RDA activity on the regions. Each RDA will be expected to contribute to the high level targets. In due course, detailed output targets will also be negotiated separately with each RDA.

Objectives—applying throughout urban and rural areas	*Outcome targets (by 2004–05 unless otherwise stated)*
To promote economic development and regionally balanced growth.	1. Provide the strategic framework to improve the sustainable economic performance in each region measured by the trend in growth of GDP per capita, while also contributing to the broader quality of life in the region.
To promote social cohesion and sustainable development through integrated local regeneration programmes.	2. *Regeneration:* Work with local strategic partnerships (LSPs) to tackle poverty and social exclusion through promoting economic development in the most deprived areas by reducing deprivation by 10 per cent. in those wards that are currently in the bottom 20 per cent. of the region as identified by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation. 3. *Urban:* Working with the LSPs, contribute to the renaissance of towns and cities so that negative current population trends in key urban areas are reversed and the numbers living and/or working there are increasing. 4. *Rural:* In line with Rural White Paper objectives, regenerate Market Towns in or close to Rural Priority Areas, and achieve increases in employment, skills and new business formation levels in priority rural areas comparable with those being achieved elsewhere in the Region. 5. *Physical development:* Work with partners to ensure that 60 per cent. of new housing is provided on previously developed land and through conversion of existing buildings by 2008. Ensure that brownfield land will be reclaimed at a rate of over 1,100 hectares per annum by 2004 (reclaiming 5 per cent. of current brownfield land by 2004 and 17 per cent. by 2010).
To help those without a job into work by promoting employment and enhancing the development of skills relevant to employment.	6. *Employment:* Work with Employment Service and Learning Skills Councils (LSCs) to increase employment over the economic cycle—by increasing the ILO employment rate by 2004. 7. *Skills:* Work with LSCs to increase by 3 percentage points by 2004 the number of 19-year-olds achieving a qualification equivalent to NVQ level 2 compared to 2002. Improve the levels of qualifications

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Objectives—applying throughout urban and rural areas	*Outcome targets (by 2004–05 unless otherwise stated)*
	of the work force in order to meet future learning targets.
Promote enterprise, innovation, increased productivity and competitiveness	8. *Productivity:* Work with regional partners to enable an increase in productivity measured by Gross Value Added (GVA) per hour worked in the region and in particular increase productivity.
	9. *Enterprise:* Work with Small Business Service to help build an enterprise society in which small firms of all kinds thrive and achieve their potential, with an increase in the number of people considering going into business, an improvement in the overall productivity of small firms, and more enterprise in disadvantaged communities.
	10. *Investment:* Make the region an attractive place for investment to maintain the UK as the prime location in the EU for foreign direct investment, particularly by providing effective co-ordination of inward investment activities of local partners and sub regional agencies.
	11. *Innovation:* Make the most of the UK's science, engineering and technology by increasing the level of exploitation of technological knowledge derived from the science and engineering base, as demonstrated by a significant rise in the proportion of innovating business citing such sources.

Single Regeneration Budget

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what arrangements he proposes for funding the successor to the Single Regeneration Budget in 2001–02. [153475]

Ms Armstrong: The Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) will continue to be able to allocate funds from the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) expenditure line in 2001–02. Schemes approved up to the end of that year will continue to receive funding for the agreed period of the scheme, which may be up to seven years.

In SR 2000, RDAs were given considerable additional funding and flexibilities to deliver their regional strategies, whose primary purpose is to enhance the region's competitiveness through sustainable economic development, regeneration and business growth. A key flexibility is the introduction of a single budget from April 2002, which will subsume all current RDA funding streams. There will not, therefore, be a national SRB bidding round for new schemes in 2001–02. We have invited those RDAs with sufficient resources, after commitments from earlier SRB rounds are taken into account, to put forward proposals for using funds from the SRB line in their corporate plans for 2001–02. Each RDA will be able to decide on its own approach, which will contribute to the development of the RDAs' regional strategies. The RDAs will be expected to meet their commitments to schemes from SRB Rounds 1 to 6 from their single budget.

HEALTH

Imported Meat

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if the Government will make the import of over-30-months beef illegal; [144247]

(2) if he will list categories of food product covered by the ban on the sale of imported over-30-months meat; [144330]

(3) what investigation the Government have undertaken into the extent of the illegal sale of imported over-30-months meat in the United Kingdom; what conclusions have been reached; what measures the Government have taken to prevent such sales into the British food chain; and what representations he has received regarding such sales; [144249]

(4) which categories of imported animal-derived products are covered by the ban on sales of over-30-months meat; [144311]

(5) what advice the Government have given to retailers, caterers and consumers on the risks, identification and avoidance of imported over-30-months meat; [144248]

(6) if he will make a statement on the illegal sale of imported over-30-months beef into the British food chain. [144255]

Ms Stuart: The Fresh Meat (Beef Controls) (No. 2) Regulations 1996 prohibit the sale of any meat from cattle over 30 months of age for human consumption (the over-30-months, or OTM, rule). The only exceptions are meat from cattle registered in the beef assurance scheme (which can be sold up to 42 months of age so long as they have tested negative for BSE) and meat from a list of 14 countries, of which none are European Union member states. The OTM rule does not apply to processed or treated meat or products that contain meat.

There is, however, no ban on the import of OTM beef—it would be against European Union rules on free movement of goods to introduce unilateral measures under article 30 of the European Commission treaty restricting intracommunity trade where, as in this case, the legislative field has been occupied by the Community.

The Food Standards Agency is investigating allegations that companies are importing cow beef (which would be likely to be from OTM animals) for sale for human consumption. Allegations are always followed up, including with the authorities of EU member states, but no evidence of illegal activity has been found to date.

The Meat Hygiene Service (MHS), which is an Executive agency of the Food Standards Agency, enforces the OTM rule in licensed plants. If an Official Veterinary Surgeon (OVS) suspects that meat is from an over-age animal he may ask to see evidence to satisfy him that the meat is from an animal which was not over 30 months of age at slaughter. Local authorities are generally responsible for enforcement in other premises, and the checks which they carry out are determined by the authorities involved. Last November, the Food Standards Agency instructed them and the MHS to step up checks of imported beef. High levels of compliance with the OTM rule have been found and a renewed awareness of

its importance has been generated in the trade which resulted in some companies tightening their procurement practices.

It should be born in mind that the over-30-months rule is only the first defence against BSE and that the most risky parts of the animal, the specified risk material (SRM), such as the brain and spinal cord, are removed at slaughter. This greatly reduces the amount of infective material from older cattle, including any that could be included in imported beef products.

The EU requirement, from 1 January, that over-30-months-old cattle must test negative for BSE before being allowed into the food chain will provide some additional protection, though the tests are only likely to pick up infection close to the time when clinical signs of the disease appear.

The agency's advice to those who may continue to feel concerned is that consumers should buy their beef and beef products from reputable sources and that they should ask their supplier for details of the origin and the source of the meat.

Variant CJD

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vCJD sufferers received a red cell blood transfusion before they were diagnosed with the condition; and if he will make a statement. [150431]

Mr. Denham: Eight people with vCJD have been reported to the CJD Surveillance Unit as receiving blood components. After checking medical records, three of these have been confirmed as receiving a red cell blood transfusion. Of the remaining five, two reported transfusions occurred too long ago to allow checking against medical records, two have no history of transfusion and one report is still being investigated.

There is no indication at present that the donors of the blood used in these cases have themselves developed vCJD.

Mr. James Aldridge

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what threat to public health was posed by the Duckett's cheese in the possession of Mr. James Aldridge; [151312]

(2) if he will publish the external legal opinions on which he bases Her Majesty's Government's appeal against the High Court decision that his Department has acted illegally against Mr. James Aldridge's cheese making business; and if he will make a statement on the public health reasons for that appeal; [151302]

(3) what compensation was paid to Mr. James Aldridge for the destruction of Duckett's Caerphilly cheese under the 1990 Emergency Control Order placing a ban on cheese produced by Ducketts; and what steps he took to ascertain whether Aldridge's cheese came from the same batch of the banned cheese. [151307]

Ms Stuart: The threat to public health posed by Duckett's cheese in the possession of Mr. Aldridge was from the bacterium *E coli* 0157. *E coli* 0157 is known to cause severe illness and death in previously healthy people. Infection can occur from ingesting a very small number of bacteria. *E coli* 0157 was found in samples of Duckett's cheese produced using the same methods, under the same conditions and in the same place as Duckett's cheese in the possession of Mr. Aldridge.

It is not usual to publish the advice available to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State during the course of litigation. The Court of Appeal accepted the legal arguments put forward on the Secretary of State's behalf and they are set out in the published report, (1999) 3 C.M.L.R. 123. After the litigation the Specialist Cheese Makers Association questioned the Court of Appeal decision and so further legal advice was sought last year and given to them. If there had not been an appeal, the decision of the High Court would have left in doubt the circumstances in which future emergency control orders could have been made to protect the public from the risk of food related illnesses.

No compensation was payable to Mr. Aldridge for the effects of the Emergency Control Order made in May 1998 in respect of Duckett's cheese. Investigations revealed several possible sources of contamination in the production plant. It was not therefore possible to determine when contamination started and if it had stopped. The safety of any batch could not have been demonstrated except by testing to destruction.

Post Mortems

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many items retained after post mortem have been found at *(a)* Ashford Hospital, Middlesex and *(b)* St. Peter's Hospital, Chertsey. [151565]

Mr. Denham: Information is not available in the form requested. Reliable data at hospital level about the amount of organs and tissue retained following post mortem will not become available until all National Health Service trusts and medical schools' information systems have been validated under the supervision of the new Retained Organs Commission.

Autistic Children

Mr. Arbuthnot: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will commission a study to replicate the clinical studies carried out by Dr. Wakefield into autistic children with inflamed bowel disease and the possible link with the MMR vaccination. [152015]

Yvette Cooper: We have ensured that Dr. Wakefield's hypothesis suggesting an association between measles, measles vaccine, measles, mumps and rubella vaccine, inflammatory bowel disease and autism has been thoroughly looked at. Rigorous scrutiny by the Department and a number of independent expert advisory groups has concluded that the evidence does not support any such association.

The Committee on Safety of Medicines (CSM), an independent expert committee, set up a Working Party on MMR vaccine in 1998 to review the suggested link between MMR and MR (Measles/Rubella) vaccines and autism and inflammatory bowel disease. This Working Party conducted a detailed review of reports from parents of suspected side effects in children vaccinated with MMR or MR vaccine, received by the Medicines Control Agency via a firm of solicitors. The Working Party

reported in June 1999 and concluded that, despite the difficulty of coming to absolute conclusions on the basis of the information they had,

"The available information did not support the suggested causal associations or give cause for concern about the safety of MMR or MR vaccines".

Independent researchers have already tried to replicate or confirm Dr. Wakefield's findings regarding epidemiology, virology or links between MMR, autism and bowel disease, but they have been unable to do so.

The Government's independent expert advisory committees—the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation and the CSM—have reviewed the evidence as it has emerged. Their view remains that, on the scientific evidence available, there is no causal link between MMR vaccine and long-term health problems such as bowel disease or autism. This view is supported by the World Health Organisation which recognises MMR as being a

"highly effective vaccine which has such an outstanding safety record".

The Government will continue to ensure this subject is carefully reviewed by independent experts and any new evidence looked at. The evidence shows that MMR remains the safest way for parents to protect their children against these potentially very serious diseases.

Medical Research

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to assist medical research charities in getting access to patients to ask them if they would like to participate in research studies; and if he will make a statement. [151915]

Mr. Denham: Medical research charities fund many research studies in the National Health Service, and it is for the clinical research investigators undertaking such studies to obtain informed consent from patients as potential research participants. On 1 March 2001 the Department published a "Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care". This sets out the standards expected in the relationship between participants, researchers, funders and sponsors of research including the medical research charities. Through the NHS research and development funding system, the Department provides an estimated £90 million a year, which underpins research funded by medical research charities in the NHS, and which—among other things—facilitates access to patients as potential research participants.

Cystic Fibrosis

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what the average cost of screening new-born babies for cystic fibrosis is; and what estimate he has made of the medical costs incurred by late diagnosis of cystic fibrosis; [152022]

(2) what his policy is on the screening of new-born babies for cystic fibrosis. [152021]

Mr. Denham: At present, it is not national policy to screen new-born babies for cystic fibrosis. This decision was based on a review of the available evidence of benefit by the United Kingdom national screening committee and supported by the findings of national experts. This decision is being actively reviewed in the light of new evidence of effectiveness, published in 2001.

The authors of the Health Technology Assessment Report on Screening for Cystic Fibrosis estimated the cost to range from £4,400 per case detected to £6,400 per case (excluding those who would have been detected early without screening). There has been no recent assessment of the additional medical costs of late diagnosis.

Consultants' Contract

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he last met the representatives of the respective royal colleges to discuss the new consultants' contract; and if he will make a statement. [152589]

Mr. Denham: The Government's proposals for a new consultant contract were published on 21 February and made widely available. The proposals will be the subject of negotiation with the British Medical Association. Ministers meet regularly with representatives of the medical royal colleges and we anticipate that this will allow opportunities to discuss the proposals.

Radiographers

Ms Shipley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many vacancies there are nationally for radiographers. [152498]

Mr. Denham: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave on 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 324–27W.

Age-related Macular Degeneration

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many people are registered as suffering from age-related macular degeneration; [152167]

(2) what plans he has for promoting the treatment of, and research into, age-related macular degeneration. [152166]

Mr. Denham: The Department does not routinely collect statistics on individual conditions. However, hospital episode statistics show that there were 2,466 finished consultant episodes for macular degeneration and posterior pole at National Health Service hospitals in England in 1999–2000.

We fund research into vision related conditions through the Medical Research Council. This includes a clinical trial at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast: Radiotherapy in the treatment of subfoveal neovascular membranes in age-related macular degeneration of the eye for which they provided a grant of £61,571. They have also provided a £1.5 million grant to look at Genetic Susceptibility to Age Related Macular Degeneration, which is due to commence shortly.

Physical Activity (Heart Disease)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance has been issued to health authorities to help them develop policies for promoting physical activity as required by the National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease. [152529]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease and the NHS Plan require local action to tackle obesity and physical activity. The Department of Health commissioned the Health Development Agency to produce "Coronary Heart Disease: Guidance for implementing the preventive aspects of the National Health Service Framework" to help develop action plans. This document, published on 13 November 2000, provides evidence-based examples of effective interventions for dealing with all the primary risk factors for heart disease—smoking, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, overweight and obesity. Copies are available in the Library. It is also available at: http://www.hda-online.org.uk/publications.htm.

Angiographers

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many angiographies were performed by each health authority in descending order of *(a)* total number and *(b)* the number of angiographers per 10,000 population in the latest year for which figures are available. [152619]

Mr. Denham: The number of angiography procedures carried out by health authority in 1999–2000 is shown in the table.

Angiographies are carried out under the direction of consultant cardiologists, assisted by cardiac technicians and nurses. The number of cardiologists is shown in the table.

Date	*Number of cardiologists*	*Percentage increase*	*Total percentage increase over five years*
September 1996	388	—	—
September 1997	405	4.4	—
September 1998	458	13.1	—
September 1999	467	2.0	—
September 2000	546	16.9	40.7

Note:

The figures for 2000 are equivalent to 0.1 cardiologists per 10,000 population in England.

Finished consultant episodes (FCEs) where contrast radiology of heart is performed (operation code K63), by HA of residence, listed in descending order of FCEs and by number of FCE per 10,000 population

NHS Hospitals, England 1999–2000

Health authority of residence	*FCEs*	*Per 10,000 population*
QAM East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	2,527	33.50
QD9 Birmingham	2,081	20.54
QAV Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	2,021	29.53
QDH Leeds	1,848	25.43
QAH Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	1,837	24.36
QAF West Kent	1,782	18.22
QCL Leicestershire	1,777	19.01
QDP Tees	1,696	30.51
QAX North Essex	1,663	18.37
QAR Brent and Harrow	1,635	35.16
QDW Dorset	1,586	22.90
QAJ Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	1,580	24.94
QAN West Sussex	1,578	20.75

Finished consultant episodes (FCEs) where contrast radiology of heart is performed (operation code K63), by HA of residence, listed in descending order of FCEs and by number of FCE per 10,000 population

NHS Hospitals, England 1999–2000

Health authority of residence	*FCEs*	*Per 10,000 population*
QET Norfolk	1,509	18.95
QD6 South and West Devon	1,496	25.27
QAY South Essex	1,464	20.55
QER Cambridge	1,378	19.01
QAE East Kent	1,333	21.89
QCY North West Lancashire	1,332	28.58
QAW East London and The City	1,320	21.10
QDR North Yorkshire	1,263	16.89
QAL West Surrey	1,257	19.33
QDV Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	1,212	24.50
QCE Oxfordshire	1,185	18.92
QA7 Berkshire	1,182	14.76
QEP East and North Hertfordshire	1,182	23.48
QDE County Durham	1,181	19.46
QD3 Southampton and South West Hampshire	1,168	21.37
West Hertfordshire	1,164	21.57
Avon	1,158	11.49
Warwickshire	1,150	22.64
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	1,123	20.63
East Riding	1,094	19.07
North Staffordshire	1,090	23.23
Liverpool	1,072	23.41
Calderdale and Kirklees	1,058	18.08
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	1,049	23.19
Bexley and Greenwich	1,047	24.10
Buckinghamshire	1,044	15.14
Suffolk	1,042	15.45
Coventry	1,037	34.12
North and Mid Hampshire	1,005	17.89
Wigan and Bolton	940	16.24
Northamptonshire	912	14.68
Manchester	910	21.11
Newcastle and North Tyneside	908	19.47
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	906	22.06
South Derbyshire	880	15.43
QCM Lincolnshire	868	13.81
Bedfordshire	857	15.24
Enfield and Haringey	848	17.25
North and East Devon	844	17.48
South Cheshire	822	12.26
Croydon	808	23.94
Barnet	795	23.39
Camden and Islington	786	21.12
QC9 West Pennine	786	16.70
East Surrey	769	17.98
Bradford	761	15.73
Gateshead and South Tyneside	749	21.31
Somerset	739	14.99
Bury and Rochdale	734	18.72
Wakefield	733	22.93
Sheffield	725	13.66
Salford and Trafford	722	16.22
Worcestershire	711	13.17
St. Helens and Knowsley	702	21.14
South Staffordshire	698	11.80
Bromley	697	23.14
Wirral	676	20.70
East Lancashire	673	13.23
Barking and Havering	667	17.25
North Cumbria	659	20.73
Gloucestershire	650	11.46
South Lancashire	638	20.43
Sandwell	628	21.70
Nottingham	604	9.43
Kingston and Richmond	587	17.15
Northumberland	571	18.41
Hillingdon	567	22.35
Shropshire	564	13.04
Wiltshire	543	8.90
South Humber	534	17.34

Finished consultant episodes (FCEs) where contrast radiology of heart is performed (operation code K63), by HA of residence, listed in descending order of FCEs and by number of FCE per 10,000 population

NHS Hospitals, England 1999–2000

Health authority of residence	*FCEs*	*Per 10,000 population*
Doncaster	531	18.32
Sunderland	521	17.92
Morecambe Bay	516	16.53
North Cheshire	510	16.35
North Nottinghamshire	496	12.65
Walsall	488	18.65
Stockport	481	16.48
Solihull	478	23.25
Dudley	465	14.91
Sefton	437	15.23
Wolverhampton	421	17.48
North Derbyshire	414	11.15
Rotherham	393	15.49
Barnsley	355	15.56
Herefordshire	217	12.89
Isle of Wight	35	2.73
England residents total	95,129	19.12
Scotland	53	—
Wales	1,348	—
Not known	807	—
Northern Ireland	19	—
Total treated in UK	97,356	—

Notes:

1. An FCE is defined as a period of patient care under one consultant in one health care provider. The figures do not represent the number of patients, as one person may have several episodes within the year.

2. Figures in this table are provisional (version 2) and have not yet been adjusted for shortfalls in data.

Source:

Hospital Episode Statistics (HES), Department of Health

Asthma

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice his Department is giving to health authorities and primary care groups on their strategies and expenditure with regard to asthma alleviation. [152542]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* Management of asthma takes place mainly in primary care. In addition to the general health promotion, general practitioners offer their patients more targeted care which is also provided for specific conditions through chronic disease management programmes (CDMP's). The asthma CDMP, introduced in 1993, is designed to support GPs in setting up and overseeing organised programmes of care for patients with asthma.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what financial arrangements are being made in respect of *(a)* NHS trusts dissolved and *(b)* new NHS trusts and primary care trusts established in 2000–01. [153615]

Mr. Milburn: Pursuant to the dissolution of 26 National Health Service trusts on 1 April 2000 and 1 October 2000, and their reconfiguration through the establishment of 10 new NHS trusts, I propose to create originating capital for the new NHS trusts equal to the net assets transferred to them and therefore to remit the outstanding debt of the dissolved trusts.

A number of primary care trusts were also established during the year. Public Dividend Capital is not required for the establishment of new primary care trusts as they are subject to a different financial regime. Net assets transferred from dissolving NHS trusts to primary care trusts are reflected in the general fund of the primary care trust.

These operations will involve no overall loss to the Exchequer. Her Majesty's Treasury has today presented a minute to the House giving particulars and circumstances of the proposed remission which it has approved in principle.

Capital Health Projects (Islington)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list capital health projects in Islington financed by his Department since 1 May 1997. [153114]

Mr. Denham: The information is as follows:

Whittington Hospital—Replace Waterlow Unit (Acute Mental Health Unit)

City Road Health Centre relocation

Goodinge Road Health Centre major upgrade

Newington Green general practitioner surgery relocation

Royal Northern Primary Care Centre development

Margery Street GP surgery relocation

Improvement grants provided to GP's for: Bains and Greenough Practice, Rahaman Practice, St. Johns Way Practice, Tibble Practice, Jacobs Practice and Flinders Practice.

NHS Reporting System

Mr. David Davis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the reasons are for the delay in implementing the recommendation that the NHS should set up a mandatory reporting system for logging all failures, mistakes, errors and near misses in healthcare contained in the report "An Organisation with a Memory". [152896]

Mr. Denham: Work on setting up a mandatory reporting system is being very actively progressed. The original recommended timetable was reviewed as part of setting targets within the NHS Plan and a more realistic target of December 2001 was agreed and published as part of the plan in July 2000. The new system will be established by the end of 2001 and details of the implementation plan will be published in due course.

Prescription Season Tickets

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make it his policy to allow prepayment season tickets for prescriptions to be spread over the year. [152835]

Ms Stuart: In England, we have no plans to do so. However, we recognise that some people may have difficulty in finding the fee for an annual prepayment

certificate (PPC) in one payment, which is why we have also made PPCs available for four-monthly periods. For Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, these matters are for the devolved Administrations to consider.

Low Frequency Radio Transmissions

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what investigations he has made into the effects on health of extremely low frequency radio transmissions; and if he will made a statement. [153044]

Yvette Cooper: The Department obtains advice on potential health effects risks associated with extremely low frequency electromagnetic fields (EMF) from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB). A report published on 6 March by the NRPB's Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation was a review of all available published work to date and provides an assessment of the potential risks of cancer from electromagnetic fields (Documents of the NRPB Volume 12, Number 1,2001). Copies are available in the Library. The board of the NRPB also published a response statement which can be found on the NRPB website: www.nrpb.org.uk.

The report states that any possible risk of childhood leukaemia relates to those exposed at relatively high levels of domestic exposure but that these are not necessarily associated with proximity to pylons or overhead power transmission lines. The conclusions indicate that the question whether exposure to electromagnetic fields can influence the development of cancer cannot at present be completely resolved. The report made a number of specific research recommendations. The NRPB consider that the report provides no additional scientific evidence to require a change in the guidelines to limit exposure to extremely low frequency EMF.

The Department will consider carefully the recommendations of the NRPB and commission appropriate research in the light of that which is already under way. Current research includes a number of Government-funded studies in this country and support for the multinational electromagnetic fields project set up and co-ordinated by the World Health Organisation.

National Bidding Process

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much additional capital has been allocated to the Trent region as part of the national bidding process; and how much each NHS trust has obtained through that process for each national priority scheme in the current financial year. [149993]

Mr. Denham: Trent region has been allocated £23,446 million in 2000–01 from earmarked funds to support investment in Government priorities. The amount allocated to each National Health Service trust in the Trent region through the process is shown in Table A. Allocations were also made to health authorities and some primary care groups and primary care trusts.

Details of the allocations for the individual priority areas are in table B.

Table A

NHS trust	*Total earmarked capital £000*
Barnsley Community and Priority Services	0
Barnsley District General Hospital	755
Bassetlaw Hospital and Community Health Services	547
Central Nottinghamshire Healthcare	47
Central Sheffield University Hospitals	1,692
Chesterfield and North Derbyshire Royal Hospital	879
Community Healthcare Services, North Derbyshire	10
Community Health Services, Southern Derbyshire	397
Community Health Sheffield	0
Doncaster and South Humber Healthcare	0
Doncaster Royal Infirmary and Montagu Hospital	1,104
East Midlands Ambulance Service	266
King's Mill Centre for Health Care Services	675
Leicestershire and Rutland Healthcare	62
Lincoln District Healthcare	50
Lincolnshire Ambulance and Health Transport Service	41
North East Lincolnshire	534
Northern General Hospital	1,952
Nottingham City Hospital	1,487
Nottingham Community Health	0
Nottingham Healthcare	8
Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham University Hospital	3,718
Rotherham General Hospitals	929
Rotherham Priority Health Services	0
Scunthorpe and Goole Hospitals	448
Sheffield Children's Hospital	854
South Lincolnshire Healthcare	0
South Yorkshire Metropolitan Ambulance Service	82
Southern Derbyshire Acute Hospitals	1,509
Southern Derbyshire Mental Health	0
University Hospitals of Leicester	2,836
United Lincolnshire Hospitals	2,016

Table B: 2000–01 earmarked capital funding

£000

	Revascularisation	*Coronary heart disease Rapid access chest pain clinics*	*Equipment*	*Total*	*Ambulance response times*	*Waiting lists/times*	*Renal*	*Accident and emergency*	*Action on cataracts*
Barnsley Community and Priority Services	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Barnsley District General Hospital	—	22	—	22	—	576	—	—	—
Bassetlaw Hospital and Community Health Services	—	175	—	175	—	176	—	—	75
Central Nottinghamshire Healthcare	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Central Sheffield University Hospitals	—	—	50	50	—	541	—	—	—
Chesterfield and North Derbyshire Royal Hospitals	—	—	220	220	—	354	—	—	—

Table B: 2000–01 earmarked capital funding

£000

	Coronary heart disease								
	Revascularisation	*Rapid access chest pain clinics*	*Equipment*	*Total*	*Ambulance response times*	*Waiting lists/times*	*Renal*	*Accident and emergency*	*Action on cataracts*
Community Health Care Services, North Derbyshire	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Community Health Services, Southern Derbyshire	—	—	—	0	—	350	—	—	—
Community Health Sheffield	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Doncaster and South Humber Healthcare	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Doncaster Royal Infirmary and Montagu	—	—	215	215	—	414	—	150	156
East Midlands Ambulance Service	—	—	88	88	178	—	—	—	—
King's Mill Centre for Health Care Services	—	224	—	224	—	177	—	—	110
Leicestershire and Rutland Healthcare	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Lincoln District Healthcare	—	—	—	0	—	50	—	—	—
Lincolnshire Ambulance and Health Transport Service	—	—	—	0	41	—	—	—	—
North East Lincolnshire	—	—	15	15	—	405	—	—	—
Northern General Hospital	—	50	604	654	—	898	335	—	—
Nottingham City Hospital	774	74	118	966	—	252	233	—	—
Nottingham Community Health	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Nottingham Healthcare	—	—	—	0	—	8	—	—	—
Queen's Medical Centre Nottingham University Hospital	—	74	61	135	—	969	—	—	—
Rotherham General Hospitals	—	40	50	90	—	450	—	104	—
Rotherham Priority Health Services	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Scunthorpe and Goole Hospitals	—	—	14	14	—	179	—	—	90
Sheffield Childrens Hospital	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
South Lincolnshire Healthcare	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
South Yorkshire Metropolitan Ambulance and Paramedic Service	—	—	—	0	82	—	—	—	—
Southern Derbyshire Acute Hospitals	—	155	—	155	—	729	183	—	220
Southern Derbyshire Mental Health	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
The University Hospitals of Leicester	500	80	77	657	—	1,440	251	—	150
United Lincolnshire Hospitals	—	77	65	142	—	974	—	—	184
Bassetlaw PCG	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	10
Mansfield and District PCT	—	—	—	0	—	5	—	—	10
North East Lincolnshire PCT	—	—	—	0	—	75	—	—	—
Barnsley HA	—	—	50	50	—	—	—	—	—
Doncaster HA	—	—	38	38	—	—	—	—	—
Leicestershire HA	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Lincolnshire HA	—	—	55	55	—	—	—	—	—
North Derbyshire HA	—	—	70	70	—	—	—	—	—
North Nottinghamshire HA	—	—	75	75	—	—	—	—	—
Nottingham HA	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Rotherham HA	—	—	—	0	—	—	—	—	—
Sheffield HA	—	—	19	19	—	—	—	—	—
South Derbyshire HA	—	—	110	110	—	—	—	—	—
South Humber HA	—	—	31	31	—	—	—	—	—
Trent RO total	1,274	971	2,025	4,270	301	9,022	1,002	254	1,005
National total	—	—	—	20,000	3,000	90,000	10,000	19,859	12,000

	Action on:								
	Pathology modernisation	*Outpatient long waits*	*Neonatal intensive care*	*Cancer CT scanners*	*Dermatology*	*ENT*	*T&O*	*Cataracts*	*Total earmarked capital*
Barnsley Community and Priority Services	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Barnsley District General Hospital	—	12	41	—	29	25	50	—	755
Bassetlaw Hospital and Community Health Services	—	30	16	—	15	10	50	—	547
Central Nottinghamshire Healthcare	—	—	—	—	15	10	22	—	47
Central Sheffield University Hospitals	—	—	91	—	40	25	—	945	1,692
Chesterfield and North Derbyshire Royal Hospitals	—	—	58	—	29	25	50	143	879
Community Health Care Services, North Derbyshire	—	—	—	—	—	10	—	—	10
Community Health Services, Southern Derbyshire	—	—	—	—	15	10	22	—	397
Community Health Sheffield	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Doncaster and South Humber Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Doncaster Royal Infirmary and Montagu	—	—	50	—	29	25	65	—	1,104
East Midlands Ambulance Service	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	266
King's Mill Centre for Health Care Services	—	—	45	—	29	25	65	—	675
Leicestershire and Rutland Healthcare	—	—	—	—	15	25	22	—	62
Lincoln District Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	50
Lincolnshire Ambulance and Health Transport Service	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	41
North East Lincolnshire	—	—	24	—	15	25	50	—	534
Northern General Hospital	—	—	—	—	—	—	65	—	1,952
Nottingham City Hospital	—	—	14	—	—	—	22	—	1,487
Nottingham Community Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Nottingham Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	8
Queen's Medical Centre Nottingham University Hospital	2,016	366	87	—	40	40	65	—	3,718
Rotherham General Hospitals	—	—	40	—	29	25	50	141	929
Rotherham Priority Health Services	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Scunthorpe and Goole Hospitals	—	36	25	—	29	25	50	—	448
Sheffield Childrens Hospital	313	—	—	494	15	10	22	—	854
South Lincolnshire Healthcare	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
South Yorkshire Metropolitan Ambulance and Paramedic Service	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	82
Southern Derbyshire Acute Hospitals	—	—	88	—	29	40	65	—	1,509
Southern Derbyshire Mental Health	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
The University Hospitals of Leicester	—	58	135	—	40	40	65	—	2,836
United Lincolnshire Hospitals	—	—	78	493	40	40	65	—	2,016
Bassetlaw PCG	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	10
Mansfield and District PCT	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	15
North East Lincolnshire PCT	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	75
Barnsley HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	50
Doncaster HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	38
Leicestershire HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Lincolnshire HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	55
North Derbyshire HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	70
North Nottinghamshire HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	75

	Action on:								
	Pathology modernisation	*Outpatient long waits*	*Neonatal intensive care*	*Cancer CT scanners*	*Dermatology*	*ENT*	*T&O*	*Cateracts*	*Total earmarked capital*
Nottingham HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Rotherham HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Sheffield HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	19
South Derbyshire HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	110
South Humber HA	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	31
Trent RO total	2,329	502	792	987	453	435	865	1,229	23,446
National total	15,000	11,031	6,500	30,000	4,762	4,755	9,511	10,253	246,671

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum (Iraqi Nationals)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people from Iraq *(a)* applied for asylum in the UK, *(b)* had applications refused, *(c)* had applications allowed on appeal, *(d)* were given exceptional leave to remain, *(e)* were deported to Iraq and *(f)* were removed to a third country in each year since 1995; and what are the latest available figures for the current year. [153116]

Mrs. Roche: The latest available information on principal applicants (that is, excluding dependants) for nationals of Iraq is given in the table.

	1995	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*	*1999*[1]	*2000*[1,2]
Applications received	930	965	1,075	1,295	1,800	7,080
Initial decisions[3]	795	665	665	1,100	745	4,865
Of which:						
Grants of exceptional leave[4]	175	135	295	500	325	1,975
Refused[4]	50	60	110	90	105	2,120
Appeals determined by Immigration Appellate Authority adjudicators[5]	20	20	15	45	[7]—	[7]—
Of which:						
Appeals allowed[5]	0	*	10	15	[7]—	[7]—
Removals[6]	15	30	40	40	[8]40	[8]50

[1] Provisional figures
[2] Decision figures, by nationality, are not readily available for the period January to March 2000.
[3] Decision figures do not necessarily relate to applications received in the same period.
[4] Includes cases decided under measures aimed at reducing the pre-1996 asylum application backlog.
[5] Figures are based on the cases for which information is recorded on the Refugee Index.
[6] Includes persons removed under on-entry and in-country procedures who had, at some stage, claimed asylum.
[7] Not available
[8] Estimated
Note:
Figures rounded to the nearest 5 with * = 1 or 2.

Information is not held centrally on the specific countries to which persons are removed. This information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost through the examination of individual case files.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the policy of his Department is regarding the safety of nationals deported to Iraq having failed asylum applications in the United Kingdom. [153117]

Mrs. Roche: Applications for asylum are considered on their individual merits, in accordance with our obligations under the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. We would not normally contemplate returning failed asylum seekers to Government controlled Iraq. We also accept that there may be certain people from the Kurdish autonomous area in northern Iraq who are in need of international protection and cannot be returned there. But there are also those who, after detailed examination by trained asylum caseworkers, cannot establish a need for international protection and who can be safely returned to northern Iraq. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have also said that there are those who can safely remain in, or return to, northern Iraq. Other European countries take a similar approach regarding the safety of returning certain failed asylum applicants to northern Iraq.

Hilda Murrell

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he is taking to ensure the investigation into the forensic evidence in the case of Hilda Murrell is being carried out with the devotion of reasonable resources. [152632]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I am satisfied that the Forensic Science Service (FSS) is dedicating the appropriate resources to investigating the forensic evidence in the case of Hilda Murrell. The results obtained so far have provided no information about DNA from anyone other than the victim. The FSS is undertaking staged examinations of samples using the latest DNA techniques. As each of these examinations is completed, the next step in the priority order of tests is triggered. The analysis is being applied in order of priority so as to conserve as far as possible samples for future analysis if existing DNA tests are unsuccessful. Once the results of the tests have been assessed, the FSS will consider what further analysis could usefully be undertaken.

Greater Manchester Police

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers were serving in Greater Manchester in each year since 1990. [152808]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is set out in the table.

Greater Manchester police—police numbers 1990 to 2000

Year (as at 31 March)	*Number of police officers*
1990	6,992
1991	7,014
1992	7,061
1993	7,060
1994	6,967
1995	7,037
1996	6,938

Greater Manchester police—police numbers 1990 to 2000

Year (as at 31 March)	*Number of police officers*
1997	6,922
1998	6,949
1999	6,810
2000	6,795
2000 (30 September)	6,767

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers serving in Greater Manchester have taken *(a)* early retirement and *(b)* retirement due to ill health in each year since 1990. [152810]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Police officers are entitled to retire with an ordinary police pension on completion of 25 years' pensionable service, subject to certain conditions. However, most police officers choose to retire on completion of 30 years' pensionable service, as this is when maximum pension benefits are accrued.

There are currently no provisions for early retirement from the police service with an actuarially reduced pension. However, officers may retire early on the ground that they are permanently disabled from performing the ordinary duties of a police officer and will receive an ill-health pension.

The numbers of ill-health retirements from Greater Manchester police are set out in the table.

Number of officers retiring on ill-health grounds from Greater Manchester police

	Number
1990	188
1991	165
1992	149
1993	162
1994–95	198
1995–96	168
1996–97	207
1997–98	199
1998–99	179
1999–2000	132

Ill-health retirements in Greater Manchester police as a percentage of all retirements

	Percentage
1990	73
1991	68
1992	67
1993	60
1994–95	69
1995–96	49
1996–97	65
1997–98	61
1998–99	64
1999–2000	56

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimates he has made of the number of police officers serving in Greater Manchester in *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 2001 and *(c)* 2002. [152813]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Home Office Statistical bulletin 2/01 published on 16 January 2001 gave details of Greater Manchester police (GMP) strength on 30 September 2000. I understand from GMP that the force expects to have reached the strengths shown in the table by March 2001 and March 2002.

	Number
(a) 30 September 2000[1]	6,767
(b) 31 March 2001[2]	6,988
(c) 31 March 2002[2]	7,242

[1] Full-time Equivalent numbers, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 2/01.
[2] Number of individuals

It is important to note that the projections for 2001 and 2002 are expressed as headcount whereas strength at September 2000 is expressed as Full-Time Equivalents (FTE). Headcount figures will be larger than FTE figures because officers working part-time count as one in headcount terms, but as a fraction of an officer in FTE terms.

Greater Manchester police plan to reach the strength figures shown, but precise strength may be affected by the budget set for the force, by changes to projected wastage and by the success of the force's recruitment plans.

Police (North-West)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers undertook training in the North West Region but served as a police officer in another region in each year since 1990. [152811]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information requested is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

In addition to police officers undertaking training at the National Police Training schools, they also have training at their force's, and other forces' training establishments.

Special Constables (West Sussex)

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many special constables there were in West Sussex in *(a)* 1992, *(b)* 1997 and *(c)* the latest year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [152895]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Statistics of the strength of the Special Constabulary have been collected since 1995 by the Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate. These figures are compiled at the end of March and September each year. Before 1995, figures were collected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. The figures for 1992 were compiled at the end of the calendar year.

Both sets of figures are collected for Sussex police as a whole and not defined further. The Special Constabulary strength figures for Sussex police force for 1992, September 1997 and September 2000 (the latest figures available) are therefore as follows:

	Total
December 1992	549
September 1997	465
September 2000	317

Home Office funded research was completed last year into the premature wastage of special constables. We are currently exploring the implications of this research with the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Association of Police Authorities with a view to identifying the best way of addressing the decline in the number of special constables in England and Wales.

Websites (Prisoners)

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what assessment he has made of the compatibility of the establishment of the website www.jeremybamber.com with Prison Rules; and if he will make a statement; [152972]

(2) what rules govern the setting up of websites by prisoners; and if he will make a statement. [152970]

Mr. Boateng: Prisoners are not normally permitted to have computers in their possession, and are not permitted internet connections. Prison Rules do not regulate a person outside a prison setting up a website on a prisoner's behalf.

Paragraph 34 of Standing Order 5B, made under the Prison Rules, regulates the sending by prisoners of written material for intended or likely publication, and this would include material for posting on a website.

The Standing Order prohibits receipt of payment for publication; the sending of material about a prisoner's own crime, except where it consists of serious representations about a conviction or sentence; and references to other prisoners or staff in such a way that they may be identified. I am satisfied that the material on this website does not fall within the prohibitions of Standing Order 5B.

Mr. Jeremy Bamber

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects the Criminal Cases Review Commission to complete its consideration of the case of Mr. Jeremy Bamber; and if he will make a statement. [152971]

Mr. Charles Clarke: An application on behalf of Mr. Bamber, for review of his conviction, was made to the Home Office, but no decision had been made on it when the Home Secretary's powers to consider cases of alleged miscarriage of justice came to an end on 31 March 1997. Mr. Bamber's application was transferred to the Criminal Cases Review Commission in April 1997. The Commission commenced its review of Mr. Bamber's case in November 1997 and has been in regular contact with Mr. Bamber or his representatives. I understand that the Commission expects to make a decision on whether or not to refer Mr. Bamber's case to the Court of Appeal very shortly.

Court Visits

Mr. Marshall-Andrews: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the occasions since 1 May 1997 on which he has observed proceedings in courts of criminal jurisdiction. [152135]

Mr. Straw: I have visited courts on the following occasions:

3 September 1997, Aldershot
16 September 1997, Swindon
1 May 1998, Oxford
16 September 1998, Bristol
14 July 1999, Manchester.

I have also observed a number of proceedings at courts in my constituency.

I regularly receive reports of relevant court proceedings and read the judgments of the higher court relating to criminal law and procedures.

General Abacha

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how he has responded to the formal request from the Nigerian authorities in relation to General Abacha and his associates; and if he will make a statement. [152496]

Mr. Straw: A request has been received from the authorities in Nigeria with regard to the affairs of the late General Abacha and his family and associates. We are of course very keen to assist the Nigerians in this case, but we have to work within the framework of our own legislation. The request raised a number of issues which required clarification and amplification, and accordingly we wrote to those acting for the Nigerian Government in September last year asking for some additional information. Despite a number of reminders and follow up requests, we have not yet received a reply which is sufficient to enable us to proceed.

Gaming and Lotteries Fees

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to amend the fees for gaming and lotteries. [153513]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I have today laid before Parliament two Orders under the Gaming Act 1968 and one under each of the Lotteries and Amusements Act 1976, and the Gaming (Bingo) Act 1985.

The Gaming Board and the Home Office review gaming fees and the fees for society and local authority lotteries every year. The National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have made recommendations about how these fees are set. They have called for the creation of a more reliable basis for determining the costs of the relevant licensing and police authorities and achieving their full recovery, and for the elimination of cross subsidies among and between the various gaming industry and lottery sectors.

The Government have accepted these recommendations and acted upon them. The amended fees in the four Orders are based upon estimates by the Gaming Board for Great Britain of the cost of each service and demand for it during the financial year 2001–02.

The four Orders will bring revised fees into effect from 1 April 2001. The table sets out the current and the new level of all the fees.

£

Fee	Old fee	New fee
S 19 Employees Certificates	100	145
S27 gaming machine licences		
New	4,140	5,623
Renewal	1,650	3,753
Casino licenses		
Grant	35,670	26,349
Renewal	7,325	7,325
Transfer	7,900	5,898
Consent Application	6,810	6,810
Consent transfer	3,405	3,405
Bingo licences		
Grant	2,940	2,940
Renewal	920	1,357
Transfer	1,030	1,030
Consent Application	2,045	3,260
Consent transfer	680	2,630
National Bingo Game		
New	165,020	150,168
Renewal	158,875	144,576
Lotteries		
Gaming Board fee per lottery raising:		
£200K or more	635	404
£50K, less than £200K	355	263
£20K, less than £50K	180	86
£10K, less than £50K	145	86
Less than £10K	82	82
Registration fee	710	3,840
Registration renewal fee	75	142
Lottery manager	2,735	5,470
Inspection Lottery Return	5	5
Pt II Club Registration		
New	210	235
Renew	105	118
Pt III Club Registration		
New	115	115
Renew	69	69

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Legal Aid

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 751W, on legal aid, what estimate he has made of Government spending on *(a)* legal aid, *(b)* Legal Help and *(c)* Children Act 1989 cases in the most recent year for which figures are available. [152764]

Mr. Lock: Net expenditure in 1999–2000 on Civil Legal Aid was approximately £766 million. This includes approximately £201 million on what is now known as Legal Help. Expenditure on Children Act 1989 cases (included in the £766 million referred to) is estimated at £218 million.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 751W, concerning financial awards from successful civil cases funded by legal aid, what damages were awarded or agreed in publicly funded cases by category for 1997–98; and if he will provide figures relating to payments by instalment. [152763]

Mr. Lock: During 1997–98 damages were awarded or agreed in publicly funded civil cases as follows:

In Matrimonial and Family proceedings categorised as:

(i) ancillary relief—£466,784,701;

(ii) other divorce/judicial separation proceedings—£36,359,303;

(iii) other proceedings involving children £9,922,001.

In Non-Matrimonial civil proceedings categorised as:

(i) personal injury—£644,142,212;

(ii) other proceedings for negligence or tort—£86,699,293;

(iii) business-related proceedings—£57,294,136;

(iv) proceedings involving land or property—£45,340,029;

(v) housing proceedings—£21,048,104;

(vi) appeals and other miscellaneous proceedings—£2,859,565.

The total awarded or agreed was therefore £1.37 billion.

The Legal Aid Board did not collect information on the value of awards for periodic payments because under Regulation 94(c) of the Civil Legal Aid (General) Regulations 1989 such payments were exempt from the Board's Statutory Charge.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Nice Summit

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his estimate is of the total cost to the EU budget of the Nice summit. [151898]

Mr. Vaz: The costs of holding European Councils are met by the host Government and the EU budget. I suggest that my right hon. Friend contact the Secretariat of the Council of the European Union for information on the costs of the Nice Council specifically.

Nice Treaty

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will include the texts of the treaties proposed to be amended by the treaty of Nice as they would be if that treaty came into force in the Command Paper in which the treaty of Nice is published. [152041]

Mr. Vaz: The Command Paper will contain the treaty of Nice which amends the treaty on European Union, the treaties establishing the European Communities and certain related Acts.

The intergovernmental conference did not prepare a consolidated version, and therefore it will not be included in the Command Paper. But we expect the Office for Official Publications of the European Union to publish a version in due course. We will place this in the Libraries of both Houses as soon as it becomes available.

Bonded Labourers (Indian Sub-continent)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what report he has received from the Indian organisation, Volunteers for Social Justice, regarding bonded labourers in Punjab State who have registered their cases in 1999 or before, but have not been released. [153121]

Mr. Wilson: We understand that, as of 19 August 2000, 698 bonded labourers had registered cases at the Punjab Human Rights Commission or the Punjab and Haryana Court. Of these cases almost all had been filed in 1999 or before. We share the concern of Volunteers for Social Justice over the situation of bonded labourers in India. We continue to monitor the issue closely.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received regarding threats and attacks against human rights activists working to protect and release bonded labourers in India and Pakistan. [153120]

Mr. Wilson: We are aware of reports of harassment of the bonded labour activist and General Secretary of Volunteers for Social Justice, Jai Singh, in Punjab, India. Officials in our High Commission in New Delhi are looking into this incident. We are not aware of similar incidents in Pakistan. The Indian authorities are well aware of our commitment to human rights and the importance of investigating abuses. We will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many people have been charged and prosecuted, and what sentences have been given, in India and Pakistan under their Bonded Labour Scheme (Abolition) Acts. [153119]

Mr. Wilson: It will take some time to collate the information requested by my hon. Friend I will write to him once it is available and place a copy of my letter in the Libraries of the House.

Gibraltar

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when voters resident in Gibraltar will be eligible to vote in European Parliament elections. [152836]

Mr. Vaz: The UK unequivocally accepts its obligation to give effect to the Matthews judgment. We are fully committed to seeking enfranchisement for Gibraltar before the 2004 European Parliamentary elections.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussion he has had with *(a)* President Chirac and *(b)* the European Development Commissioner regarding the situation in Zimbabwe. [152890]

Mr. Wilson: The Government's deep concern at recent events in Zimbabwe was conveyed to Commissioner Neilson and President Chirac before their meetings with President Mugabe.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on recent developments regarding the Chief Justice of the Zimbabwe High Court; and what plans he has to seek representations from other Commonwealth member states on the rule of law in Zimbabwe. [152893]

Mr. Wilson: The Foreign Secretary issued a statement on 21 February expressing his concern at the pressure being applied to the judiciary by the Government of Zimbabwe. The Foreign Secretary has spoken to the Commonwealth Secretary-General to reiterate his concern, and will discuss Zimbabwe with colleagues at the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group on 19–20 March.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the specific objectives are of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group meeting schedule for 19 March to discuss Zimbabwe. [152891]

Mr. Wilson: The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group meeting on 19–20 March will consider a full agenda of Commonwealth business. Zimbabwe will be discussed after Any Other Business.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last met representatives from the Movement for Democratic change in Zimbabwe; and when he next plans to do so. [152894]

Mr. Wilson: The Foreign Secretary last met Morgan Tsvangirai on 6 November 2000. FCO Ministers and officials have regular meetings with representatives of the MDC, most recently being on 5 March.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs with which Commonwealth member states he has discussed the expulsion of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth; and what was the conclusion of these discussions. [152887]

Mr. Wilson: FCO Ministers regularly raise Zimbabwe with their Commonwealth counterparts. Zimbabwe will be discussed at the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group meeting on 19–20 March.

Kosovo-Macedonia Border

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's call for the creation of a buffer zone on its border with Kosovo; and if he will make a statement. [153112]

Mr. Vaz: We and our Allies and partners have been in close contact with the Government of Macedonia about the recent violent acts by ethnic Albanian extremists which led to the deaths of three Macedonian soldiers last weekend. Following discussions, KFOR has intensified its efforts to control the border between Kosovo and Macedonia with some success. KFOR continues to monitor the situation very closely. There are reports that the extremists may be withdrawing.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to his Macedonian counterpart regarding the situation relating to the border between Kosovo and The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. [153111]

Mr. Vaz: On 2 March, I telephoned the Macedonian Foreign Minister, Mr. Srgjan Kerim. I reassured Mr. Kerim that we share Macedonian concerns about the situation in the border area and that NATO and KFOR were doing everything within their power to control the border with Kosovo. I also welcomed the continuing restraint shown by the Macedonian Government.

Dayton Peace Accords

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to his *(a)* EU counterparts and *(b)* Yugoslav counterpart regarding the implementation of the Dayton Peace accords. [153102]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made no recent representations to either his EU counterparts or his Yugoslav counterpart specifically on the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement—but Her Majesty's Government are fully engaged with EU partners in supporting the High Representative in his efforts to achieve the full implementation of the agreement. The FRY authorities have made clear their support for the Dayton Agreement.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with his US counterpart regarding progress made in implementation of the Dayton Peace accords; and if he will make a statement. [153106]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed Balkan issues with his US counterpart in Washington on 6 February.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the progress achieved in implementing the Dayton peace accords. [153100]

Mr. Vaz: The Peace Implementation Council ministerial meeting in Brussels in May last year concluded that much has been accomplished since the Dayton/Paris accords, that the security situation had stabilised, major reconstruction achieved, and the building of the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina has begun.

However, much remains to be done to consolidate and build on this progress. The actions outlined at the Peace Implementation Council, as well as the EU's road map leading to the negotiation of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA), give a framework for reform. We are continuing our active support for the new moderate Governments at state and entity levels in their reform efforts.

Southern Serbia

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his EU counterparts regarding an international military presence in Presevo Valley. [153113]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary discussed the situation in southern Serbia with his EU and NATO counterparts at ministerial meetings on 26 and 27 February. He remains in close touch with them.

Middle East Peace Process

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he will meet the new Israeli administration to discuss the Middle East peace process. [153025]

Mr. Wilson: The Prime Minister spoke to the new Israeli Prime Minister on 7 February. The Foreign Secretary sent a message of congratulation to the new Israeli Foreign Minister on 7 March. We are in frequent contact with both Israeli and Palestinian representatives, and with other regional Governments.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the proposals by Bosnian Croat nationalists to announce the creation of a separate Croat entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina; and if he will make a statement. [153103]

Mr. Vaz: The declaration on 3 March by the self-styled Croat National Congress of Bosnia and Herzegovina made clear their intention to place themselves outside the provisions of the Dayton/Paris accords. This is utterly unacceptable. The Bosnia Croat people's future lies in the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina; their legitimate interests can be pursued only through full participation in the State and Federation structures.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many refugees, including internally displaced persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are still without permanent secure access to their pre-war homes. [153108]

Mr. Vaz: According to the UNHCR, a total of 781,900 people are currently without access to their pre-war homes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This includes 263,500 refugees and 518,400 internally displaced persons.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on progress made in reconstructing Bosnia and Herzegovina's infrastructure and the institution building process. [153099]

Mr. Vaz: It will take some time to collate the information requested by the right hon. Member. I will write to him when it is available and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the security situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. [153105]

Mr. Vaz: I refer to my answer to the right hon. Gentleman's question today, *Official Report*, column 395W.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what funds have been allocated by the European Union for refugee returns in Bosnia and Herzegovina for each year since the Dayton Peace accords was signed; and how much has been delivered. [153107]

Mr. Vaz: It will take some time to collate all the information requested by the right hon. Member. I will write to him once it is available and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to his EU counterparts regarding the Bosnian Croat plans to create a separate Croat entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina. [153104]

Mr. Vaz: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has had no discussions with his EU colleagues about Bosnia Croat plans to create a separate Croat entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, EU Foreign Ministers will be meeting on 19–20 March for the next General Affairs Council in Brussels, and High Representative Wolfgang Petrisch will be present. It is expected that this issue will be addressed.

The Swedish Presidency issued a statement on behalf of the EU on 7 March, which condemned moves to create a separate Croat entity and reaffirmed the EU's support for the High Representative's actions, including the removal of President Ante Jelavic and three Bosnian Croat officials.

Balkans

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the security situation in *(a)* Bosnia and Herzegovina, *(b)* Montenegro, *(c)* southern Serbia and *(d)* Kosovo. [153110]

Mr. Vaz: In Bosnia and Herzegovina the security situation remains calm. We have no specific concerns about the security situation in Montenegro.

The violent activities of Albanian extremists in southern Serbia are of serious concern to the Yugoslav and Serbian Governments, and to the international community. We welcome the restraint shown by the Yugoslav/Serbian authorities and the proposals they have presented to find a peaceful resolution to the crisis. We are working with our partners and Allies to support this process.

The security situation in Kosovo is much improved since 1999 when UNMIK and KFOR were established. Nevertheless, criminally, ethnically and politically motivated violence remains a serious problem. Efforts to counter this is a key priority for UNMIK and KFOR.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of continued support by the newly elected Belgrade administration to nationalist elements in Bosnia's entity Republika Srpska. [153101]

Mr. Vaz: The FRY and Serbian Government in Belgrade have publicly expressed their support for the Dayton/Paris accords, and their intention to work within the framework established at Dayton.

On 5 March, an agreement was signed establishing a special parallel relationship between FRY and Republika Srpska. Such agreements are allowed under the Dayton/Paris accords, and the agreement was approved in advance by the High Representative. We hope that this will formalise relations between the democratically elected Governments in both the FRY and Republika Srpska, increase transparency, and enhance regional stability.

Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what conditions are attached to *(a)* Government's, *(b)* the EU's and *(c)* the Stability Pact's aid for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [153109]

Mr. Vaz: HMG provides technical assistance to support the commitment by the FRY authorities to pluralist democracy and a market economy. We also assist civil society on the understanding that it contributes to service delivery and democracy.

Following the fall of Milosevic, the EU provided 200m euro in emergency humanitarian aid to the FRY for fuel, emergency food supplies and medicine and a further 240m euro distributed via the European Reconstruction Agency. No specific conditionality was attached to this aid. The swift EU response was in support of the new democratic Government of President Kostunica. FRY will also be eligible for EU aid under the new regional programme CARDS, subject to it meeting the following conditions: respect for democracy, the rule of law, human and minority rights, fundamental freedoms and principles of international law.

The Stability Pact co-ordinates aid with a regional dimension in south-east Europe. Broadly, such aid should contribute to the stability of the region, but it is for the donor states and funding institutions to decide whether to attach any conditions to disbursement, including to the FRY. Stability Pact funding via CARDS will therefore be subject to the same EU criteria as outlined.

TREASURY

Contributions Agency Staff

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many Contributions Agency staff have been *(a)* disciplined, *(b)* prosecuted and *(c)* dismissed for misusing National Insurance numbers in each year since 1992. [152409]

Dawn Primarolo: Since 1992, there have been no incidents of Contributions Agency, or latterly Inland Revenue, National Insurance Contribution Office, staff being either disciplined, prosecuted or dismissed for misusing National Insurance numbers.

Pensions

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the change to income tax receipts resulting from the basic state pension being uprated in line with earnings after 2002–03. [151795]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The full year income tax effect of uprating basic state retirement pensions by average earnings instead of retail prices in 2003–04 is estimated to be £65 million.

The estimate is based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and is consistent with the November 2000 pre-Budget report.

Mothers (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of mothers in London returned to employment when their youngest child was aged *(a)* under six months, *(b)* six to 12 months, *(c)* one to three years and *(d)* over three years in each of the last five years. [152205]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Ms Harriet Harman, dated 9 March 2001:

The National Statistician, has been asked to reply to your parliamentary question about the percentage of mothers in London who returned to employment when their youngest child was in various age groups (152205). I am replying in his absence.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is the main source of labour market data on individuals used by National Statistics. The attached table shows information for mothers in employment with a child aged under one year. The other information requested is not available.

Mothers in Greater London with youngest dependent child aged under one year, 1996–2000 (autumn) not seasonally adjusted (per cent.[1])

Per cent.

	In employment
1996	38
1997	40
1998	44
1999	42
2000	48

[1] Percentages are based on those in employment as a percentage of all mothers with youngest child under one year.

Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Pay (Hemsworth)

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what his estimate is of the number of people in *(a)* Hemsworth constituency and *(b)* Wakefield district earning less than £4.10 per hour; [153007]

(2) what his estimate is of the number of people in *(a)* Hemsworth constituency and *(b)* Wakefield district who have benefited from the introduction of the minimum wage. [153006]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Mr. Jon Trickett, dated 9 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent questions about the number of people in Hemsworth and Wakefield who have benefited from the National Minimum Wage (NMW) so far, and the number of people in these areas who earn less than £4.10 an hour (153006, 153007). I am replying in his absence.

The Office for National Statistics has published estimates of the number of jobs paid at less than specific hourly pay thresholds for all workers in the United Kingdom for Spring 2000, and the number of jobs paid at less than NMW rates for Spring 2000, disaggregated by gender and full and part-time. These estimates are based on an improved methodology using data from the New Earnings Survey (NES) and Labour Force Survey (LFS). This methodology provides the best estimates for the number of jobs in the UK paid below low hourly rate thresholds. These estimates are posted on the National Statistics website at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/nsbase/themes/labour_market/nmw_lowpay_tables.asp

The new methodology has been developed to overcome the deficiencies inherent in the two surveys, the NES and LFS, in measuring low pay. Estimates based on this methodology are not available for the areas requested.

Departmental Policies (Hemsworth)

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly to the locations as possible, the effects of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997 on *(a)* Hemsworth constituency and *(b)* Wakefield district. [153008]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Hemsworth, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 969, or 36 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 68 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 68 per cent.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,127 young people in Hemsworth constituency gain valuable skills and experience—569 (50 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,500 families in Hemsworth constituency and 8,300 in Wakefield local authority district were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 15,600 in Hemsworth, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 9,600 in Hemsworth.

Hoteliers (Disability Discrimination Act)

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will use the tax system to help small hoteliers meet the financial costs of complying with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [152886]

Dawn Primarolo: Spending by business to meet the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 may qualify for tax relief under the general rules for writing off machinery and plant expenses against taxable income, the 40 per cent. first year allowance and the 4 per cent. tax relief for hotel building costs.

Departmental Policies (Houghton and Washington, East)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Houghton and Washington, East of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [152996]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Houghton and Washington, East, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 530, or 18 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 73 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 52 per cent.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,473 young people in Houghton and Washington, East constituency gain valuable skills and experience—744 (51 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,500 families in the constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 14,800 in Houghton and Washington, East, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 9,500 in Houghton and Washington, East.

Low Income Tax Reform

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent discussions he has had with the Low Income Tax Reform Group about individuals who have share capital but pay no income tax. [152828]

Dawn Primarolo: I am not aware of any such discussions on this particular subject, but the Inland Revenue regularly meet the Low Incomes Tax Reform Group to discuss matters of interest.

Tax Credits

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the impact of tax credits on people who pay no income tax. [152827]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government are committed to making work pay and eliminating child poverty. Those who pay no income tax are those on the lowest incomes and the Working Families Tax Credit ensures that families with children get a decent minimum working income. A single earner family on the National Minimum Wage working 35 hours a week and eligible for WFTC pays no income tax. We have already ensured that families of this sort have a guaranteed weekly income of £214 from April, rising to £225 in October.

Comprehensive Spending Review

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assumptions about population are used, for each of the four countries of the United Kingdom, in the formula referred to in paragraph 21.2 of the 2000 Comprehensive Spending Review. [153011]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The population estimates for the four countries of the United Kingdom used in the 2000 Spending Review were set out in the Statement of Funding Policy published in July 2000.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will calculate spending in Scotland in 2001–02 to 2003–04, if the Barnett formula had been applied without the qualifications mentioned in paragraph 21.2 of the 2000 Comprehensive Spending Review. [153009]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Scotland spending allocations set out in the 2000 Spending Review were determined by the Barnett formula in the normal way. Details of the Barnett formula were set out in the Statement of Funding Policy published in July 2000.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the relevant English spending referred to in paragraph 21.2 of the 2000 Comprehensive Spending Review is planned to be in 2001–02 to 2003–04. [153021]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The comparability percentages used in the Barnett formula in the 2000 Spending Review were calculated on the basis of 2000–01 provision of Government Departments. The details of the calculation of the comparability percentages are set out in Annexe C of the Statement of Funding Policy.

European Union Budget

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which member states were *(a)* net beneficiaries from and *(b)* net contributors to the EU budget for the calendar year 1999; and what were the corresponding amounts paid and received including, where applicable, the effect of the Fountainebleau rebate, expressed per capita for the population of each country. [152897]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Details of the net position of each member state for 1999, including on a per capita basis, will be published in the Chancellor's departmental report. Details of the gross contribution of each member state, including their contribution to the United Kingdom's Fountainebleau rebate, and each member state's receipts, can be found at Table 1.2 and Diagram VI respectively of the European Court of Auditors Annual Report concerning the financial year 1999.

Mrs. B. E. Jones

Mr. Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when his Department will give a substantive reply to Mrs. B E. Jones of Verwood about her retirement pension. [153041]

Dawn Primarolo: This letter has not been received. If the hon. Member wishes to forward a copy it will be dealt with although the issues raised may be for the Department of Social Security to reply to.

Customs and Excise

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidance he gives to customs officers regarding the questioning of people bringing into the UK tobacco products and alcohol in quantities below the guidelines stated on HM Customs and Excise Notice 1; and if he will make a statement. [153045]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs officers are guided by Statutory Instrument 1992/3155 The Excise Duties (Personal Relief) Order 1992, implementing EU Directive 92/12/EC, which makes any excise goods personally imported from another member state liable to forfeiture if they are intended to be used for a commercial purpose. The Order lists a variety of factors to be used by customs to determine whether goods are imported for a commercial purpose.

Second-hand Goods

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the payment of *(a)* customs duty and *(b)* VAT on second-hand goods imported in the UK. [152829]

Dawn Primarolo: Importations of second-hand goods from outside the EU are subject to the normal import procedures, and conditions, as detailed in the HM Customs and Excise Integrated Tariff of the United Kingdom. Where applicable customs duty and/or import VAT are due at the appropriate rates.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Automated Credit Transfer

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what arrangements he will implement when full-scale Automated Credit Transfer is introduced to protect benefit claimants from *(a)* delays that are the responsibility of Government and *(b)* delays that are the responsibility of banks. [152431]

Mr. Rooker: Automated Credit Transfer was first introduced as a method of paying benefits in 1982 and is now available for all benefits except Social Fund. Currently, over a third of customers already choose to be paid by this method.

Current procedures and contractual arrangements supporting the process are all aimed at ensuring the customer receives payment on the appropriate day.

Hospital Downrating Rule

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the approximate annual income derived from the operation of the hospital downrating rule, as it applies to reductions in the state pension after six weeks as a hospital in-patient, and the approximate annual cost of administering the hospital downrating rule on state pensions. [152143]

Mr. Rooker: There is no income derived from the operation of the hospital downrating rule. Under rules that have been in existence since 1948, Social Security benefits are downrated after stays of six weeks in NHS hospitals and further reduced after 52 weeks, This is to prevent duplicate provision from public funds. The costs of abolishing the hospital downrating rules in respect of State Retirement Pension are estimated to be about £60 million a year. The information requested on administration costs is not available.

Notes:

1. Based on a 5 per cent. sample of data from the Pensions Strategy Computer System March 2000.

2. It is assumed that the information drawn at the date of the sample is representative of the year as a whole.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will list the IT projects his Department plans to undertake in the next year; and if he will state in each case the *(a)* expected date of commencement and completion and *(b)* cost; [151481]

(2) if he will list the IT projects currently undertaken in his Department; and if he will state the *(a)* expected completion date and *(b)* cost of each project. [151510]

Angela Eagle *[holding answers 26 February 2001]:* The Department is undertaking a major programme of change to modernise the way it delivers its services and to support the implementation of important new policy initiatives such as the reform of Child Support and the introduction of New Tax Credits. This programme will require extensive IT change affecting all areas of the Department.

A number of the projects to deliver this change programme are already under way and will continue into the next year. Plans for others, including the implementation of Pension credit from 2003 and the replacement of the Department's outdated computer systems, are currently being developed. Finalised completion dates and costs for these are therefore not yet available. The overall costs of the projects to support Working Age, Pensions, Child Support and other key welfare reforms are shown in the table but it is not yet possible to show the IT cost component because contracts have not yet been let for many of the IT projects.

Project	*Planned completion date*	*Anticipated cost (£ million)*
Working Age Project	March 2003	145
Pensions	June 2003	57
Child Support	April 2003	914
Corporate	March 2005	852

Pension Supplements

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost of providing *(a)* a £3 supplement for single pensioners aged over 75 years and *(b)* a £5 supplement for pensioner couples aged over 75 years in (i) Scotland and (ii) the UK. [153070]

Mr. Rooker: We will increase basic state pension from April 2001 by £5 for a single person and £8 per couple. This is at an overall cost of £1.3 billion and will benefit over 10 million British pensioners of which 900,000 reside in Scotland. The information is in the table.

£ million

Gross and net cost	*Great Britain*	*2001–02 Scotland*
Gross	660	50
Net of income-related benefit savings	450	30

Notes:

1. The figures in the table are for basic state pension obtained as of right through the recipients own national insurance contributions (Category A pension). Because the Category A pension is paid to both single and married pensioners it is not possible to estimate the costs. Therefore, it is assumed that the Category A rate of state pension is increased by £3 per week for those aged 75 and over and the Category BL married woman's rate is increased by £2 per week for those aged 75 and over.
2. Estimates of gross costs provided by the Government Actuary's Department. Income-related benefit offsets are estimated using the Policy Simulation Model.
3. United Kingdom figures are not available. Costs associated with overseas pensioners are included and are apportioned on a pro-rata basis between Scotland and the rest of Great Britain.
4. Costs are rounded to the nearest £10 million.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many claims for Winter Fuel Payments remain unpaid *(a)* nationally and *(b)* in Gloucestershire; what factors underly non-payment; what steps are being taken to ensure that these payments are quickly made; and if he will make a statement. [152294]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The administration of benefits is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Laurence Robertson, dated 8 March 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many claims for winter fuel payments remain unpaid (a) nationally and (b) in Gloucestershire; what factors underly non-payment; what steps are being taken to ensure that these payments are quickly made; and if he will make a statement.

As you may be aware, around 11 million people have benefited from Winter Fuel Payments this winter. All automatic payments, where entitlement was established, were made before Christmas 2000. All payments in respect of successful claims determined by 9 November 2000 were also made before Christmas 2000.

It was made clear in our information campaign that, to guarantee payment before Christmas, claims had to be made before 22 September 2000.

To enable as many people as possible to get their payment before Christmas another payment schedule was added to the operational plan so that claims determined by 9 November would also be paid before Christmas.

Approximately 70,000 claims that were determined after 9 November and before 15 January are due to be paid during the first two weeks in March.

A further 33,000 payments will be made in April 2001 and any remaining will be made in June 2001. Claims for this winter must be made by 31 March, therefore the June payment schedule is necessary.

It is not possible to make all payments on successful claims immediately. We must ensure that the right amount of money is paid to the right person. To enable the correct amount of Winter Fuel Payment to be determined various payment processes which can take a little time, are necessary. I am sure you will agree that it is prudent to make sure that people receive the right amount.

However, we are doing everything possible to ensure that claims for Winter 2000 are processed and paid within the shortest timescale available.

Unfortunately, information you ask for is not available at constituency level.

I hope this is helpful.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Arts Administration

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to the oral statement by the Minister for the Arts of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 572, on spending on arts administration, how operating costs are defined. [152769]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Operating costs are defined as all staff costs, publicity, administration, overheads and associated costs. It excludes all direct expenditure on art forms.

Athletics Championships (Funding)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will publish the minutes of meetings between his Department and the Mayor of London about *(a)* the staging of the World Athletics Championships in 2005 and *(b)* the investment of transport infrastructure associated with the proposed development of a new athletics stadium at Pickett's Lock; [152520]

(2) if he will publish correspondence between his Department and the Mayor of London about *(a)* the staging of the World Athletics Championships in 2005 and *(b)* the investment in transport infrastructure associated with the proposed development of a new athletics stadium at Pickett's Lock. [152521]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Further to my answer of 9 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 703–04W, to the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Miss Kirkbride), a copy of the minutes of the Lee Valley Forum meetings which took place on 26 June 2000, 2 October 2000, 13 November 2000 and 16 January 2001 were placed in the Libraries of both Houses on 5 March. There has been no correspondence with the Mayor on this issue.

Sport Strategy Implementation Group

Jane Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the Action Plan submitted to his Department by the Sport Strategy Implementation Group. [153670]

Kate Hoey: On Saturday 10 March, we will publish "A Sporting Future for All—The Government's Plan for Sport". This is a practical and detailed programme which will make a real and lasting improvement to the sporting life of this country and is largely based on the work done by the Sports Strategy Implementation Group set up last year. I am arranging for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 12 March 2001

DEFENCE

Joint Service Defence Council

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 8 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 631W, on the Joint Service Defence Council, what factors led him to authorise the withdrawal of JS DC1 88/00. [152852]

Mr. Spellar: I authorised the temporary withdrawal of Joint Service Defence Council instruction 88/00, pending a review, as a result of concerns that the Ministry of Defence's policy towards membership of societies such as the Freemasons might not be fully compliant with the European convention on human rights.

Special Advisers

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the special adviser working for him will relinquish his post on the dissolution of Parliament. [149320]

Mr. Hoon: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on 13 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 130W.

DERA

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the progress of the private-public partnership within DERA. [152775]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the announcement I made in the House on 24 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 777–79 about our decision to implement the core competence model for the DERA public-private partnership. Under core competence, around three-quarters of the current DERA organisation will be turned into a company, referred to as NewDERA. For strategic reasons, the remainder will be retained within the Ministry of Defence to carry out functions that could not appropriately be transferred to the private sector.

Work to implement the PPP has intensified over recent months and significant progress has been made on separating DERA into two new organisations. An amended trading fund order, entitled the draft Defence Science and Technology Laboratory Trading Fund Order 2001, was laid before Parliament on 17 January 2001. Operational separation of DERA is planned by 1 April 2001. Legal separation follows on 1 July after a period of shadow operation to test the organisations and their infrastructures. We will then carry out the remaining work necessary to prepare NewDERA for sale.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the extent to which DERA has met its targets in relation to payment of its sub-contractors; and what steps are being taken to improve the timeliness of payments. [152772]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* During the year 1999–2000, as reported in the annual report for that year, DERA paid in excess of 97 per cent. of invoices within the agreed credit period on receipt of an undisputed invoice or date of confirmation of receipt of an acceptable service. The payment process is monitored and DERA is currently exploring the possibility of introducing a fast-track payment system for the large number of low value invoices that it processes and making payments more frequently. DERA currently makes payments twice a week, once by cheque and once by bank automated clearing system (BACS).

Private Simon Jeans

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the verdict reached by the Croatian court on the killing of Private Simon Jeans in Split, Croatia, in September 1996; what representations he has made to his Croatian counterpart regarding the killing; and if he will make a statement. [153176]

Dr. Moonie: Despite the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of Private Simon Jeans, it would, of course, be wholly inappropriate for this Government to attempt to intervene in the judicial process of another country. We have to recognise that the Croatian judiciary, like our own, is independent and not subject to external pressure or direction.

We did, however, make it clear to the Croatian Government, at a senior level, that the case was important and that we were anxious it should be handled both properly and swiftly. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the then Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, all raised the subject, in addition to the regular dialogue conducted between the Embassy and Defence staff in Zagreb and Split and the Croatian authorities.

Ministerial Visits

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the Ministers in his Department who visited any of the constituencies which are in the Peterborough Unitary Authority area between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001, indicating in each case *(a)* the date of the visit, *(b)* the constituencies included in the visit and *(c)* if the local hon. Member met the Minister. [151022]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The Minister for the Armed Forces visited North-West Cambridgeshire on 31 March 2000 to meet the right hon. Member. No other Defence Ministers have visited constituencies which are in the Peterborough unitary authority between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001.

Lost Medical Records

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on how many occasions the medical records of a member of the armed services have been declared lost in each year since 1992. [151811]

Dr. Moonie: The Ministry of Defence does not maintain a central list of lost records. Duplicates of some of the documents contained in Service personnel personal medical folders are held centrally and over the last four years 3,722 requests have been made for copies of these records. Of this total, 95 records could not be traced. In addition, hospital records are forwarded to a central repository, which over the last five years has been unable to trace 429 records from 7,227 requests made. Requests for duplicate copies of medical records do not necessarily indicate that the originals are lost: they may be held in another location or an additional copy may be needed.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much depleted uranium is unaccounted for or missing as a result of the malfunction of the test rig which was placed on the sea bed at the Dundrennan range in 2000. [151845]

Mr. Spellar: The depleted uranium samples attached to the test rig damaged by heavy seas in the Solway Firth, and which are now missing, amount to 20.76kg. This is the equivalent of four depleted uranium rounds. If not recovered in a diving exercise planned for the week beginning 5 March, this material will oxidise and disperse in exactly the same way as the existing penetrator rounds, causing a negligible increase above the level of uranium occurring naturally in sea water. Since 1982, when firing of DU rounds into the sea began, there has been no detectable increase in uranium levels in samples of sea water, sea-bed sediment and shellfish taken in the area.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many depleted uranium shells were fired into the Irish Sea in each of the last 10 years. [152629]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* No depleted uranium (DU) shells have been fired into the Irish sea in the last 10 years. DU projectiles are fired from Kirkcudbright into the Solway Firth and the numbers fired over the last 10 years are as follows:

Year	*Numbers fired*
1991	666
1992	781
1993	682
1994	455
1995	280
1996	147
1997	740
1998	134
1999	111
2000	272
2001	[1]14
Total	4,282

[1] to date

National Missile Defence

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if it is the Government's policy that it remains premature to make any judgment on a proposal for National Missile Defence until such a proposal has been made. [151857]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 7 March 2001]:* We share the United States concerns about missile proliferation and we recognise the role that missile defence can play as one part of a strategy to deal with it. We have made it clear that we would want to respond helpfully should the US make a specific request, but until any such proposal has been made it does remain premature to make a specific judgment.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations have been received from BAE Systems and other British companies regarding participation in US National Missile Defence. [152668]

Mr. Hoon *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* None.

Defence Medical Services

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his answer of 15 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 192W, on Defence Medical Services, if he will list each level of medical downgrading used in the medical downgrading categorisation system stating in each case *(a)* the nature of duty restriction, *(b)* the nature of geographical restriction and *(c)* the level of deployability; and if he will make a statement. [151807]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 March 2001]:* The various levels of medical downgrading used in the services medical downgrading categorisation systems are set out in detail in service publications. These are currently under review and a revised version is expected to be finalised shortly. As the level of detail involved would require an answer of considerable length, I will write to the right hon. and learned Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Consultancy Companies

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps are taken to ensure that small consultancy companies are given a fair chance to compete for contracts. [152773]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* The use of competition to select contractors and sub-contractors in order to secure best value for money is the cornerstone of Ministry of Defence's acquisition policy. Suppliers, whether they are small and medium enterprises or large corporate groups, are encouraged to compete for requirements in excess of certain value thresholds (£93,000 for the *Official Journal* of the European Community, and £250,000 for the MOD Contracts Bulletin for consultancy requirements), which are widely advertised. For low value requirements, formal competition may not be considered cost-effective (in respect of bidding and resource costs), and in such cases a supplier may be selected on the basis of expertise or past performance for example. The principle of fairness throughout the acquisition process is not only MOD policy, but is enshrined in UK and European law.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on the imposition of a turnover threshold in relation to competition for consultancy assignments. [152774]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* The Ministry of Defence needs to be assured that potential bidders can fulfil its requirements, and therefore seeks only to invite tenderers with whom it is prepared to place a contract. This not only helps to reduce the cost of bidding to industry, but it provides reassurance that value-for-money defence capability is being delivered. Financial status is just one of the factors taken into account when considering potential bidders eligibility. Turnover size may be employed as part of the calculation to determine whether a supplier has adequate resources to undertake a particular contract, whether for consultancy or other goods or services. This process accords with the central unit on procurement's guidance on good professional practice.

Service Personnel (Sexually Transmitted Diseases)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what tests are carried out on members of HM armed forces for *(a)* sexually transmitted diseases and *(b)* HIV/AIDs; and if he will make a statement. [153169]

Dr. Moonie: There is no compulsory testing for sexually transmitted diseases or HIV. Standard laboratory tests, specific to the particular type of disease, for sexually transmitted diseases are carried out on service personnel where clinically indicated. Tests for HIV are carried out where this is a requirement prior to service in certain countries, or at the request of individuals who are concerned that they may have contracted HIV. Service personnel can, of course, make use of civilian genito-urinary clinics.

2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates the 2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment has served tours of duty in Northern Ireland since 1971. [153098]

Mr. Spellar: The dates on which the 2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment has served tours of duty in Northern Ireland since 1971 are listed.

22 April 1971 to 26 August 1971
15 February 1972 to 15 June 1972
29 July 1972 to 28 September 1972
27 March 1973 to 17 July 1973
29 May 1975 to 29 September 1975
2 December 1976 to 16 March 1977
19 September 1977 to 14 January 1978
27 July 1979 to 6 March 1981
12 November 1984 to 26 March 1985
3 March 1990 to 12 June 1990
4 June 1993 to 3 June 1995
1 October 1994 to 1 April 1995
3 August 1996 to 4 March 1997
15 December 1998 to 15 June 1999
2 December 2000 to current date[1]

[1] Only one company of the 2nd Battalion has been deployed to Northern Ireland during this present tour. This company has been used mainly to protect those military personnel and contractors who are involved in the dismantling of the three remaining Fermanagh Patrol Bases.

Muslims (Forces)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures he has taken to ensure that persons of Muslim belief are able to serve in HM forces without discrimination and are facilitated in their religious observance. [153061]

Mr. Spellar: The armed forces are fully committed to the avoidance of all forms of discrimination and make every effort to respect and accommodate the religious requirements of personnel. Muslim personnel are normally allowed to celebrate religious festivals and holidays and to fast and pray. The armed forces also aim to cater for religious dietary requirements: Halal, Kosher and vegetarian meals are provided by service messes and are available in operational ration packs for operations and exercises. However, there may be some circumstances when, in the interests of health and safety or operational effectiveness, some flexibility may be required on the part of the individual.

Service chaplains are currently working to establish a network of local religious advisers from the Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu and Sikh faiths to ensure that the spiritual and moral needs of all service personnel are provided for to the greatest extent possible.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assistance has been provided for the enforcement of measures to prevent the further spread of foot and mouth disease in Northern Ireland; what instructions have been given to Army units that have patrolled rural areas concerning risk of spreading infection; and what correspondence has he received from Northern Ireland political parties, representatives of farmers organisations and others concerning these matters. [152865]

Mr. Spellar: The military have not been asked to help in the enforcement of measures to prevent the further spread of foot and mouth disease in Northern Ireland, either by other Government Departments (OGDs) or by Irish Ministers or farmers organisations.

The prevailing threat from dissident Republican terrorists prevents the security forces from ceasing their operational activity. While full details cannot be given for reasons of operational security, modified patrol activity is being conducted to counter the threat. All operational activity remains in support of the police, and is aimed at thwarting and deterring terrorist activity.

Royal Navy (Courtesy Calls)

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many courtesy calls and visits have been made by vessels of the Royal Navy to UK towns, cities and ports in each year since January 1997; what the duration was of each visit; and if he will list the port and vessel involved in each case. [153029]

Mr. Spellar: The total number of courtesy calls and visits by vessels of the Royal Navy to UK towns, cities and ports since January 1997, including operational stand-offs, affiliation, fishery protection and informal visits, is as follows:

	Number of visits
1997	377
1998	434
1999	381
2000	478
2001 (to date)	51

I am placing in the Library of the House a detailed list of the visits, showing the duration of the visit and the port and vessel involved in each case.

Air Traffic Controllers

Mr. Duncan Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many RAF air traffic controllers have *(a)* been recruited and *(b)* left the service in each of the past five years; how many air traffic controllers there are in the RAF; how many RAF air traffic controllers have joined National Air Traffic Services in the past year; and what plans he has for retention schemes for RAF air traffic controllers. [153172]

Mr. Spellar: The following table shows the intake and outflow of air traffic controllers (ATC) in the RAF over the past five years:

	Intake	*Outflow*
1996	11	108
1997	43	55
1998	53	48
1999	64	41
2000	49	53

The current trained strength of ATC as at 1 February 2001 is 822.

The RAF does not maintain records to show how many ATC have joined National Air Traffic Services. There are currently no plans for retention schemes specifically related to RAF ATC.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what licences have been granted for the export of arms and military equipment to Sri Lanka in each year since 1997. [152481]

Dr. Howells: I have been asked to reply

Details of all export licensing decisions taken between 2 May 1997 and 31 December 1999 were set out in the Government's 1997, 1998 and 1999 Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls, published by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; copies are in the Library of the House. These reports list by country of destination the export licences issued and refused in each entry in the relevant legislation under which the export of goods is controlled, which is known as their rating.

Between 1 January 2000 and 1 March 2001 40 Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and five Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued covering goods on the Military List. Details of these are set out in the tables:

Standard Individual Export Licences issued between 1 January 2000 and 1 March 2001 for Sri Lanka

Rating	*Number of SIELs*
ML1	6
ML2	3
ML3	8
ML4	3
ML5	2
ML6	2
ML9	2
ML10	2
ML11	8
ML14	1
ML15	4
ML21	1
ML22	4
PL5017	10
P5031	1

Open Individual Export Licences issued between 1 January 2000 and 1 March 2001 for Sri Lanka

Rating	*Number of OIELs*
ML5	2
ML10	1
ML11	1
ML13	2
ML17	1
MLPL5001	1

Note:
Each licence may cover a range of ratings, and where this is so, data on them are included under each of the relevant ratings.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Customs and Excise

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Solicitor-General if a decision has been reached concerning the future of Customs and Excise as a prosecuting authority. [153572]

The Solicitor-General: The report by His Honour John Gower QC and Sir Anthony Hammond KCB QC was delivered to the Attorney-General on 5 December 2000. I have today placed a copy of the report in the Libraries and copies of the report are available on request to the solicitor for HM Customs and Excise.

The report concludes that the Customs and Excise solicitor's office should retain its prosecution function, but that in exercising this function, including the giving of advice to investigating officers, it must be truly independent and be seen to be so. To that end, the report has also concluded that in relation to the prosecution function the solicitor should be accountable to the Attorney-General rather than to the commissioners and that the solicitor/client relationship between the commissioners and the solicitor should cease in relation to this function. Where cases are referred to the solicitor's office with a view to prosecution, the decision on whether to do so will rest with the appropriate lawyer after consultation with, where

necessary, an administrator on matters of policy and public interest. These recommendations are supported by a number of associated recommendations on detailed structural and financial aspects.

The Government have carefully considered all these recommendations. They accept all the recommendations in principle, but, given the significant resource implications associated with some recommendations, have opted for a phased approach to implementation.

The Government have had particular regard to the need to ensure that adequate resources are made available to the solicitor's office to enable it properly to conduct the large and complex drugs and other prosecutions which were the main focus of the report, and which are conducted by the special casework division of that office (SCD). They have therefore decided to afford this area of work the greatest priority.

Accordingly, it has been decided that, with effect from 1 April 2001, Customs and Excise will invest sufficient extra resources in the solicitor's office to enable it to implement the recommendations in the report which bear directly on the cases conducted by the SCD. This will mean that, taken with additional resources already provided to the solicitor's office in relation to the Butler report, the number of staff working on those cases in the SCD will almost double.

These additional resources will enable recommendation 10 of the report (the attendance at conferences with counsel, and attendance at hearings in the Crown court) to be implemented quickly in relation to all SCD cases, and in over 60 per cent. of the cases conducted by the solicitor's office in total. The implementation of the remainder of that recommendation will be subject to local trials to evaluate the benefits and costs.

Recommendation 15 (the conduct of magistrates courts proceedings) will not be implemented immediately and will also be subject to such local trials.

The report concludes that Customs and Excise lawyers are dedicated professionals with valuable skills and expertise, and the Government believe that making the changes in accountability, responsibility and resourcing referred to above will ensure public confidence in the solicitor's office as a prosecuting authority.

To enable detailed consideration to be given to the implementation of the remaining recommendations in the report, particularly where these have structural and budgetary implications, the change in accountability will have effect on 1 April 2002.

HEALTH

NHS Dentistry

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the criteria his Department uses in assessing whether NHS dentistry is available to those who need it; and how many extra dentists will be required to ensure full availability, on these criteria, by 2001. [143259]

Mr. Hutton: We are committed to making National Health Service Dentistry available to all who need it by September 2001. The key test for this target will be whether callers (to the health authority or to NHS Direct) can be offered dentistry.

There are more dentists working within the General Dental Service than ever before. In England there are now about 18,040, over 1,600 up on 1997. Availability problems are not caused by a shortage of dentists but by the amount of time dentists dedicate to private work. To address this problem the dental strategy, "Modernising NHS Dentistry: Implementing the NHS Plan", offers incentives to NHS dentists to maintain and increase the amount of NHS work they do. The strategy also allows health authorities to commission personal dental services in areas where there are access difficulties.

Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy

Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the membership of the task force formed to study Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy; and if he will make a statement. [146327]

Mr. Hutton: We have not formed a task force to study Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy.

However, the Griffith's review (Review of the Research Framework in the North Staffordshire National Health Service Trust) recommended that the Department convene an expert and inter-disciplinary panel to review methods of identification of children who have either had illnesses induced or fabricated by their carer. In response to this recommendation, which the Government accepted, a steering group has been formed to develop draft guidance for public consultation. This guidance is being developed within the framework of our interagency guidance on child protection "Working Together to Safeguard Children" (1999).

The group is chaired by Mr. Bruce Clark, a senior official of the Department, and in addition to the external members listed, comprises administrative officials, together with medical, nursing and health advisers, from the Department of Health, the Department for Education and Employment, the Home Office and the National Assembly for Wales.

The external members include:

Dr. G Adshead—Royal College of Psychiatry

Ms I Charles-Edwards—English National Board of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting

Mr. J Fox—Association of Chief Police Officers

Ms S Hensman—Royal College of Nursing

Ms D Kinnair—Community Practitioner and Health Visitors Association

Ms S Smallman—United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting

Dr. D Sowden—Royal College of General Practitioners

Mr. A Webb—Association of Directors of Social Services.

Genetic Conditions (Insurance)

Siobhain McDonagh: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what safeguards apply to ensure that people applying for insurance policies are not asked to reveal the results of tests for genetic conditions which have not had approval from the Genetics and Insurance Committee. [148856]

Yvette Cooper: The use of genetic test results by insurers is governed by a genetic testing code of practice issued by the Association of British Insurers. For an insurance company to ask for the results of a genetic test

for a condition which is not approved by the Genetics and Insurance Committee (or is not one of the specified tests for conditions currently being considered by the Committee) would be in breach of an undertaking given by the ABI and in breach of their code of practice. Individuals who feel they have been unfairly treated under the code of practice can refer their case to an independent Adjudication Tribunal set up under the code. If the tribunal upholds a complaint, it is required to consider what further remedy or penalty is appropriate.

A requirement to report to Ministers on the compliance by the industry with the recommendations of GAIC is also included in the terms of reference of GAIC.

We have asked the Human Genetics Commission to examine the issues and the use of genetic information including in insurance and employment.

Cardiothoracic Transplant Services

Mr. Allan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when he expects to publish a discussion document on the reorganisation of cardiothoracic transplant services; [149672]

(2) what arrangements he is making for public consultation on the reorganisation of cardiothoracic transplant services. [149671]

Mr. Denham: We will issue a document soon setting out proposals for the future of the National Cardiothoracic Transplant service. The document will invite views on the proposals from patients, the public and appropriate organisations.

Weston General Hospital

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the waiting times in the Gastroenterology Department of Weston General Hospital were in 2000; and what the national average waiting time was in that year. [152428]

Mr. Denham: The national average waiting times for the gastroenterology speciality at 31 December 2000 were two months for inpatient treatment; and 8.1 weeks for an outpatient appointment. Waiting times for the gastroenterology service at Weston Area Health National Health Service Trust are not reported separately to the Department because at the trust this service is provided within the general medicine speciality. The hon. Gentleman may wish to contact Ms Martha Perriam, chairman of the trust, for further information.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many appointments were cancelled by Weston General Hospital in 2000; and what the national average was in that year. [152429]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Northwick Park and Mount Vernon Hospitals

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list *(a)* the amount and *(b)* the purpose of each specific grant allocation made to (i) Northwick Park Hospital and (ii) Mount Vernon Hospital since 1997. [152490]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the format requested. The Department does not give grants to trusts direct. The Department allocates directly to health authorities using a national weighted capitation formula.

Northwick Park Hospital comes under the health economy area of Brent and Harrow health authority. The 2001–02 unified allocation for Brent and Harrow health authority is £371 million, which represents a cash increase of £31 million (8.99 per cent.). Mount Vernon Hospital comes under the health economy area of Hillingdon health authority. The 2001–02 unified allocation for Hillingdon health authority is £184 million, which represents a cash increase of £16 million (9.35 per cent.).

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much certified timber has been purchased by his Department over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152114]

Ms Stuart: At present Departments do not yet have systems in place to provide data on the proportion of certified timber purchased over the last six months. The interdepartmental timber working group is working to develop a common reporting template which will form the basis for future reporting on timber procurement. An annual report will be provided in line with the answer given on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, columns 947–48W, by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152113]

Ms Stuart: Departments will be reporting their progress on all aspects of greening government and the report from Green Ministers is due to be published in November. It will make specific reference to timber procurement. Further information may be published separately.

Alcohol

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the consultation document on a national strategy for alcohol abuse will be published. [152665]

Ms Stuart: We remain committed to the publication of a cross-Government strategy to tackle alcohol misuse, and we are working with key stakeholders across Government, the alcohol field and the alcohol industry to ensure that this commitment is delivered.

The NHS Plan, published in July 2000, said that the Department would be implementing the strategy by 2004. The Department expects to publish a consultation paper in due course.

Mobile Phones

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what changes were made to the draft leaflet "Mobile Phones and Health" in the section relating to the use of mobile phones by children and young people under 16 following receipt of comments from the Department of Trade and Industry; and if he will make a statement. [153256]

Yvette Cooper: Detailed discussions took place between the Department of Health, the Department of Trade and Industry, other Government Departments and United Kingdom Chief Medical Officers throughout the process of developing the leaflet. A number of drafts were discussed as is customary in situations where it is necessary to identify the best way to put complex scientific issues into plain English. The CMOs' intention to provide clear advice to parents over children using mobile phones was paramount throughout. The final version was signed off by all four CMOs after agreement between them.

Psychiatric Drugs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the use of *(a)* Prozac and *(b)* other psychiatric drugs on children. [153260]

Mr. Hutton: Prozac is not licensed for use in children in the United Kingdom. Doctors may prescribe Prozac, outside the normal licensed indication, if they consider that this is in the patient's best interests.

Other psychotropic drugs are less commonly used in children than adults as the prevalence of severe mental illness is considerably lower. Methylphenidate (Ritalin) and other similar stimulants are, however, licensed and used for the treatment of the more severe forms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence issued guidance last November on the use of Methylphenidate.

Waiting Lists (Mid Essex)

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the most recent figures for the numbers of people *(a)* waiting for hospital treatment and *(b)* waiting to see a consultant in the Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust area. [153374]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is as follows:

Total number of patients waiting for hospital treatment at Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust in January 2001:

January 2001—Total number of patients waiting 9,282
Source:
Monthly waiting list returns.

Total number of patients waiting 13 weeks or more for an outpatient appointment at Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust in Quarter 3, 2000–01:

Quarter 3 2000–01—Number of patients waiting over 13 weeks—2,349
Source:
QM08 quarterly return.

Abuse in Care

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the number of people who have been abused as children in the care system since 1971. [153392]

Mr. Hutton: We do not know how many children in care have been abused since 1971, and do not have a sound basis on which to form an estimate. It is a tragedy for any child to be abused, and a particular betrayal when such abuse happens in care. As we made clear in "Learning the Lessons", our response to the report of the Waterhouse Inquiry, too many children in the past were failed by the very services that should have been helping them. We are concentrating our efforts on ensuring that such failures in the care system are not allowed to happen again, as evidenced by our programme of new protective legislation for children in care and our £885 million Quality Protects Programme.

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what specific services are available for people who were abused while in care. [153394]

Mr. Hutton: A variety of health and social care provision is available for people who were abused while in care. Counsellors, clinical psychologists and others are available within mental health services provided in primary care, and/or specialised services.

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many people who were abused in care needed mental health services in each of the past three financial years; and what was the cost of these services; [153395]

(2) if he will develop a strategy to support those adults who were abused as children in care. [153396]

Mr. Hutton: We are aware that people who have been abused in care may continue to experience mental health problems. However, central records are not kept of the number who disclose this history. We have set out clear national standards in the National Service Framework for Mental Health. It describes how people should be able to get quicker access to more effective treatments in and through primary care, with support from specialised services where necessary.

Children's Manifesto

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received about the Children's Manifesto produced by Barnardos, the Child Poverty Action Group and the NSPCC; and what plans he has to evaluate and monitor services to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. [153397]

Mr. Hutton: The Children's Manifesto is an interesting and thought-provoking document that we are considering carefully. We share the aim expressed in the manifesto of enabling today's young people to grow into secure, confident and resourceful citizens. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are children in need under the Children Act 1989. Services for them are, therefore, monitored and evaluated in the same way as other children's personal social services. From time to time, as necessary, we look specifically at services for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. For example, we asked local authorities to describe services for this group in their Year 3 Quality Protects Management Action Plans, submitted in January 2001. These plans are currently being evaluated.

Child Sex Abuse

Ms Julie Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to ensure that children who sexually abuse other children have access to appropriate treatment services. [153398]

Mr. Hutton: Children who sexually abuse other children are likely to have considerable, often complex, needs. Local authorities are expected to work closely with their partner agencies to ensure that such children receive support and treatment based on their assessed needs.

Injury Victims

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money has been spent annually by his Department since 1997 on *(a)* research into the prevention of intentional injuries, *(b)* research into the epidemiology, care and rehabilitation of victims of injury and *(c)* research into the biological mechanisms underlying the injury process and injury treatment. [153178]

Yvette Cooper: The Department's research is conducted into a wide range of areas including head injury, fractures and self-harm. However, information in the form requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Zimbabwe

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much *(a)* bilateral and *(b)* European Union aid has been given to Zimbabwe in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [152208]

Clare Short: UK bilateral development assistance to Zimbabwe was as follows:

	£ million
1995–96	15.0
1996–97	11.1
1997–98	12.2
1998–99	16.6
1999–2000	14.0

We expect to spend £11.2 million in 2000–01.

EC development assistance to Zimbabwe in the last five years for which data are available was:

	£ million
1994	63.2
1995	38.2
1996	38.6
1997	10.6
1998	13.2

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much has been spent by her Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152649]

Clare Short: Since its establishment in 1997 (as the successor to the Overseas Development Administration) this Department has spent the following on revised logo/identity:

	£
Logo change	6,000
Licensing typeface	5,000
Guidelines for contractors: on logo/identity issues	5,600

Mozambique

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations her Department has received from Mozambique about the impact of recent floods; what response has been made; and if she will make a statement. [152266]

Clare Short: Following the immediate relief operation in response to last year's catastrophic floods in Mozambique, my Department has remained engaged in rehabilitation as well as in developing new measures, via the United Nations system, to strengthen both UN and Government of Mozambique contingency arrangements for future disasters. Over the past few months DFID, FCO, MOD, the RNLI and the UK Fire Service have been working together to prepare contingency plans for different emergency scenarios. In addition, we have continued to work closely with the Government of Mozambique's National Directorate of Water to set up early warning flood systems with the UK Met Office.

Following the onset of the current floods, we have switched gear to immediate response operations which are deliberately aimed at preventative rescue and relief, i.e. extricating people before the worst hits them and there is substantial loss of life and suffering. In addition to contributing £250,000 to the Red Cross appeal for Mozambique, we are currently:

- funding two Puma helicopters which are busy moving people from the riskiest areas and transporting urgent relief supplies;
- providing three logisticians to World Food Programme to assist in its operational response;
- providing a humanitarian specialist in Beira to reinforce DFID presence on the ground and conduct field assessments.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what factors he considered before he gave his advice that it would be beneficial for the Cabinet Secretary to accept a lunch invitation from the Hindujas. [153433]

Mr. Wilson: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office considered that accepting such an invitation would be beneficial to British commercial interests in India. The Hinduja group has extensive commercial interests in India.

President Mugabe

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Belgian Government regarding their reception of President Mugabe. [152960]

Mr. Wilson: The Foreign Secretary raised his deep concern at recent events in Zimbabwe, and his views on the current situation, with the Belgian Foreign Minister before the latter's meeting with President Mugabe on 5 March.

UK/India Round Table

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 6 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 173W, if he will list those present representing *(a)* the UK and *(b)* India at each of the meetings of the UK/India Round Table; and if he will list the recommendations arising from these two meetings. [153435]

Mr. Wilson: The following people participated in the two meetings of the UK/India Round Table held so far:

First Meeting

UK Side

The Lord Paul of Marylebone—Co-Chairman

Professor Judith Brown—Balliol College, Oxford

Daljit Dhaliwal—Journalist and Broadcaster

Stephen Evans—Head, South Asian Department, FCO

Patrick French—Author

Sir David Goodall KCMG—Former High Commissioner to India

Melville Guest—Chief Executive, Asia House

David Jeffries, CBE, FEng—Co-Chairman, Indo-British Partnership

John Lloyd—Journalist

Liz Lloyd—Policy Unit, No. 10

Ros Marsden—Director, Asia/Pacific, FCO

Alpesh Patel—Businessman and Journalist

Sir Rob Young KCMG—High Commissioner to India

Indian Side

K. C. Pant—Co-Chairman

Swapan Dasgupta—Deputy Editor, India Today

HE Nareshwar Dayal—High Commissioner of India UK

Dr. Ashok S. Ganguly—Chairman, ICI Ltd.

Dr. Jamshed J. Irani—MD, Tata Iron and Steel Co. Ltd.

Sandhya Jain—Columnist, The Pioneer

Uday S. Kotak—Vice Chairman, Kotat Mahindra Finance

Hemedra Kothari—Chairman, DSP Merrill Lynch

Bashwati Mukherjee—Joint Secretary, Indian Ministry of External Affairs

M. K. Rasgotra—Former High Commissioner to London

Dr. Jahar Saha—Director Indian Institute of Management

Aveek Sarkar—Editor-in Chief, Anand Bazar Patrika

Professor Obaid Siddiqi—Scientist, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research

Second Meeting

UK Side

The Lord Paul of Marylebone—Co-Chairman

Professor Judith Brown—Balliol College, Oxford

Stephen Evans—Head of South Asian Department, FCO

Patrick French—Author

Sir David Goodall KCMG—Former High Commissioner to India

Melville Guest—Chief Executive, Asia House

David Jeffries, CBE, FEng—Co-Chairman, Indo-British Partnership

Sir Tim Lankester, KCB—Director, School of Oriental and African Studies

John Lloyd—Journalist

Liz Lloyd—Policy Unit, No. 10

Edmund Marsden—Director, British Council India

Ros Marsden—Director, Asia/Pacific, FCO

Alpesh Patel—Businessman and Journalist

Mark Tully—Freelance writer and journalist

Sir Rob Young KCMG—High Commissioner to India

Indian Side

K. C. Pant—Co-Chairman

Swapan Dasgupta—Deputy Editor, India Today

HE Nareshwar Dayal—High Commissioner of India to UK

Dr. Ashok S. Ganguly—Chairman, ICI Ltd.

Sandhya Jain—Columnist, The Pioneer

Girish Karnard—Director, Nehru Centre, London

Hemendra Kothari—Chairman, DSP Merrill Lynch

Bhaswati Mukherjee—Joint Secretary, Indian Ministry of External Affairs

M. K. Rasgotra—Former High Commissioner to London

Jahar Saha—Director, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad

Aveek Sarkar—Editor-in Chief, Anand Bazar Patrika

Dr. Gautam Sen—Lecturer, London School of Economics

Professor Obaid Siddiqi—Scientist, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research.

On each occasion, the Round Table made a series of recommendations covering a range of issues which impact on the bilateral relationship—including trade, commerce, investment, IT, media, culture, academic co-operation and visas. A copy of the recommendations will be placed in the Libraries of the Houses of Parliament.

Echelon Surveillance System

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the Echelon surveillance system. [153269]

Mr. Robin Cook: The hon. Member will be aware that it is long-standing Government policy not to comment on alleged surveillance systems.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Fuel Smuggling

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on which date he last met representatives of the retail petrol industry in Northern Ireland to discuss the smuggling of motor fuel products into Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [153427]

Dr. Reid: My right hon. Friend the Minister of State met with representatives of the petroleum industry on Monday 5 March 2001. The purpose of the meeting was to hear the industry's concerns in relation to fuel smuggling into Northern Ireland. This criminal activity is being pursued with the utmost vigour. During the period April to September 2000, fuel to the value of £1.3 million was seized. Also, during the course of last year, 13 laundering plants with an estimated annual production in excess of 40 million litres of fuel were dismantled.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the dates in 2001 on which he or his officials have held discussions with his counterparts in the Irish Republic on the smuggling of motor fuel products into Northern Ireland. [153424]

Dr. Reid: My officials were due to meet with their Republic of Ireland counterparts on Friday 2 March 2001 to discuss fuel smuggling. The foot and mouth crisis prohibited that meeting from taking place and a new date has been set for the end of March.

Mr. Vincent McKenna

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what date the RUC was first informed of allegations against Mr. Vincent McKenna; what steps were taken to protect children coming into contact with him; and what advice was made available to senior police officers and officials coming into contact with the campaign with which Mr. McKenna was identified. [150837]

Mr. Ingram: On 2 July 1998, under joint protocol arrangements, the Department of Health and Social Services informed the Royal Ulster Constabulary that Monaghan social services had made them aware of allegations against Mr. McKenna. As a result, RUC officers from the child abuse and rape enquiry (CARE) unit in Mr. Mckenna's area and local social services convened a number of case conferences and liaison was established with An Garda Siochana. It would be inappropriate to provide specific details of the action taken.

There was no disclosure of the allegations against Mr. McKenna until such time as details were in the public arena.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what dates information was received from the Garda Siochana concerning the allegations and prosecution of Mr. Vincent McKenna. [150581]

Mr. Ingram: On 2 July 1998, under joint protocol arrangements, the Department of Health and Social Services informed the Royal Ulster Constabulary that Monaghan social services had made them aware of allegations against Mr. McKenna. Liaison was established with An Garda Siochana on or shortly after this date and was maintained until the criminal proceedings against Mr. McKenna concluded.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps have been taken to share information with the Garda Siochana concerning Mr. Vincent McKenna; how many persons have been interviewed since the conviction of Mr. Vincent McKenna; and what steps have been taken to investigate further allegations. [150582]

Mr. Ingram: Liaison with An Garda Siochana was established by the Royal Ulster Constabulary once they were made aware of allegations against Mr. McKenna and this was maintained until the criminal proceedings concluded.

No complaints have been made alleging any offences in Northern Ireland; consequently no investigation has been conducted by the RUC.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

People's Peerages

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council how many persons are to be recommended to the Prime Minister for a people's peerage. [151863]

Mrs. Beckett: The Prime Minister has asked the Appointments Commission to submit 15 names of people to be recommended for non-political peerages. In the past, each honours list was accompanied by the publication of four or five names of new peers. The last such honours list was at the new year 2000.

CABINET OFFICE

Consultative Group on Better Regulation

Mr. Andy King: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress has been made by the high-level consultative group on better regulation set up by the Strasbourg meeting of European Ministers of Public Administration last November. [153703]

Mr. Stringer: Following the decision by the Ministers of Public Administration, the first meeting of the Group took place on 21 December in Paris. Chaired by Dieudonné Mandelkern, the French representative, the Group agreed its work plan for the first four months in accordance with its mandate from the Ministers. It decided to look at five themes—codification of existing legislation, simplification, improving consultation, impact assessment (including alternatives to regulation) and the administrative structures needed to support this. I have placed a copy of this work plan and a copy of the Ministers' resolution establishing the Group in the Library of the House.

The second and third meetings of the Group looked at each of the five themes identified, resulting in agreement on the Group's initial report at its meeting in Paris on 26–27 February. On the suggestion of the Swedish representative, the Group also decided it should be known as the 'Mandelkern Group' in future, after its chairman. I have placed a copy of the initial report in the Library of the House.

The Group's initial report is an excellent document covering the main issues of better regulation. Alongside espousing some general principles of better regulation, it makes specific and practical recommendations on each of the five key themes. It is being discussed by the Internal Market Council today and will then be one of the

contributions to the Stockholm European Council on 23–24 March. This document is a very positive development, representing as it does the first time that representatives of all 15 European member states have endorsed such a specific text on better regulation.

Rural Policy

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when she last met other Ministers to discuss co-ordination of the Government's rural policy; and if she will make a statement. [153403]

Mr. Ian McCartney: It is established practice under exemption two of Part II of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information not to disclose information relating to the proceedings of Cabinet Committees.

Policy and Strategy Units

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the post of director of policy studies was established; which of the director's reports are in the public domain; how many departmental or non-departmental special advisers participate in its work; how many regular *(a)* non-departmental and *(b)* departmental staff participate in its work; and how many of these work for him on a full-time basis. [150365]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Policy Studies Directorate (PSD) is part of the Centre for Management and Policy Studies and the Director of Policy Studies was appointed in March 2000. PSD supports policy makers by evaluating new approaches to policy making and promoting best practice, by encouraging and enabling an evidence-based approach and by working to ensure high standards in Government research and evaluation. It is the intention that research reports on new approaches to policy making will be published as they are completed. Special Advisers to Ministers may contribute to the work of the unit in the same way as they would to the other work of a Department, in line with their role and duties as set out in the "Model Contract for Special Advisers". The Director currently has a staff of 22; six are Cabinet Office permanent staff; 11 are on loan from other Departments; one is on secondment from a university; and two are temporary clerical staff. All work full-time for her. Two research fellows—one permanent Cabinet Office staff and one secondee—work part-time for her.

Early Retirement

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what terms and conditions apply in the case of public sector employees seeking early retirement when those same workers are part of the disabled quota. [152841]

Mr. Stringer: Early retirement terms are the same for all civil servants, including those with a disability. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 removed the system of quotas and allowed individuals to declare themselves disabled without the need for formal verification from medical records or a doctor.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what conditions must be satisfied before a civil service worker can take early retirement. [152842]

Mr. Stringer: The minimum age at which most civil servants can retire with full superannuation benefits is 60. The Civil Service Management Code enables staff to retire or be retired early by Departments and agencies on several grounds. A copy of the code is available in the Library.

Public Relations (Expenditure)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure was in her Department for the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000, and what the planned expenditure and breakdown of expenditure for 2000–01 is on (i) public opinion research, (ii) television, radio and newspaper advertising and (iii) direct mail. [149269]

Marjorie Mowlam: The total expenditure during *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000, and the planned expenditure during 2000–01 on (i) public opinion research, (ii) television, radio and newspaper advertising and (iii) direct mail, is shown in the table. All figures are inclusive of VAT where applicable.

Table—total and planned expenditure

£

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*[1]
Public Opinion Research	[2]—	656,604	897,622	270,096	532,076
Advertising (television, radio and newspaper)	337,465	238,270	246,438	678,601	662,277
Direct Mail	548,204	660,427	521,950	428,304	553,060
Total	885,669	1,555,301	1,666,010	1,377,001	1,747,413

[1] Planned
[2] Not available

Notes:
1. Figures only include Cabinet Office entities and divisions as of 31 January 2001.
2. Figures do not include the salary costs of Cabinet Office staff.
3. Direct Mail includes all postage services costs of the Cabinet Office.
4. Expenditure on advertising include recruitment advertising.
5. Expenditure undertaken by Central Office of Information on behalf of clients is not included.

Computer Systems

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) what facilities are immediately available to Departments principally involved in the collection or distribution of funds in the event of existing computer systems failing; [152633]

(2) what instructions have been given to Government Departments to ensure effective back-up systems exist in

the event of existing computer systems failing; and if annual reviews of these instructions take place; [152634]

(3) when the last assessment of departmental computer back-up systems took place; and what improvements were made subsequently; [152635]

(4) if he will list those commercial companies he has been in contact with in the last 24 months regarding disaster contingency programmes; [152636]

(5) which Minister has specific responsibility for computer disaster contingency programmes. [152637]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Each Government Department is responsible for ensuring it has robust business continuity plans in place to ensure that they can respond effectively to a wide range of problems, including computer failure. Departments are expected to test these plans regularly and to respond to any weaknesses identified. From January 2001 all new high risk projects involving procurement in the Civil Departments of central Government, along with their executive agencies and NDPBs require a business continuity plan that addresses potential problems during implementation and roll out of the project.

Guidance to Departments is principally made available via the Office of Government Commerce, which also chairs an Interdepartmental Business Continuity Planning Forum. This forum has involved a range of commercial companies, including the Guardian IT Group and SGRS.

Departments are also required to ensure that their computer systems are adequately protected, and to review regularly security measures. An IT Health Check Service is available from companies accredited by GCHQ's Communications-Electronics Security Group, which will identify vulnerabilities and recommend effective security counter measures.

To enhance further security across Government, especially in relation to computer systems, all Departments have now prepared plans to achieve compliance with the International Standard on Information Security Management (ISO 17799). The standard requires organisations to develop and test effective business continuity plans, and Departments will be asked to gain objective assurance that key systems are adequately protected.

Strategic Communications Unit

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what was the cost of running the Strategic Communications Unit for each financial year since 1 May 1997. [153265]

The Prime Minister: I am replying to this question as it relates to matters for which I am responsible.

The cost of running the Strategic Communications Unit (SCU) in 1999–2000 was £838,421. In the current financial year, the cost up to the end of December 2000 was £732,364. For information on previous years' expenditure, I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 10 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 22W.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Disability Discrimination Act

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what targets and indicators his Department has set to monitor progress towards delivering increased employer awareness of the employment provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. [150819]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* We have not set specific targets for employer awareness of the employment provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Employer awareness is, however, one of the indicators used by my Department and we test the level through research. A survey carried out in 1998 showed that 75 per cent. of respondents were aware of the DDA, including all respondents from large firms. While 80 per cent. of large firms also stated that they were very or fairly aware of the employment provisions in the Act, awareness was much lower among small businesses at 36 per cent. My Department has recently commissioned a survey of workplaces, involving interviews with line managers as well as personnel staff and head office staff. This survey will examine a range of issues regarding the employment and retention of disabled people, including awareness of the employment provisions of the DDA.

As part of our efforts to raise awareness, a wide range of information about the DDA has been included in free leaflets and by April 2000, over 2 million had been distributed by the DDA Helpline, which was set up to give information and advice to businesses and disabled people. The "See the Person" campaign was launched in June 1999 to raise awareness about disability and to give information and advice to employers and service providers about the requirements of the DDA. The campaign included TV and radio advertisements, posters, press articles, and publicity organised through employers' organisations. The campaign was used to promote new publications such as a good practice guide for employing disabled people which has also been helpfully promoted through organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and the CBI. The Government's current publicity campaign—"What have you got to offer"—is aimed at service providers and their responsibilities to provide access to disabled customers under Part III of the DDA. The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) took over responsibility for the Helpline, when it was set up in April 2000, and continues to provide support, advice and free publications about the Act. The DRC Helpline is on 08457 622 633.

On Monday 5 March we announced our intention to end the exemption of small employers from the DDA employment provisions in 2004. Through our document—"Towards Inclusion"—we are consulting on what help small employers might need as a result and we said that the DRC, the Small Business Service and the DfEE's telephone advice line, Equality Direct, would all work together to ensure that effective advice and information are available at the right time. Our intention is to continue working with these and other organisations and services and increase awareness through a range of initiatives including publicity campaigns.

Job Loss Compensation

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the occasions since 1971 when compensation was paid to individuals who lost their jobs as a result of a change in the law. [152278]

Ms Jowell: Job gains and losses occur for a variety of reasons. Currently, job gains exceed job losses with employment in the UK up 225,000 over the last year (ending October to December 2000). Where job losses occur it is, in general, contrary to EU state aid rules for the Government to compensate companies, partnerships and/or individuals whatever their cause. In these cases, individuals have employment rights including statutory entitlement to redundancy payments from their employer.

Teacher Training

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money was made available for teacher training and in-service teacher training for teaching about child protection in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999 and *(d)* 2000; and how much will be available in 2001. [152280]

Jacqui Smith: The Department made a further £1.5 million available from the Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) programme for 1997–98. The purpose of this funding was to enable senior teachers with designated responsibility for child protection to receive appropriate and practical in-service training. From 2001–02, schools will be free to use most of their devolved Standards Fund grant to meet their individual priorities, including, where appropriate, in-service teacher training in child protection. The Standards Fund will increase to around £2.2 billion (excluding capital expenditure) in 2001–02, most of which will be devolved to schools.

Circular 4/98, "Teaching: High Status, High Standards", sets out the requirements for all courses of initial teacher training. It makes specific references to child protection standards, which all trainees must demonstrate that they meet in order to gain Qualified Teacher Status. It is for individual providers to decide how best to deliver appropriate training from within their overall funding.

We are currently reviewing our child protection guidance to the education service and will make a decision later about whether to support any new guidance with further funding for training.

School Councils

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will develop a statutory framework for school councils in both primary and secondary schools. [152281]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Citizenship programme of study, which will become statutory for secondary schools in September 2002, encourages active participation of young people in the democratic life of their school and the wider community. School councils and class councils provide excellent opportunities to fulfil this aim, although within the flexible Citizenship programme, it will be open to schools to decide whether to have a school council.

To support the schools that decide to introduce a school or class council, the Department has funded School Councils UK to produce a primary schools toolkit, and develop resources for secondary schools to enable teachers and pupils to set up effective structures for pupil participation. The primary toolkit was made available to schools last September and the secondary resource will be made available to schools this summer.

School Buildings (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what funding has been made available to the London borough of Wandsworth in each year since 1997 for improving school buildings. [152680]

Jacqui Smith: The following table shows the total central Government support for capital investment made in Wandsworth local education authority from 1996–98 to 2000–01. This includes £4.651 million investment through the New Deal for Schools programme.

In January this year, we announced that the New Deal for Schools would be extended over the next three years to 2003–04. Allocations benefiting schools in Wandsworth local education authority announced in January under the New Deal for Schools total £2.827 million over three years. This amount will be increased by the extra funding announced in the Chancellor's Budget Statement on 7 March, and later this year when allocations to local authorities of the new £555 million New Deal for Schools Modernisation programme are announced.

It will be for Wandsworth and its schools, working within guidelines provided by the Department, to allocate this new funding to individual projects.

Nationally, capital investment in school buildings has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.5 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £8.5 billion in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Central Government support for capital investment in Wandsworth local education authority 1997–98 to 2000–01

£000

Year	*Wandsworth*
1997–98	861
1998–99	1,897
1999–2000	3,476
2000–01	6,980
Total	13,214

Numeracy and Literacy (South Tyneside)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on trends in numeracy and literacy among children in junior schools in the borough of South Tyneside since 1996. [152765]

Ms Estelle Morris: In the 2000 Key Stage 2 tests, 72 per cent. of South Tyneside's 11-year-olds achieved the expected standard for their age in English, an increase of 16 percentage points since 1996. In mathematics, 74 per cent. of pupils achieved the expected standard, a

21 percentage point increase since 1996. These results are clear evidence of the success of the national literacy and numeracy strategies.

Education Funding (South Shields and South Tyneside)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the annual increase has been in the Standards Fund since 1996; and how much of the Standards Fund has been spent in *(a)* South Shields constituency and *(b)* the borough of South Tyneside in each year since then. [152766]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the annual cash increase in the Standards Fund since 1996–97:

£ million

Year	*Total allocations*	*Increase on previous year*	*DfEE contribution*	*Increase on previous year*
1996–97	265	14	163	12
1997–98	320	55	211	48
1998–99	620	300	395	184
1999–2000	1,260	640	862	467
2000–01	2,490	1,230	1,913	1,051

Note:
The total allocation figures include both Government and local authority contributions.

Figures for the amount of grant spent in an individual constituency cannot be provided, but the following table shows the Standards Fund grant spent in South Tyneside local education authority since 1996–97. The figures include all grants paid through the Standards Fund payment system excluding New Deal for School capital, which is not part of the Standards Fund programme.

Amount of Standards Fund spent in the borough of South Tyneside

£ million

Year	*Total expenditure*	*DfEE contribution*
1996–97	1.1	0.7
1997–98	1.4	1.0
1998–99	2.4	1.5
1999–2000	4.0	2.8
2000–01	9.5	7.3

Notes:
1. The total expenditure figures include both Government and local authority contributions.
2. The figures for 1996–97, 1997–98, 1998–99 and 1999–2000 are audited outturn expenditure figures.
3. The figures for 2000–01 are the total expenditure currently expected to be incurred in this financial year.

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the funding allocations, by scheme, to South Tyneside Local Education Authority in each year since 1996; and what his estimates are for the 2001–02 financial year. [152780]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer my right hon. Friend to the letter sent to him by the Secretary of State on 16 February. The total funding for South Tyneside local education authority since 1996–97 is set out:

£ million

	1996–97	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–01*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
SSA	59.0	59.5	65.7	68.8	71.8	73.6
Grants	0.7	3.0	1.4	3.0	6.5	7.7
Of which:						
Standards Fund[1]	0.7	0.9	1.1	2.0	4.1	4.9
Class Size Reduction Grant	—	—	—	0.2	0.3	0.4
Education Action Zones	—	—	0.3	0.8	0.9	—
Nursery Vouchers Grant	—	2.1	—	—	—	—
£50 million Special Grant LEAs	—	—	—	—	0.2	0.5
School Standards (Special) Grant	—	—	—	—	1.0	1.9
Capital	1.5	1.5	2.5	3.4	5.6	n/a

[1] DfEE contributions only. Figures for 2001–02 are provisional.

In the Budget on 7 March, national increases of £100 million for School Standards Grant and devolved New Deal for Schools Capital were announced. South Tyneside will benefit from these increases; the precise allocations are being calculated, and have not been included in the table above.

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much direct grant was received by each school in the South Shields constituency for the 2000–01 financial year; and what his estimate is for each school in 2001–02. [152781]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows the School Standards Grant payable to each school in 2000–01. No estimate by individual school is yet available for 2001–02. However a typical primary school will receive £24,000 in 2001–02 compared with £9,000 in 2000–01; and a typical secondary school, £70,000 compared with £40,000 in 2000–01.

£000

School name	*Amount of grant*
Elizabeth Diamond Nursery School	3
Wharfedale Drive Nursery School	3
Cleadon Park Nursery School	3
Chuter Edge Behavioural Support Unit	3
Hadrian Primary School	9
Ridgeway Primary School	9
Downhill Infants' and Nursery School	6
Harton Infants' School	9
Laygate School	9
Mortimer Primary School	9
Mowbray Junior Mixed School	9
Marine Park Junior Mixed Infant and Nursery School	6
Stanhope Junior Mixed and Infants School	9
Westoe Infants' School	9
Biddick Hall Junior School	9
Temple Park Junior School	9
Highfield Infants' School	6

£000

School name	Amount of grant
Temple Park Infants' School	6
Biddick Hall Infants' School	9
Monkton Junior School	9
Monkton Infants' School	6
Ashley Primary School	9
Harton Junior School	9
Cheviot Junior School	9
Lord Blyton Primary School	9
Albert Elliott Primary School	9
All Saints' CofE Junior School	6
All Saints CofE Infants' School	3
St. Mary's CofE Voluntary Aided Primary School	9
St. Bede's RC Voluntary Aided Primary School, South Shields	9
St. Gregory's RC Voluntary Aided Primary School	9
SS Peter and Paul RC Voluntary Aided Primary School	9
St. Oswald's RC Voluntary Aided Primary School	9
Harton School	50
Mortimer Comprehensive School	40
Brinkburn School	40
King George V School	40
St. Wilfrid's RC Voluntary Aided Comprehensive School	40
Bamburgh School	15
Margaret Sutton School	15

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the amount of capital funding made available to schools in the South Shields constituency through the New Deal for Schools since May 1997. [152782]

Jacqui Smith: The following table shows those schools, in the South Shields constituency, which have benefited from investment through the New Deal for Schools programme, which commenced in 1997–98. These allocations formed part of the £5.5 million investment made in schools in the South Tyneside local education authority under the New Deal for Schools programme between 1997–98 and 2000–01. In total, in those four years, some £13 million of funding for capital investment has been allocated for schools in South Tyneside local education authority.

New Deal for schools—allocations for schools in the South Shields constituency

Year/School	Project	Total allocation (£)
1997–98		
Included within an LEA wide package:		
Biddick Hall Infants	Roof repairs	[1] 536,000
Highfields Infants		
Brinkburn Comprehensive		
Harton Junior		
Harton Junior	IT development	
Mortimer Comprehensive		
1998–99		
All Saints CE Junior	Replacement of electrical wiring	42,500
Biddick Hall Infants	Replacement of electrical wiring	53,100
Margaret Sutton Special	Replacement of electrical wiring	53,100
Harton Comprehensive	Replacement of electrical wiring	84,600
Monkton County Infants	Replacement of electrical wiring	63,400
Monkton Junior	Replacement of electrical wiring	42,500
St. Mary's CE Junior	Replacement of electrical wiring	51,685
St. Peter and Paul RC Primary	Replacement of electrical wiring	63,300
Temple Park Infants	Replacement of electrical wiring	38,000
Mortimer Comprehensive	Improvement of ventilation	25,500
Cheviot Junior	Renewal of obsolete firm alarm	75,000
Cleadon Park Nursery	Renewal of obsolete firm alarm	5,250
Downhill Infants	Renewal of obsolete firm alarm	5,250
Harton Comprehensive	Renewal of obsolete firm alarm	85,600
Laygate School	Renewal of obsolete firm alarm	41,200
Ridgeway Junior	Renewal of obsolete firm alarm	31,650
Temple Park Infants	Renewal of obsolete firm alarm	13,700
Brinkburn Comprehensive	Installation of safer emergency lighting	32,300
Harton Comprehensive	Installation of safer emergency lighting	42,500
King George V School	Installation of safer emergency lighting	34,000
Laygate School	Installation of safer emergency lighting	24,650
Mortimer Comprehensive	Installation of safer emergency lighting	47,600
St. Wilfred's RC Comprehensive	Installation of safer emergency lighting	26,800
Bamburgh Special	Fire precautions	17,000
1999–2000		
Included within a 16 school package:		
Bamburgh School	Boiler/Heating distribution replacement	[2] 718,309
Cheviot Junior		
Downhill Infants and Nursery		
Harton Infants		
Harton Junior		
Stanhope Primary		

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New Deal for schools—allocations for schools in the South Shields constituency

Year/School	*Project*	*Total allocation (£)*
Included within a 16 school package:		
All Saints CE Junior		
Bamburgh School		
Brinkburn Comprehensive		
Cheviot Junior		
Cleadon Park Nursery	Flat roof finishing	[2] 438,990
Lord Blyton Primary		
Margaret Sutton Special		
Marine Park Junior, Infant and Nursery		
Ridgeway Primary		
Wharfedale Drive Nursery		
Brinkburn Comprehensive	Food technology room refurbishment	97,325
2000–01		
Ridgeway Primary	Ridgeway family support centre	753,431
St. Gregory's RC Primary	Replacement extension	211,119
Hadrian Primary	Electrical rewire and flat roof renewal project	22,019
Marine Park Primary	Emergency lighting and flat roof renewal	20,249
Included in a 4 school package:		
King George V School	Boiler and heating distribution replacement	[2] 560,387
Stanhope Primary		
Included in a 4 school package:		
Margaret Sutton Special	Re-roofing	[2] 178,664
Wharfedale Drive Nursery		

[1] Local education authorities were not required to specify individual project costs for phase 1 of the NDS programme, so the amount shown is the total allocation in that year to the LEA. South Tyeside LEA holds project level information.
[2] Allocations made to package projects covering more than one school. South Tyneside local education authority will be able to advise the value of projects at schools which benefited from these allocations.

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of its local schools' budget South Tyneside Council has delegated to schools in each year since 1996. [152784]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is set out in the table. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has set a target for all local education authorities to delegate 85 per cent. of their local schools budget in 2001–02.

Financial year	*Percentage of schools' budget delegated*
1996–97	78.8
1997–98	78.1
1998–99	78.6
1999–2000	80.5
2000–01	83.3

Note:
For 1998–99 and previous years, the figures represent the percentage of South Tyneside's General Schools Budget (adjusted mainly to exclude capital expenditure and capital financing costs) delegated to schools in accordance with the LEA's school funding formula.

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the capital investment in schools in South Tyneside local education authority was from 1996 to 1999 *(a)* in total and *(b)* by funding stream; and what his forecast is for the next three years. [152786]

Jacqui Smith: Table A shows the capital allocations made to South Tyneside local education authority, by funding stream, from 1996–97 to 2000–01. Table B shows the forecast investment for the South Tyneside local education authority over the next three years.

Nationally, capital investment in school buildings has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.5 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £8.5 billion in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Table A: Central Government capital investment in schools in South Tyneside local education authority

£000

Funding Stream	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Basic Credit Approvals	618	571	148	314	424
Supplementary Credit Approvals	556	253	34	786	350
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	34	94	94	136	326
Schools Renewal Challenge Fund	307	—	—	—	—
New Deal for Schools	—	536	1,675	1,270	2,058
School Security Grant	—	45	56	56	56
Energy Efficiency Initiative	—	—	67	—	—
Key Stage 1 Class Size Initiative	—	—	—	—	74
National Grid for Learning Grant	—	—	364	488	543
Assistance with Asset Management Plans	—	—	—	22	—
Seed Challenge Funding	—	—	—	—	129

Table A: Central Government capital investment in schools in South Tyneside local education authority

£000

Funding Stream	1996–97	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01
Devolved Formula Capital for Schools	—	—	—	—	1,174
Renewal of School Laboratories	—	—	—	—	126
Schools Access Initiative Grant	5	—	18	—	—
Nursery Provision	—	—	—	—	59
Early Excellence Centre Grant	—	—	—	319	321
Total	1,520	1,499	2,456	3,391	5,640

Table B: Forecast investment in schools in South Tyneside local education authority

£000

Funding Stream	2001–02	2002–03	2003–04
Basic Credit Approvals	185	'—	'—
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	167	'—	'—
Private Finance Initiative Credits	—	'—	'—
New Deal for Schools Devolved Formula	649	873	1,680
New Deal for Schools Condition Funding	477	1,367	1,733
Seed Challenge Funding	142	226	226
Renewal of School Laboratories	126	'—	'—
School Access Initiative	232	'—	'—
Total	1,978	2,466	3,639

' Future years' allocations shown in the above table are those already announced as being attributable to South Tyneside local education authority.

In addition to the amounts shown above, schools in the Authority will also benefit from a share of other programmes where allocations have not yet been made. These include over £1 billion of credit approvals, mainly to provide new pupil places; £440 million of grant to governors of Voluntary Aided schools; £555 million funding through the NDS Modernisation programme; £170 million worth of funding under the Schools Access Initiative and additional New Deal for Schools Devolved Formula announced in the Budget on 7 March of £300 million in total over the next three years.

This funding will be augmented by capital receipts and other contributions from local education authority sources, and the contribution which governors of Voluntary Aided schools make to their building work. In addition, around £1.6 billion is available nationally through Private Finance Initiative Credits for projects which will sign in 2002–03 and 2003–04.

Funding specifically ring fenced for the renewal of school laboratories and secondary learning support units is ending in 2001–02. Local authorities will be able to prioritise their other increased funding for this purpose, if they wish.

New Deal (Wansbeck)

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many 18 to 24-year-olds in Wansbeck have entered *(a)* voluntary work, *(b)* work experience, *(c)* education and training and *(d)* unsubsidised employment through the New Deal in the last year. [153137]

Ms Jowell: Figures for the period January 2000 to the end of December 2000 for the constituency of Wansbeck show the following numbers of young people participated in New Deal:

	Number
Starts to New Deal	457
Starts to Options	129
of which:	
Employment	28
Full Time Education and Training	42
Voluntary Sector	35
Environment Task Force	24
Unsubsidised Employment	295

Note:
All options include an element of work experience and training

Age Diversity in Employment

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to publish the evaluation of the code of practice for age diversity in employment. [153251]

Ms Hodge: A summary of key findings from the code of practice on age diversity in employment and three other research projects on age will be published at the end of this month.

The full report on the evaluation will be published summer 2001.

Correspondence

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will reply to letters from the hon. Member for West Derbyshire dated 8 November and 21 September 2000 concerning the exclusion from holiday play schemes of children with medical conditions. [153253]

Jacqui Smith: I replied to the hon. Member on Friday 9 March 2001.

Childminders

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many responses were received to the consultation on national standards for the regulation of day care and childminding in England; how many of the responses were included in the sample considered reaching the decision that the Government would not ban childminders from smoking in front of the children in their care; what method was used to select the sample of responses considered in reaching this decision; and how

many of the responses considered *(a)* opposed the proposal that parents should be allowed to decide whether childminders should be allowed to smoke, *(b)* supported the proposal and *(c)* neither supported nor opposed the proposal. [153380]

Ms Hodge: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 365–66W.

Out-of-authority Education

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many pupils in each local education authority in England were educated in maintained schools in that local education authority and normally resident in other local education authorities in *(a)* 1997–98, *(b)* 1998–99 and *(c)* 1999–2000. [153295]

Ms Estelle Morris: Information on children educated in a local education authority area other than the one where they normally reside is collected only for those pupils with special educational needs.

Polish Students

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many Polish students attended summer schools in the United Kingdom in each of the last three years. [151176]

Ms Estelle Morris: I will write to my hon. Friend and place a copy of my letter in the Library.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152104]

Mr. Wills: In line with other central Government Departments, DfEE will be reporting annually to the Committee of Green Ministers on its timber purchases. The Green Ministers' annual report will be the main vehicle for publishing DfEE information and there are no plans for a separately published report.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many 16 to 24-year-olds were claiming Jobseeker's Allowance in *(a)* May 1997 and *(b)* January 2001. [152334]

Ms Jowell: The following table illustrates numbers of Jobseeker's Allowance claimants in 1997 and 2001. Figures for January 1997 and January 1998 are also included in order to enable annual comparisons in the absence of seasonal adjustments:

	16–17 year olds	*18–24 year olds*	*Total*
January 1997	16,510	457,950	474,460
May 1997	17,750	382,020	399,780
January 1998	15,230	357,070	372,310
January 2001	12,980	250,270	263,250

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the cost to the Employment Service has been of, and how many Employment Service staff have been attributable to, the administration of Jobseeker's Allowance. [152450]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Mark Neale to Mr. Graham Brady, dated 12 March 2001:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your question concerning the Employment Service cost of, and the number of staff attributable to the administration of Jobseeker's Allowance. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying on Mr Lewis behalf.

The resource available to the Employment Service for the financial year 2000–2001 to administer Jobseeker's Allowance was £183m. This resource equated to approximately 10,600 staff in Jobcentres.

I hope this is helpful.

New Deal

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many 16 to 24-year-olds have *(a)* entered the New Deal in London and *(b)* entered unsubsidised employment through the New Deal since 1998. [152335]

Ms Jowell: Latest figures for the period ending December 2000 show that since the introduction of the New Deal, 89,000 young people have started the New Deal for Young People, aimed at 18 to 24-year-olds, in the Greater London area. 32,200 young people have gained unsubsidised employment as a result of being on the programme. We know that many other young people will have left the programme for employment without telling the Employment Service—these people are not included in this figure. Nationally, in addition to the 274,000 young people recorded as gaining jobs, we estimate that a further 83,000 young people gained jobs from the New Deal.

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many lone parents in London have participated in the New Deal for lone parents since its inception; and how many have entered employment after participation in the scheme. [152336]

Ms Jowell: All statistics are taken from the New Deal Evaluation Database.

NDLP latest results	*London ES districts*
Number of Initial Interviews	27,901
Number agreeing to participate	24,088
(Percentage of interviewees)	86
Number of jobs obtained	7,637
(Percentage of participants)	32

All figures relate to the national programme only up to December 2000

Post-16 Inspections

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to reduce the numbers of forms required to be completed during *(a)* external and *(b)* internal inspections of post-16 establishments; and if he will make a statement. [152639]

Mr. Wicks: On external inspections, all the inspectorates require providers to complete one or two forms to enable the planning of inspections. In the future in line with guidance given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State such information will be routed to the inspectorates through the Learning and Skills Council. During the inspection, inspectors draw from standard documentation prepared and made available by providers. The Secretary of State has required the new Post-16 inspectorates to keep the burden of inspection to a minimum consistent with maintaining the rigour and quality of inspection. As to internal inspections, how these are conducted are matters for the providers themselves.

A-level Students

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the number of A-level students working to fund their studies; what assessment he has made of the effects that this has had on their results; and if he will make a statement. [152095]

Mr. Wicks: According to the Youth Cohort Study, 53 per cent. of 16–18-year-old A-level students, in full-time education, were also in some form of employment. They worked an average of 10 hours per week. Research evidence indicates that young people choose to undertake part-time work for a variety of reasons: not solely to finance their studies.

I am not aware of studies specifically looking at the effects of paid work on the results of A-level students. However, the evaluation of the first year of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) found that young people, in EMA pilot and control areas, who worked in Year 11 achieved better exam results than those that did not. Subsequent stages of the EMA evaluation should throw further light on this issue.

Student Voting

Mr. Lammy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by constituency of origin the number of students attending university who went to a school within the constituency of their parental address. [152411]

Mr. Wicks: The data are not collated centrally on a constituency basis.

Physical Education

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set higher targets for physical education within the National Curriculum for all pupils, in response to the recent NAO report on obesity. [152537]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced on 11 January that all children should receive an entitlement to two hours of physical activity. This will be delivered during and after school through the PE curriculum and study support. We will be consulting with parents, teachers and relevant organisations to see how the two hour entitlement can be best delivered, and we are working closely with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, to look at ways of increasing the opportunities available to children to participate in physical activities. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority are also producing evidence that demonstrates how schools can achieve the two hours entitlement. Over the last two years, seven out of 10 schools have increased their provision of out of school hours activities, of which sport is the most popular, and over a half plan to increase provision in the coming year. The current curriculum is designed to promote positive attitudes towards active and healthy lifestyles, and the importance of fitness and health is a part of each Key Stage. We are working closely with the Department of Health on the National Healthy School Standard, which seeks to promote health and well being in schools.

Invalidity Care Allowance

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will disregard invalidity care allowance paid to the natural parent of a young person applying for an educational maintenance allowance where a sibling is disabled and in need of the benefit arising from the invalidity care allowance; and if he will make a statement. [152641]

Mr. Wicks: Education maintenance allowance (EMA) is paid on the basis of an assessment of the income available to a student's parents. In line with long established practice, taxable benefits are included in the income to be assessed. Invalid care allowance (ICA) is classed as a taxable payment because it is intended to compensate a carer for the lost earnings which result from not being able to work full-time. Exempting income-replacement benefits from tax would discriminate against those whose income comes from earnings. But other benefits which are intended to meet a specific need of the claimant—such as attendance allowance and disability allowance—are not subject to tax, and are not included in the income to be assessed in deciding on eligibility for EMA.

Paperwork (Teachers)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what action he is taking to reduce paperwork for teachers. [151697]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 7 March 2001]:* The Government are fully committed to reducing paperwork for teachers in order to allow teachers to concentrate on teaching and raising standards. Examples of our action to do so include: guaranteeing to cut by a third the number of documents, and by a half the number of pages, that the Government send automatically to schools during this school year—last term we reduced paperwork to secondary schools by 60 per cent. and to primary schools by 40 per cent.; harnessing DfEE and Cabinet Office resources to simplify some of the paperwork that schools complete—the first results of this joint project are set out in the "Making a Difference: Reducing School Paperwork" report. This shows that a typical school is

expected to save over 200 hours of paperwork every year—equivalent to more than a month's work for one person; and across the school system 4.5 million hours will be saved annually; simplifying radically the operation of next year's Standards Fund—we have replaced bidding, claiming and reporting with a single expenditure returns sheet; we have allowed schools to vire funds between almost all grant headings; we have allowed schools to carry funds over to the end of the school year; and we have introduced monitoring against existing targets; placing model schemes of work on the DfEE website to underpin all National Curriculum subjects at Key Stages 1 to 3—they are entirely voluntary and teachers may use them directly or adapt them as they wish. We also have plans to place model lesson plans on the website in a further effort to reduce paperwork and make the necessary lesson preparation as straightforward as possible; and developing new ICT resources, including the launch of:

(a) EASEA—a full electronic in-tray and document archiving service for head teachers, teachers and governors that now has 7,000 registered users,

(b) TeacherNet—a single web page offering links to the full range of educational resources on the internet,

(c) an internet based "A-Z" of school leadership and management—an electronic encyclopaedia for heads with succinct, practical guidance on a wide range of topics, full search facilities, and links through to reference material on organisational and legal issues, and examples of good practice.

School Dinners

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he provides to *(a)* head teachers, *(b)* school governors and *(c)* local education authorities on choosing the suppliers of ingredients for school dinners. [152768]

Jacqui Smith: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State does not provide guidance on choosing suppliers of school meal ingredients. It is for local education authorities and schools in England to obtain supplies or contract for meals provision in line with relevant legislation. They have a general duty to ensure the health and safety of pupils.

From 1 April this year, local education authorities and schools in England will have to meet compulsory minimum nutritional standards for school lunches. The new standards will ensure that a nutritionally balanced lunch must be available to pupils every day. Our guidance for caterers on the standards offers advice, for example, on menu planning, suitable ingredients, and healthy cooking methods.

School Uniforms

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many local education authorities provide assistance towards the cost of school uniforms. [152955]

Jacqui Smith: This information is not collected centrally. Local education authorities have a discretionary power, but not a duty, to offer grants towards the cost of school uniform and school clothing in cases of hardship. It is for them to decide whether to offer assistance and, if they do, what the eligibility criteria should be. It is also for them to defend their policies locally in the light of local needs and priorities.

Departmental Policies (Warrington, North)

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Warrington, North constituency, the effects on Warrington, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152316]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

SCOTLAND

New Deal

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many young people in each constituency in Scotland have received full-time education, training or work experience with the voluntary sector or the Environmental Taskforce as a result of the New Deal in each constituency in Scotland. [152467]

Mrs. Liddell: The table shows for each constituency in Scotland the number of young people who have received help through full-time education, training or work experience with the voluntary sector or the Environmental Taskforce options of New Deal for Young People between April 1998 and December 2000.

Constituency	*Full-time education and training*	*Voluntary sector*	*Environment task force*
Aberdeen, Central	78	54	32
Aberdeen, North	50	19	24
Aberdeen, South	52	16	16
Airdrie and Shotts	151	87	165
Angus	122	108	117
Argyll and Bute	63	39	108
Ayr	131	134	98
Banff and Buchan	71	32	10
Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross	108	31	70
Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley	157	157	148
Central Fife	275	67	165
Clydebank and Milngavie	185	52	112
Clydesdale	229	92	101
Coatbridge and Chryston	95	50	142
Cumbernauld and Kilsyth	176	45	33
Cunninghame, North	139	134	52

Constituency	Full-time education and training	Voluntary sector	Environment task force
Cunninghame, South	235	145	72
Dumbarton	246	83	163
Dumfries	253	79	58
Dundee, East	237	145	199
Dundee, West	238	133	244
Dunfermline, East	177	78	88
Dunfermline, West	172	48	90
East Kilbride	126	20	37
East Lothian	40	33	44
Eastwood	83	32	69
Edinburgh, Central	102	59	28
Edinburgh, East and Musselburgh	81	63	45
Edinburgh, North and Leith	104	98	63
Edinburgh, Pentlands	101	43	72
Edinburgh, South	64	43	40
Edinburgh, West	39	27	48
Falkirk, East	127	87	76
Falkirk, West	165	76	76
Galloway and Upper Nithsdale	104	66	48
Glasgow, Anniesland	204	142	76
Glasgow, Baillieston	171	206	206
Glasgow, Cathcart	170	74	76
Glasgow, Govan	278	91	94
Glasgow, Kelvin	258	74	53
Glasgow, Maryhill	259	140	136
Glasgow, Pollok	261	53	115
Glasgow, Rutherglen	149	52	82
Glasgow, Shettleston	238	114	131
Glasgow, Springburn	328	120	209
Gordon	36	40	20
Greenock and Inverclyde	100	95	53
Hamilton, North and Bellshill	167	119	98
Hamilton, South	125	53	160
Inverness, East, Nairn and Lochaber	86	35	43
Kilmarnock and Loudon	199	145	125
Kirkcaldy	272	65	179
Linlithgow	89	80	77
Livingston	98	78	76
Midlothian	28	35	72
Moray	43	79	79
Motherwell and Wishaw	203	145	161
North, East Fife	95	35	37
North Tayside	77	60	55
Ochil	170	74	125
Orkney and Shetland	17	8	20
Paisley North	155	157	64
Paisley South	140	120	84
Perth	45	73	23
Ross, Skye and Inverness West	115	24	44
Roxburgh and Berwickshire	84	69	70
Stirling	131	32	31
Strathkelvin and Bearsden	74	42	49
Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale	46	75	73
West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	36	20	21
West Renfrewshire	78	71	30
Western Isles	56	19	42
Total	9,857	5,389	6,042

Poverty

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many *(a)* children, *(b)* families and *(c)* people, in each constituency in Scotland, were living in poverty in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1999 and (iv) 2000. [152465]

Mr. Foulkes: Poverty and social exclusion are multi-faceted problems. Therefore, the Government do not use a single definition of poverty but instead use a range of indicators to monitor the progress of our strategy. Information relating to the indicators can be found in the second Government "Opportunity for all" report on tackling poverty and social exclusion "One year on: making a difference". The report also describes and monitors the impact of policies we have already introduced, and sets our plans for the future.

When tackling poverty in Scotland, the UK Government work in partnership with the Scottish Executive, through mechanisms such as the Joint Ministerial Committee on Poverty. The Scottish Executive produces a Social Justice Annual Report " . . . a Scotland where everyone matters".

This report outlines measures taken by both the Executive and the UK Government to promote social inclusion in Scotland.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Leisure Facilities

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to meet the Fitness Industry Association to discuss competition from Lottery-funded leisure facilities. [152861]

Kate Hoey: The Fitness Industry Association has not asked for a meeting.

Former Coalfield Areas

Tony Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he has taken to ensure that former coalfield areas receive increased awards from the National Lottery distributors. [152997]

Kate Hoey: My Department and Lottery distributors commissioned research into the impact of the Lottery on the coalfields and is working with coalfields groups to take forward the report's recommendations. These include actively encouraging applications from areas of low take-up, producing flexible partnership funding requirements, making decision making more transparent, and better co-ordination with other organisations responsible for regenerating coalfields. We shall continue to monitor carefully applications and awards in coalfields areas.

Export Licences

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations he has made to the European Commission regarding the value thresholds applying to works of art for which export licences are required; and if he will make a statement. [152625]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The financial thresholds were most recently discussed on 2 March at a meeting of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Goods, at which my Department made representations about a current proposal to change the date for conversion from euro into sterling, which will effectively reduce the thresholds by 20 per cent. In addition, my Department also made representations about the need for a review of the financial thresholds to, at least, update them in line with inflation. As a result, the European Commission has agreed to consider a review next year, in order to give Her Majesty's Government an opportunity to explain our concerns in detail.

Palliative Care (Funding)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will report on the outcome of the consultations into the proposed sum being made available through the New Opportunities Fund to provide palliative care for adults and children. [153290]

Kate Hoey: The Department announced the results of the public consultation on 10 March. On 1 March the Department laid an affirmative order in the House specifying the new initiatives to be funded by the New Opportunities Fund. Draft policy directions for these new initiatives and an analysis of responses to the consultation were placed in the Libraries of both Houses on 9 March.

Wembley Project

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) what role he had in *(a)* discussions and *(b)* recommendations relating to the Chairman of the Wembley Holding Company;. [152509]

(2) what involvement Ministers in his Department have had in the appointment of the Chairman of the Wembley Holding Company. [152508]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Wembley National Stadium Ltd. is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Football Association. The appointment of Sir Rodney Walker as Chairman of Wembley National Stadium Ltd., and the terms upon which the appointment was made, is entirely a matter for them.

Sir Rodney Walker informed me in December that he had been asked by the Football Association to take over as Chairman of Wembley National Stadium Ltd. and asked for my advice on whether the appointment would conflict with his position as Chairman of the United Kingdom Sports Council. I advised Sir Rodney that as the United Kingdom Sports Council were not directly involved with the Wembley project, in my view no such conflict arose.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Departmental Rules (Gifts)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what rules apply to officials within his Department relating to the receipt of gifts from *(a)* private companies and *(b)* individuals; and whether those rules continue to apply during the contractual period between end of employment and the date on which private sector employment may begin, where such gifts originate from the future employer. [153258]

Dr. Howells: The Department expects its staff to observe exceptionally high standards of personal honesty and integrity. Staff should not accept gifts which would or might appear to place them under any obligation to the donor, compromise impartiality or otherwise be improper.

After consultation with senior managers, staff may keep gifts with a retail value of less than £25. Gifts that have a value greater than £25 given by commercial or trade organisations or individuals must be surrendered. Alternatively, if it is considered appropriate to retain such gifts, staff must pay the Department the value in excess of £25. Any gift which has a value of £10 or more must be registered.

These rules apply to all employees of the Department; they do not apply after employment has ended.

Parental Leave

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how he will monitor the uptake of parental leave. [152849]

Mr. Alan Johnson: A survey of working parents conducted in June 2000 by my Department asked parents whether they had taken up parental leave since December 1999. Initial analysis of the results suggests that 3 per cent. of working parents who had babies born since 15 December 1999 had taken parental leave. A full report of the survey findings is being prepared for publication.

In addition, we are piloting the monitoring of uptake of parental leave in the next Labour Force Survey.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the extent to which the uptake of parental leave is influenced by an individual's level of income. [152848]

Mr. Alan Johnson: A survey of working parents conducted in June 2000 by my Department asked parents whether they had taken up parental leave since December 1999. For the great majority of cases, the survey collected information on household income rather than individual income. We are currently analysing this information, which should allow analysis of take-up levels of parental leave across household income bands and provide an indication of whether potential take-up of parental leave is influenced by income levels. A full report of the survey findings is being prepared for publication, but no detailed results are yet available.

Regeneration Initiatives

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the criteria for assessing applications for financial support for economic and physical regeneration initiatives for funds administered by his Department; and what account they take of *(a)* the variation in the availability of previously developed land and buildings and *(b)* other considerations of environmental capacity. [152339]

Mr. Caborn: The aims of my Department's policies for economic and physical regeneration were summarised in the recent White Paper, "Opportunity for All in a World of Change". These are based on putting greater emphasis on growth within all regions, by assessing under-performance, putting in place the building-blocks for economic success and establishing strategies for sustaining this success. The exercise of these policies is based on equipping all regions with the means to build on their own distinctive cultures, know-how and competitive advantages. These will include factors relating to land, buildings and the environment, and criteria of this kind are being included in the corporate plans currently being agreed jointly between the regional development agencies, my Department and the DETR and DFEE.

Departmental Policies (Stroud)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on the Stroud constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [152400]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Since May 1997 my Department has introduced and developed a variety of initiatives in my hon. Friend's constituency. These include the competitiveness development fund, which has supported two projects close to Stroud. This fund is provided to the South West regional development agency. It includes funding for the regional development agency's south west innovation fund which supports research and development projects for small and medium-sized enterprises.

One company which has benefited is IONEX—a small water treatment company where a grant of £3,000 was given to continue to develop electro catalytic electrodes for the reduction of nitrate to nitrogen and oxygen. Another company, Primrose Bumble, received a grant of £2,250 to help with the development of a spelling aid for dyslexic individuals.

The constituency's small business community has also benefited from several smart awards and the local business link facilitated 95 business start-ups in the year 2000.

The Department's funds have also benefited the Stroud energy group, an environmental group who advise on renewable energy and ways to improve environmental awareness. £200K in total has been given to the project's publicity funds.

The Gloucestershire market towns scheme is an single regeneration budget (SRB) scheme which is active within the Stroud DC area. This covers seven Gloucestershire market towns, including Stroud, Dursley/Cam. This was a successful SRB round 4 bid in 1998 which secured over £1 million of Government funding. It is a five-year scheme which is designed to tackle social deprivation issues in all of the seven identified market towns. This SRB scheme has been providing very useful input into SWRDA's region wide new market/coastal towns initiative which is due to be launched at the end of March 2001.

Gloucestershire-wide initiatives which may have impacted on the Stroud constituency are:

The Gloucestershire Development Agency, West of England Aerospace Forum (WEAF) and Automotive Centres Excellence (ACE) the RDA partnership, which is committed to supporting the Aerospace and Automotive sectors, with approximately £80,000 being provided in 2000–01 to strengthen the businesses in the supply chains of these industries, primarily through networking and mapping exercises.

The £200,000 which has been used to support the development of the Gloucestershire Innovation Centre which will be located at the former Bank of England site at Gloucester Docks. This centre will be of benefit to fledgling businesses in the Gloucester area who will be able to access business mentoring and state of the art facilities. This centre will be part of the regional Business Incubation South West network.

The £45,000 that has been given for the development and improvement of the business focussed research facility at Gloucester Royal Infirmary, in partnership with Cranfield University and Gloucester City Council for 2000–01. This facility will benefit medi-science businesses in the area, who will have access to these facilities.

Computer Failures

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those commercial companies he has been in contact with in the last 24 months regarding computer disaster contingency programmes. [152548]

Ms Hewitt: Over the past two years, officials from my Department have been in contact with a number of organisations to discuss security of information and ways of ensuring that the information is available after a disaster. The need for such contingency planning has been highlighted by the "I love you" bug and other computer viruses which have affected the operations of many companies around the world.

My Department encourages all organisations to implement ISO/IEC 17799/BS7799, the code of practice for information security management standard. This standard promotes the use of risk assessment and putting appropriate security controls in place before embarking on decisions which would involve losses or damage of an organisation. This includes business continuity management and information security education and training.

Employment Compensation

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will introduce compensation for workers who lose their jobs through no fault of their own. [152695]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The redundancy and insolvency payments provisions of the Employment Rights Act 1996 provide a safety net of minimum entitlements for employees who lose their jobs through no fault of their own. The limits on payments under these provisions are subject to annual uprating. Employers and employees (or their representatives) are free to negotiate more favourable severance conditions than the statutory provisions require, if this accords with their own priorities, needs and circumstances. In most cases this is in fact what happens. The Government have no plans for any amendments to the law in this regard.

Businesses (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many business failures there were in each of the last 15 years in London. [152190]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* The table shows compulsory liquidations and bankruptcies in London for the years 1991 to 2000. The County court allocates an Official Receiver and it is the location of the Official Receiver's office that is recorded, not the location of the business. Official Receiver's offices do not coincide with Government office regions. April 1991 is the earliest available record of regional insolvencies.

Insolvencies in London

Year	*Company compulsory liquidations*	*Individual bankruptcy orders*[1]
1991[2]	2,037	1,649
1992	3,268	2,954
1993	2,498	2,859
1994	1,703	2,245
1995	1,574	1,895
1996	1,221	1,714
1997	937	1,345
1998	1,487	1,374
1999	1,161	1,286
2000	951	1,285

[1] Individual Bankruptcy Orders includes the following categories: Self employed; Employees; No occupation and unemployed; Directors and promoters of companies; Occupation unknown.
[2] 1991 only available from Q2.
Source:
DTI

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many new businesses opened in London in *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* in the last year for which figures are available. [152191]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* Official statistics for new business openings are reflected in VAT registrations. There were 34,055 VAT registrations of London businesses in 1996 and 37,335 in 1999, the last year for which figures are available.

Post Offices

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the agreement between the Post Office and the banks over the future of the universal bank will be signed; and if he will make a statement. [153027]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* Discussions with the banks are at an advanced stage.

Motor Fuel

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will ask the Office of Fair Trading to investigate the pricing of motor fuel. [153288]

Dr. Howells: Under UK competition legislation, the Director-General of Fair Trading is responsible for monitoring markets and considering allegations of anti-competitive behaviour.

The Director-General has investigated the supply of petrol a number of times over recent years and has found it to be competitive. He has said that he will continue to monitor this market very closely.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to require suppliers to display the level of duty payable on petrol and diesel on pumps at petrol forecourts. [153250]

Mr. Hain: Fuel duty rates are well known, and I have no plans to require retailers to display them.

Working Time Regulations

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 43W, what recent representations he has received on the adequacy of specialist working time officer availability. [152969]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I am not aware of any recent representations made to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry or myself on the adequacy of specialist working time officer availability.

Departmental Policies (Hemsworth)

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly to the locations as possible, the effects

of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997 on *(a)* Hemsworth constituency and *(b)* Wakefield district. [153004]

Mr. Caborn: The Department has provided the following support for businesses in Wakefield since May 1997. Information at constituency level is not available in all cases.

Regional Selective Assistance (RSA)

RSA is a capital investment grant linked to the creation or safeguarding of jobs in designated areas of need. 49 RSA grant offers totalling £4.9 million have been made to businesses in the Wakefield district, to support projects with a total capital expenditure of £52 million, and to create and safeguard a total of 1,984 jobs. Within these figures 10 offers related to the Hemsworth constituency where a grant of £0.8 million was offered against capital spend of £10.5 million and the creation/safeguarding of 246 jobs.

Enterprise Grants

The Enterprise grants scheme is a simplified scheme that was introduced in April 2000 to help small firms undertake fixed capital investment projects. Four offers totalling £14,000 have been made to firms in the Wakefield district, of which three were in the Hemsworth constituency.

Smart

Smart awards are designed to help small firms with the introduction of new products and processes. Seven smart awards totalling £557,076 have been made to firms in the Wakefield district. No awards have been made in the Hemsworth constituency.

Business Link

Business Link Wakefield have provided services to small businesses in the Wakefield area (including the Hemsworth constituency) since 1997. These include general and specialised advice to help businesses grown, export development counselling, ICT advice, and a full range of specialist information. From April 2001, these services will be provided by the Small Business Service operating through a new West Yorkshire business link with local concessions, including one in Wakefield. This new service will be more customer focused ensuring that services are driven by local need.

Indebtedness Taskforce

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if Scottish advice providers have been involved in the discussions of his Department's indebtedness taskforce; [153074]

(2) what involvement the Scottish Executive has had in the work currently being undertaken by the Department of Trade and Industry to improve the lending practices of credit providers and the transparency of information provided to consumers. [153073]

Dr. Howells: Both the Scottish Executive and Money Advice Scotland are represented on the overindebtedness discussion group. This group, representing a wide cross-section of interested parties, works alongside the taskforce providing suggestions on areas to be tackled and comment on emerging conclusions, aimed at achieving more responsible lending and borrowing.

BNFL

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 15 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 281W, on BNFL, when his Department first informed representatives of the Japanese Government that the quality control worker who discovered the falsification of data at the MDF plant at Sellafield was a non-BNFL employee. [151662]

Mr. Hain: My Department has not provided information to the Japanese Government about the employment terms of the individual to whom the hon. Gentleman refers or about those of any other individual working at BNFL's MDF plant at Sellafield.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many individuals have contacted his Department on the new pensions guide since the launch of the pensions awareness advertising campaign. [153291]

Mr. Rooker: The purpose of the campaign is to raise awareness of pensions in the wider population and to get younger people thinking about their pensions. We propose to assess how successful the campaign has been via a tracking study. We anticipate that this will provide evidence that many people have made their own pension provision on the back of the campaign. In addition, between the start of the pensions awareness advertising campaign on 11 January and 7 March 2001 the Department has had a total of over 212,000 responses to the pensions education marketing campaign. In response to this, we have sent out over 410,000 copies of the new pension guide.

Computer Failures

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment of risk he has made of the impact of a major computer disaster on the work of his Department; what steps he has taken to minimise the effects of such a disaster; and what the standard of compliance is to protect his Department from its effects. [152545]

Angela Eagle: The Department has contingency arrangements in place for all computer systems, including standby facilities for major disaster. These contingencies are comprehensively rehearsed at regular intervals.

Miners (Compensation Payments)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if she will exempt from compensation clawback those ex-miners who have received, or will receive, compensation for having contracted respiratory diseases as a result of their work with British Coal or its predecessor firms. [146460]

Mr. Bayley: Compensation is intended to restore a person to the financial position which they experienced before the accident, injury or disease occurred.

The Compensation Recovery Scheme is based on the long-standing principle that a person should not get compensation twice over for the same period.

The Department is doing all it can to ensure that the Compensation Recovery Scheme is operated as efficiently and effectively as possible. In particular, in the case of miners the Department is currently putting in place a series of administrative easements to speed up payment on miners' compensation claims. These changes will include, for example, allowing the Department of Trade and Industry more time to negotiate with the miner, without the need to contact the Department of Social Security; and reducing duplication and red tape. These changes will ensure delays in the process do not occur.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people under 60 years are in receipt of *(a)* middle and higher rate care component and *(b)* the higher rate of mobility component of Disability Living Allowance; and what the annual cost would be to extend the Winter Fuel Payment to this group. [153372]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Number of people under 60 years in receipt of middle and higher rate care component of Disability Living Allowance and the higher rate of mobility component of Disability Living Allowance, with the annual cost of extending Winter Fuel Payments to these groups

	Number	*Cost (£ million)*
Higher and middle rate care component	747,140	130
Higher rate mobility component	709,560	130

Notes:
1. Based on DLA administrative data, May 2000: DSS Information Centre data, August 2000.
2. Cost rounded to the nearest 10 million.
3. Winter Fuel Payment is considered to be paid at £200.
4. Costs are based on households without a resident aged 60 years or over.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* initial claims, *(b)* renewal claims, *(c)* requests for review and *(d)* requests for appeal were received in respect of Disability Living Allowance claims in each quarter from 1996 to date. [152025]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

	Initial claims	*Renewal claims*	*Reviews*	*Appeals*
June 1996	134,831	40,054	92,890	9,338
September 1996	133,922	37,848	93,587	10,233
December 1996	124,554	42,073	79,141	8,420
March 1997	124,281	47,879	99,361	11,702
June 1997	132,092	43,863	95,037	11,683
September 1997	121,067	42,403	91,633	10,918
December 1997	110,813	44,968	85,968	12,298
March 1998	97,387	53,668	82,094	13,810
June 1998	96,125	48,505	75,419	12,342
September 1998	103,061	46,243	77,818	12,087
December 1998	96,022	46,840	72,727	11,238
March 1999	103,069	56,845	81,573	11,158
June 1999	98,997	49,899	75,498	10,418
September 1999	97,542	48,650	78,601	11,570
December 1999	91,311	47,419	72,231	16,020
March 2000	104,749	56,778	68,944	24,093
June 2000	104,079	49,373	64,631	26,051
September 2000	100,670	48,717	69,636	28,187
December 2000	96,333	47,121	60,629	26,247

Fraud

Mr. Davidson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many convictions for social security fraud there were in each of the last five years; how many of these convictions were for a second offence; if he will list the convictions by administrative areas for the latest year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [152406]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available was given in my written answer to the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) on 10 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 575W.

Flooding (Housing Benefit)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measures his Department plans to assist persons forced by recent floods to move into temporary accommodation who receive Housing Benefit for one property but have to pay rents for the flooded and the temporary properties. [152444]

Angela Eagle: Housing Benefit provides assistance to those on low income to meet the housing costs of the dwelling they occupy as their home. Help can be considered on two such dwellings, for up to four weeks where the local authority is satisfied that the liability to pay two rents was unavoidable. We are aware of the difficulties faced by people whose homes are uninhabitable due to flooding and who have had to rent alternative accommodation. We are reviewing the current arrangements.

National Insurance Numbers

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many prosecutions there have been in each year since 1992 which involve benefit fraud and the misuse of national insurance numbers. [152435]

Mr. Rooker: The information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Winter Fuel Payments

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many of those men aged between 60 and 64 years have not been issued with their Winter Fuel Payment; and if he will set a deadline for these outstanding payments to be made. [152659]

Mr. Rooker: For this winter, we estimated that up to 1.5 million additional people could be newly eligible as a result of the changes to the eligibility rules. So far as we have received around 1.3 million claims, but people have until 30 March 2001 to claim a payment for this winter.

For past winters, we estimated that up to 1.9 million people could be newly eligible. So far around 1 million claims have been made and paid. There is no time limit on claiming payments for past winters.

It is open to those who are now eligible to choose whether they wish to make a claim. An information campaign has been running since April to inform existing and potential customers about the changes to the scheme and what, if anything, they need to do.

Benefit Uptake

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the uptake was in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* Scotland in (i) 1996–97, (ii) 1997–98, (iii) 1998–99 and (iv) 1999–2000 of (A) Child Benefit, (B) Housing Benefit, (C) Council Tax Benefit, (D) Family Credit and (E) Working Families Tax Credit expressed as a percentage of those eligible; and if he will make a statement. [153076]

Angela Eagle: Estimates of take up of Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit and Family Credit for Great Britain are published in annual statistics on "Income Related Benefits Estimates of Take-Up", copies of which are in the Library. It is not possible to produce reliable estimates for different parts of Great Britain and the latest published estimates are for 1998–99.

No statistics are published for Child Benefit; it is believed that on average 98 per cent. of families take up their entitlement to Child Benefit.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what representations he has received from the Scottish Executive about increasing levels of benefit take-up. [153072]

Mr. Bayley: We are in regular contact with the Scottish Executive over a number of issues. Reducing poverty is an aim of both administrations and the UK Government works in partnership with the Scottish Executive, through mechanisms such as the Joint Ministerial Committee on Poverty.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to review the procedures and operation of the Child Support Agency. [153077]

Angela Eagle: We have no current plans to review the procedures and operation of the Child Support Agency. As a result of a fundamental review of child support completed in December 1998, we have undertaken a radical reform of the system, detailed provision for which is contained in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act 2000. The new child support scheme will be introduced for new cases by April 2002. Parents who have an existing maintenance assessment will be transferred to the new scheme at a later date when the new arrangements are shown to be working well.

The new child support scheme will be simpler and easy to understand. Child maintenance will be calculated based on a straightforward percentage of the non-resident parent's net income. The basic rate will be 15 per cent. for one child, 20 per cent. for two and 25 per cent. for three or more. The Child Support Agency will be radically reformed to provide a service focused on compliance and the needs of its customers.

Over 1 million more children will gain as a result of the new, simplified system.

The White Paper "A new contract for welfare: Children's Rights and Parents' Responsibilities" (CM 4349) sets out the scheme in more detail.

Retirement Age

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what level of basic state pension he estimates could be paid in 2040 from the projected expenditure on the basic state retirement pension if the retirement age for men and women in 2040 was 70, having been raised by one year every two years between 2030 and 2040. [153292]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Policies (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East constituency of his Department's policies and action since 2 May 1997. [153283]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of:

Eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10;

Promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and,

Combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000) sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in the income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, and in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East 12,127 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over 50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of

people claiming Jobseekers Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East the number has reduced from 3,200 to 2,900. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East from 1,800 to 1,700.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty, so we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Around 18,000 older people in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 16,900 pensioners in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic state pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over 75s of whom we estimate there are about 6,100 in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East. 2,900 pensioner families in Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Promotional Campaigns

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153415]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not available in the format requested.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Private Finance Initiative (Heat Insulation Specification)

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what standard of heat insulation is specified for pipework in PFI projects in his Department. [151657]

Ms Beverley Hughes: My Department expects all service providers, including PFI contractors, to make optimum use of plant, equipment and materials to meet the output specifications of contracts in accordance with the policies and targets set by Government in respect of sustainability, environmental and energy conservation requirements. While we do not specify standards, the output specifications of contracts conform to Government standards for sustainability and energy efficiency.

Traffic Congestion (Rail Disruption)

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimates he has made as to the effect of reduced performance reliability of the trains on road congestion. [152356]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* DETR has 160 Automatic Traffic Counters continuously measuring traffic on a range of roads throughout the country. Overall these have shown no significant increase in traffic in the weeks after the Hatfield crash compared with similar weeks before the crash. Analysis of 56 Automatic Traffic Count sites in London similarly showed no overall increase in traffic. Similarly, no increase in road traffic has been detected following the Selby rail crash.

Health and Safety Executive

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the planned budget of the Health and Safety Executive is for each of the next three years. [152606]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Commission's gross budget within the DETR's departmental expenditure limit for the next three years is £247.9 million for 2001–02, £258.8 million for 2002–03 and £264.8 million for 2003–04.

Of this budget £59.4 million will be raised from income in 2001–02, £58.4 million from income in 2002–03 and £54.4 million from income in 2003–04. The remainder will be paid by the Government from grant-in-aid to the Commission.

The figures exclude the Health and Safety Laboratory budget, which operates on a net nil administration cost regime.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the budget of the Health and Safety Executive was in each of the last 10 years. [152605]

Mr. Meacher: The budget of the Health and Safety Executive for each of the last 10 years is described in the table.

£000

Financial year	*Total gross*	*Total net*
1991–92	198,360	157,700
1992–93	215,227	171,324
1993–94	229,199	180,489
1994–95	229,620	188,364
1995–96	228,676	186,826
1996–97	215,885	179,487
1997–98	218,659	180,957
1998–99	221,310	182,228
1999–2000	231,254	186,855
2000–01	247,775	192,853

The total net figures are net of receipts received for publications and other chargeable activities.

The figures reflect accounting arrangements changed as a result of the Health and Safety Laboratory operating a net running cost regime from 1 April 1996.

Construction Industry (Health and Safety)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many health and safety inspectors who are able to inspect construction sites there are in each Government region. [152607]

Mr. Meacher: The number of health and safety inspectors who are able to inspect construction sites is 488. This is broken down on a HSE Divisional basis set out in table 1. These staff are not all allocated to construction work.

Table 1: Band 2/3 operational inspectors

Division	*Number*
Scotland	60
Yorkshire and North East	67
North West	68
Midlands	69
Wales and West	85
London and South East	65
Home Counties	74
Total	488

Generally, inspection work is carried out by Band 3 inspectors, and managed by Band 2 inspectors. Band 4 inspectors (those under training) do not normally carry out inspection of construction sites.

The current allocations to construction work for the 2001–02 workyear are as follows.

Table 2: Band 2/3's allocated to construction work

Division	*Number*
Scotland	13
Yorkshire and North East	14
North West	13
Midlands	14
Wales and West	17
London and South East	27
Home Counties	18
Total	116

This figure includes the Band 2 managers who manage the construction groups and produces a total ring fence number of 116 inspectors allocated to construction.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* routine inspections of construction sites and *(b)* inspections of construction sites in response to an accident there have been in each of the last five years. [152603]

Mr. Meacher: The table shows the number of inspection and investigation contacts made by inspectors from HSE's Field Operations Directorate to construction sites (based on the Standard Industrial Classification categorisation) for each of the last five years.

Number of contacts

	Inspection	*Inspection resulting from accident*
1996–97	33,937	890
1997–98	24,828	1,087
1998–99	21,024	1,467
1999–2000	18,421	1,670
2000–01[1]	14,309	2,769

[1] Incomplete year using data up to 5 March 2001

Nuclear Material

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the long-term strategy for the storage of waste arising from the decommissioning of nuclear reactors. [152687]

Mr. Meacher: The Government's policy is that radioactive wastes, including waste from the decommissioning of nuclear reactors, should be managed in ways that protect the safety of the public, the workforce and the environment, now and in the future. This is a complex issue and the UK Government and the devolved Administrations will publish a consultation paper setting out detailed proposals as soon as we can. This paper will begin the process that will lead to the implementation of a radioactive waste management policy capable of commanding widespread support across the UK.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on liaison between the emergency services and local authorities and BNFL on the transportation of nuclear materials by *(a)* road and *(b)* rail. [152685]

Mr. Hill: All transporters of nuclear material in Great Britain, including BNFL, are required by regulation to have emergency procedures to cover any shipment in the event of an accident. Liaison with local authorities and emergency services is not a regulatory requirement.

The nuclear industry, including BNFL, has a nation-wide emergency response organisation called RADSAFE, which has been drawn up after consultation with the relevant national bodies and organisations, including the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the Chief and Assistant Chief Fire Officers Association (CACFOA).

Selby Rail Accident (Crash Barriers)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to review the adequacy of crash barriers on the approach roads to bridges over railway lines; and if he will make a statement. [152853]

Mr. Hill: I am extremely grateful to the HSE and to TRL for their speedy consideration of the factors involved in the tragic accident at Great Heck near Selby on 28 February 2001. HSE and TRL will be continuing their investigations, but it is becoming apparent that there was nothing the railway industry could reasonably have done to prevent the train collision. It also appears that there were no technical matters connected with the road infrastructure that would help explain why the vehicle left the M62 in the first place. The road surface appears to have been adequate and the safety barriers more than met

the current standards. We will, of course, have to await the report of the police into the incident. But in the interim my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has asked the HSC to convene and lead a working group that will look at the circumstances of incidents where vehicles have blocked rail lines and whether there are features in common that might have been preventable. In parallel the Highways Agency will be reviewing its standards for safety barriers.

Youth Parliament

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to meet members of the UK youth parliament to discuss the transport and environment issues raised in the parliament's manifesto. [152965]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: We will consider sympathetically any request from the UK youth parliament to meet them to discuss the transport and environment issues raised in the parliament's manifesto.

Housing (Islington)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list each housing capital improvement project financed by his Department in Islington since 1 May 1997. [153115]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* Since May 1997, the London Borough of Islington has been allocated the following amounts of funding for specific housing capital improvement projects:

Project/year	£
Capital Challenge (Marquess Estate)	
1997–98	1,500,000
1998–99	4,500,000
1999–2000	3,500,000
Estate Action (Harvist Estate)	
1997–98	1,303,000
1998–99	1,693,000
1999–2000	1,119,100
2000–01	777,900
2001–02	500,000
Single Regeneration Budget	
Kings Cross Partnership (housing projects)	
1997–98	380,000
1998–99	1,962,000
1999–2000	1,301,000
2000–01	846,000
2001–02	577,000
Finsbury Park (Tollington Estate)	
1999–2000	45,000
2000–01	270,000
2001–02	1,200,000

The following has also been allocated to the borough. However, it is a matter for the local authority to decide how this funding is allocated between their priorities.

	£
Housing Investment Programme	
1997–98	9,996,000
1998–99	8,170,000
1999–2000	9,816,000
2000–01	28,557,000
2001–02	12,863,000
Basic Credit Approvals[1]	
1997–98	8,977,000
1998–99	11,154,000
1999–2000	11,333,000
2000–01	27,822,000
Capital Receipts Initiative	
1997–98	2,848,000
1998–99	9,168,000
1999–2000	8,334,000
Major Repairs Allowance	
2001–02	25,434,034

[1] All services

Waste Recycling

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent assessment he has made of the accuracy of the formula applied to calculate recycling rates of local authorities. [153432]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Information on the amount of waste collected and recycled by local authorities is obtained on an annual basis through the Department's annual Municipal Waste Management Survey. It is this information that is used to calculate household waste recycling rates at the national and local level. The proposed methodology for calculating the percentage of household waste recycled by local authorities in England was published in the consultation document "Best Value and Audit Commission Performance Indicators for 2001–02" in October 2000. The responses to the consultation exercise were taken into account in producing the final methodology published in Annexe A of the "Guidance on Municipal Waste Management Strategies" on 5 March 2001. A copy of the guidance has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies he has commissioned into the establishment costs of local authorities, as distinct from those related to the size or needs of their populations, and any consequent implications for the studies of local government finance. [153399]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Green Paper "Modernising Local Government Finance", notes that future revenue grant distribution formulae could distinguish more clearly between fixed costs and the costs that vary according to the number of people for whom a service is provided.

To help us explore how such formulae could be developed, we commissioned a scoping study from PricewaterhouseCoopers. The aim of the study was to review the existing evidence, and make recommendations as to the most promising avenues for further research if that was found to be needed. The study will shortly be published on the LGA website: www.lga.gov.uk. It

suggests that fixed costs that do not vary much according to the size or needs of authority populations are most likely to relate to authorities' corporate administration costs. Examples are the costs of statutory external audits, and the costs of completing statements of accounts, annual reports and Best Value Performance Plans.

We are currently considering the implications of the scoping study as part of our review of the local government finance system, including whether we need to commission more detailed follow-up research.

Airport Operators Association Environmental Guidance Manual

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the AOA environmental guidance manual. [153289]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: We welcome AOA's initiative to produce an environmental guidance manual. Any initiative which helps to mitigate the environmental impacts of aviation is to be welcomed. We hope that the manual will assist AOA members in consolidating and improving their environmental performance and building on existing good practice.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse (Maritime Sector)

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made in implementing measures to tackle alcohol and drug abuse in the maritime sector; and if he will make a statement. [153376]

Mr. Hill: The Queen's Speech on 6 December outlined the Government's intention to draft a Safety Bill. We will use this opportunity to introduce a prescribed blood/alcohol limit for professional and recreational mariners with accompanying powers for the police to test suspects. We also intend to take permissive powers to allow testing for drugs.

We propose to set a 80 mg per 100 ml blood/alcohol limit for mariners of all types of civil waterborne transport in UK waters, including non-UK vessels. It will be illegal for mariners, on duty, on board any commercial vessel or fishing vessel to be above the limit or to be unfit to fulfil their duties due to being intoxicated through drink. In the interest of passenger safety on passenger vessels or ferries the limit will apply to off-duty crew having a safety critical function in the event of an emergency. Those involved in the navigation or propulsion of recreational craft while in motion and not moored will also be included.

The proposed measures follow from recommendations made by Lord Justice Clarke in his Thames Safety Inquiry report published in December 1999 and a consultation exercise conducted by my Department last year. Responses to the consultation paper were largely supportive of the proposals and a summary has been placed in the Library of the House and a compilation of the full response is available in my Department's library.

Computer Failures

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment of risk he has made of the impact of a major computer disaster on the work of his Department; what steps he has taken to minimise the effects of such a disaster; and what the standard of compliance is to protect his Department from its effects. [152546]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Risk assessments have been made of the potential impact on DETR(C)'s business of any major incidents, including those affecting computer systems. Measures are in place to minimise the effects of such an incident, including back-up of information, off-site storage and the identification of alternative work locations. Extensive plans are also in place to maintain essential operations and restore normal working with the minimum of delay. DETR(C)'s computer systems comply with Government Information Security Standards and the Department is currently working towards compliance with BS 7799 in the Security Management of key information processes.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if all of the bidders for NATS are committed to the development of the air traffic control centre at Prestwick. [153281]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Yes. It is a fundamental requirement of all bidders. Furthermore, the commitment to develop and complete major air traffic control projects is enshrined in the Transport Act 2000, in clause 51 (3). This clause is specifically aimed at ensuring that Prestwick is completed.

Waste Transfer Station, Sompting

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he received the Inspector's report on the public inquiry into the Halewick Lane Waste Transfer Station at Sompting, West Sussex. [153124]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions received the Inspector's report on the proposed waste management centre on 16 February 2001.

Transboundary Air Pollution

Mr. McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, transport and the Regions when his Department's national expert group on transboundary Air Pollution will publish its report into acidification, eutrophication and ground-level ozone in the UK. [153495]

Mr. Meacher: The report of the national expert group on Transboundary Air Pollution will be published today on the internet as a "draft" for comment. I will also arrange for copies to be placed in the House Libraries at that time.

The draft conclusions of the expert group show a mixed picture on the impact of air pollution on ecosystems in the UK. For instance the reduction in sulphur emissions has led to a 50 per cent. reduction in 'acid rain' in the UK in the last 12 years, and as a result, some ecosystems are showing signs of recovery. However, following recent scientific developments, the expert group concludes that the continued impact of air pollution on ecosystems may be more widespread than previously calculated.

The report is being issued in draft to allow the scientific community and other interested parties the opportunity to review and comment on the scientific developments and draft findings before the group publish their final report in August or September 2001.

The draft report will also be available via the DETR's Environment Protection web pages, http://www.environment.detr.gov.uk/conindex.htm

Buildings (Non-occupational Accidents)

Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much money has been spent annually by his Department since 1997 on research undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive and by the Building Research Establishment into the prevention of non-occupational injuries related to building regulations and design features. [153177]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Falls on stairs has been identified as the main type of non-occupational accident that involves design features. Research work in this area has been funded by Building Regulations Division, with support from HSE. The research, which was carried out by the Building Research Establishment, has concentrated on improving the design of guarding and stairs. The annual cost of this research to date has been:

1998–99—£131,665

1999–00—£105,987

2000–01—£150,309 (£97,704 from Building Regulations + £52,605 from HSE).

The work is expected to continue.

Flooding (Housing Benefit)

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures his Department plans to assist persons forced by recent floods to move into temporary accommodation who receive housing benefit for one property but have to pay rents for the flooded and the temporary properties. [152443]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given today by the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), *Official Report*, column 460W.

Wafic Said Business School, Oxford

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 15 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 219W, on the Wafic Said Business School, what representations were received by *(a)* him and *(b)* his officials from (i) other Government Ministers and (ii) officials about (A) the nature of his decision and (B) the timescale of his decision and its announcement, on whether to call in the listed buildings application (98/4580/L Oxford City Council) to dismantle the former London Midland Scottish railway station, Oxford. [152462]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* Our records include no representations on whether to call in the listed buildings application (98/4580/L Oxford City Council) to dismantle the former London Midland Scottish railway station, Oxford from other Government Ministers or officials. However, they do include a representation from the hon. Member made on 18 August 1998 asking that the application should not be called in and pointing out the adverse impact that any delay in the decision would have on the Oxford Transport Strategy.

Once the decision not to call in the application had been reached, the timing of the announcement was discussed with officials in 10 Downing street in the normal way.

TREASURY

Local Government Finance

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes are proposed to the quotas for lending to local authorities by the Public Works Loan Board. [153704]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Public Works Loan Commissioners have issued a circular today notifying local authorities that the formula for calculating quotas for 2001–02 will remain unchanged from that for the present financial year.

A copy of the circular has been placed in the House Library.

Absenteeism

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the rate of absence from work due to sickness and injury for workers was in *(a)* the public sector and *(b)* the private sector in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [146961]

Marjorie Mowlam: I have been asked to reply.

My Department does not maintain these statistics. The Cabinet Office does, however, publish each year a report on sickness absence in the civil service and I would refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Mrs. Fitzsimons) on 15 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 269–70W, for the position in 1999.

The Office for National Statistics, through its Labour Force Survey, collects data on working days lost to illness and injury. The results, published quarterly in "Labour Market Trends", are not presented by the public and private sectors.

Motor Fuel

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his policy is on tackling the smuggling of motor fuel products into Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement. [153426]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government are committed to tackling this problem and since September 2000 have increased by a factor of four the resources for tackling it in Northern Ireland. I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer given to the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) on 7 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 123W.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many successful prosecutions there have been in respect of the smuggling of motor fuel products

into Northern Ireland; and how many vehicles smuggling motor fuel products into Northern Ireland have been seized in 2001. [153425]

Dawn Primarolo: The data for the opening months of 2001 are not yet available.

Family Incomes

Ms Squire: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his latest estimate is of the number of *(a)* families in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit, *(b)* families in receipt of the child tax credit and *(c)* people in receipt of the national minimum wage in each constituency in Scotland. [152463]

Dawn Primarolo: For information on the Working Families Tax Credit, I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 425W.

It is estimated that 400,000 families in Scotland will be eligible for the Children's Tax Credit, which is to be introduced for the tax year 2001–02. No reliable estimates are available for each constituency.

As to the information sought on the national minimum wage, the national statistician has published estimates of the number of jobs paid at less than NMW rates for 1998, 1999 and 2000. These are based on an improved methodology using data from both the New Earnings Survey and Labour Force Survey. Estimates for the United Kingdom and Government office regions, including Scotland, are available on the national statistics website at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/nsbase/themes/labour_market/nmw_lowpay_tables.asp. No estimates are available for parliamentary constituencies.

Computer Failures

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment of risk has been made of the impact to the UK economy in the event of the Inland Revenue being unable to collect or distribute funds for a period of more than three days due to massive computer failure. [152547]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue keeps under constant review its assessment of risks to its operations, including the collection and distribution of funds. It has full, tested contingency plans in place to minimise the impacts of any problems in a range of circumstances, up to and including massive computer failure.

Disabled Persons Tax Credit (Wansbeck)

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in Wansbeck are claiming the Disabled Persons Tax Credit. [153138]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 425W.

VAT (Fitness Clubs)

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received from the Fitness Industry Association concerning VAT exemption for health-related fitness clubs. [152862]

Dawn Primarolo: No representations have been received from this association.

Birth Certificates

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will bring forward legislation to allow children of Welsh parents born in England to be entitled to a Welsh birth certificate; and if he will make a statement. [152882]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Government will consider using the provisions of the Regulatory Reform Bill, currently going through the House, to address this issue.

Working Families Tax Credit

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his target for the time within which the Inland Revenue replies to hon. Members' letters about the Working Families Tax Credit. [152952]

Dawn Primarolo: Target times are set out in the Treasury's public service agreement, copies of which are in the Library.

Mr. Maclean: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer of 13 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 103W, what proportion of employees are overpaying tax and national insurance as a result of the Working Families Tax Credit. [151862]

Dawn Primarolo: Deducting tax and national insurance is the responsibility of employers and the January 2001 "Employers Bulletin", sent to all employers, reminded them of how tax credits should be paid. When the Inland Revenue uncovers errors in the course of its work, or is approached by employees or employers when things go wrong during the year, it helps employers to put things right so that any temporary overpayments are corrected at the earliest opportunity.

Children's Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what his estimate is of *(a)* the number of people who have claimed the children's tax credit to date and *(b)* the number who had claimed by 31 January. [152016]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The Inland Revenue has invited PAYE taxpayers to claim for the children's tax credit (CTC). By 7 March they had received 3.2 million claim forms, which represents 80 per cent. of the potential 4 million families who are eligible for CTC and pay tax under PAYE. The position at the end of January was that the Inland Revenue had received 2.9 million forms. Claims are still coming in, and any which have not been dealt with in time for April pay

will be backdated under the tax rules to April 2001 so that the claimant has the benefit of the tax cut for the whole of the tax year. The self-employed claim in the normal way when they complete their 2001–02 tax return.

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what resources he has made available to publicise and promote the new children's tax credit; and if he will make extra resources available to increase the number of telephone advisers on the helpline. [151620]

Dawn Primarolo: On publicity, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 23 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 568W. The Inland Revenue has deployed extra staff to the helpline to deal with the increased number of calls resulting from the latest campaign.

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on *(a)* the number of calls handled by the new children's tax credit helpline and *(b)* the level of staffing and resources allocated for the helpline. [151621]

Dawn Primarolo: The children's tax credit helpline and orderline has taken around 1.9 million calls. The number of calls increased during the most recent advertising campaign and the Inland Revenue increased the number of staff deployed on the helpline.

Pensions

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it has been the policy for improvements to public sector pension schemes to be applied retrospectively; and if he will make a statement. [152161]

Mr. Andrew Smith: It has been the long-standing policy of successive Governments that discretionary changes to improve the benefits from public service pension schemes should normally be implemented from a current date for future service of active members only.

PRIME MINISTER

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Prime Minister on what occasions since 3 May 1997, he has met members of the Hinduja family; where such meetings took place; and for what purpose. [148547]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on 31 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 224W.

Hammond Inquiry

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will take steps to establish and publish the source of leaks to the media concerning the Hammond Inquiry. [153239]

The Prime Minister: No. The draft report of the Hammond Inquiry was not a Government document. I received Sir Anthony Hammond's report on 8 March 2001 and it was published on 9 March 2001.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Prime Minister when he will answer the question tabled by the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood on 30 January, relating to the Hinduja family. [153254]

The Prime Minister: I have done so today.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Public Relations (Expenditure)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure was in his Department for the financial years *(a)* 1996–97, *(b)* 1997–98, *(c)* 1998–99 and *(d)* 1999–2000, and what the planned expenditure and breakdown of expenditure for 2000–01 is on (i) public opinion research, (ii) television, radio and newspaper advertising and (iii) direct mail. [149257]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* Total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure by MAFF for the financial years 1996–97, 1998–99, 1999–2000 and planned expenditure for 2000–01 on (i) public opinion research, (ii) television, radio and newspaper per advertising and (iii) direct mail, is as follows:

£

	Public opinion research	*Television, radio and newspaper advertising*	*Direct mail*[1]
1996–97	78,000	109,000	1,454,000
1997–98	257,000	248,000	1,254,000
1998–99	164,000	834,000	943,000
1999–2000	386,740	614,104	1,036,000
2000–01[2]	83,000	360,712	1,043,000

[1] Including the despatch of forms and explanatory material to farmers for MAFF administered schemes

[2] Actual spending to date

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the IT projects currently undertaken in his Department; and if he will state the *(a)* expected completion date and *(b)* cost of each project. [151505]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* A list of the major IT projects costing most than £100,000 and undertaken in the current year is shown in the table, together with the requested supplementary information. This includes a number of projects for the monitoring and control of animal diseases, as well as on-going projects for the payment of a number of common agricultural policy schemes which need annual amendment to take account of changes agreed by the EU. Costs relating to maintenance of existing systems and services are excluded.

Major IT projects are approved (or rejected) on the basis of business cases indicating the benefits to the Department to be delivered from the expenditure, and are managed by formal project boards chaired by senior staff.

To ensure probity and value for money, procurements are undertaken in compliance with EC public procurement rules, UK Government domestic procurement policy and best practice guidance to ensure probity and value for money, government accounting rules and National Audit Office requirements. MAFF is also implementing the relevant recommendations of the report "Successful IT—Modernising Government in Action", published in May 2000.

IT projects	*End date*	*Total*
State Veterinary Service network/TB implementation	[1]—	5,306,704
Replacement for current Vet Net systems—pilot projects	July 2001	150,000
Cattle Ear Tag Allocation System	April 2001	200,000
Geographical Information Systems for Animal Disease Control	April 2001	542,133
British Cattle Movement Service Strategic Enhancements and Integration Testing of IT System	[1]—	3,204,727
Web Access to Cattle Tracing System	May 2001	1,759,153
Monitoring of Animal Movements within UK and EC	[1]—	237,965
Pet Travel Scheme	August 2000	250,000
GB Cattle Herd Registration Development	November 2000	1,367,000
Scrapie Control System	July 2001	1,908,223
Food Survey System replacement	March 2002	1,329,020
Grants and Subsidies Management System for Common Agricultural Policy Payments	[1]—	2,823,476
Combined Bovine Risk Assessment Scheme	December 2001	2,151,500
Beef Extensification Premium Scheme	May 2001	1,339,000
New Common Agricultural Policy Support Systems	[1]—	15,846,854
Cattle Slaughter Premium Scheme	[1]—	1,767,500
Agenda 2000	[1]—	1,378,650
Hill Farmers Allowance	May 2001	1,838,501
England Rural Development Programme	February 2003	2,135,375
Sea Fish Management Systems	[1]—	394,005
Fisheries Satellite Surveillance	July 2003	322,541
Integration of Existing Building and Estate Management Databases	[1]—	1,553,085
Upgrade to Financial Systems and reporting tools	[1]—	10,878,802
E-Commerce	December 2001	1,867,334
Replacement Office/Corporate Systems	December 2001	9,827,835
Central Science Laboratories (CSL): Integrated Business Information System	October 2001	500,000
CSL:Upgrade to Hardware to run new Office Systems	May 2001	250,000
Centre for Environmental, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS): Laboratory Information Management Systems	March 2003	350,000
CEFAS: Biological Sampling System	March 2003	120,000
Farming and Rural Conservation Agency (FRCA): Invest to Save Interdepartmental project (MAGIC) Geographical Information System	April 2002	462,000
FRCA: Cartography Tool Kit	April 2003	930,000
FRCA: basic mapping for administration of agri-environment schemes	October 2001	292,000
Intervention Board (IB): Oracle Multi Org for Intervention Board	February 2001	252,000
IB: Block Guarantee Scheme System Redevelopment	April 2001	198,000
IB: Audit Logging	December 2001	187,548
IB: Data Integration	March 2001	287,833
IB: Brussels Matrix	March 2001	429,018
IB: Modulation	June 2001	350,000
IB: Over Thirty Month Scheme System Extension	July 2001	343,214
IB: Slaughter Premium Scheme System Development	June 2001	735,428
IB: Porting PI Open Systems to Universe	December 2001	1,150,000

[1] Annual revision required

Mr. Field: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the IT projects his Department plans to undertake in the next year; and if he will state in each case the *(a)* expected date of commencement and completion and *(b)* cost. [151469]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* A list of the new IT projects costing more than £100,000 and expected to start in 2001–02 is shown, with the requested supplementary information. Costs relating to maintenance of existing systems and services are excluded.

	Projected costs (£)	*Start date*	*End date*
Orthophotos to support Integrated Administration and Control Systems Geographical Information Systems in Agricultural Payments' Agency	250,000	April 2001	March 2002
Redevelopment of Common Agricultural Policy Payment Schemes	47,000,000	April 2001	March 2004
Intervention Board (IB): Oracle Release 11i	200,000	May 2001	July 2002
IB: Oracle Personnel System Update	210,000	October 2001	March 2002

BSE

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what analysis his Department has made of the costs of *(a)* rendering carcases killed under the OTMS prior to incineration and *(b)* direct incineration of such carcases. [151817]

Ms Quin: Rendering, meat and bonemeal incineration and direct carcase incineration services were procured by the Intervention Board through tenders conducted under EC rules.

Rates charged by individual suppliers vary. Costs by each route are regularly compared. Historically, on a per animal basis, rendering followed by incineration of the resultant MBM and tallow has been cheaper than direct carcase incineration.

However, following recently concluded negotiations leading to the extension of direct carcase incineration contracts, the costs of each disposal route are now more closely aligned.

Imported Meat

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what inspections are carried out, and by whom, on meat imports from *(a)* EU countries and *(b)* other countries. [151672]

Ms Quin: Community legislation requires member states to comply with strict hygiene rules in the production of meat and meat products in the Community before they are approved to trade. Among other things, this sets out the licensing, structural and veterinary supervision requirements to be applied in all meat plants before they can export.

The European Commission is responsible for ensuring member states fulfil their obligations. EU legislation also provides for member states to carry out checks at points of destination. These are carried out by Meat Hygiene Service official veterinary surgeons at licensed premises, local authorities and the State Veterinary Service in the UK. Depending on the perceived health risk, checks at destination may be random or 100 per cent. Following the recent identification of specified risk material in imports of meat from Germany and the current foot and mouth disease problems in the UK, the Meat Hygiene Service has been instructed to step up levels of inspection at cutting plants and cold stores to ensure that increased volumes of imports can be checked for the necessary health marks and correct documentation.

All meat imported from third countries into the UK must enter at designated UK border inspection posts (BIPs) where it is subject to veterinary checking. All consignments are subject to documentary and identity checks in accordance with EU legislation. These checks are to ensure that conditions of import into the Community have been complied with and that the products have remained in a satisfactory condition during transport. They are carried out by official veterinary surgeons employed by the local authority in which the BIP is located.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his policy is on banning the importation of beef, pigmeat and sheepmeat from countries suffering from outbreaks of *(a)* foot and mouth disease and *(b)* swine fever. [151916]

Ms Quin: The importation into the European Community of fresh meat from third countries is governed by Community legislation.

When outbreaks of notifiable disease occur (including both classical swine fever and foot and mouth disease) the Products of Animal Origin (Import and Export) Regulations 1996 allow the Government to prohibit the import of meat from a country or part thereof. On notification of an outbreak these Regulations allow the UK to issue a Declaration prohibiting meat from the relevant country or part thereof. They are effective from the date and time of signature and are sent immediately to all enforcement authorities. These Declarations remain in force pending the adoption of appropriate Community legislation. These provisions apply equally to outbreaks in member states and in third countries.

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate the Ministry has made of the total amount of imported meat in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000 and *(e)* 2001. [152379]

Ms Quin: Official Overseas Trade Statistics show that the total amount of meat and meat products imported into the UK in 1997 to 2000 was as follows:

Thousand

Year	*Tonnes*
1997	1,195
1998	1,187
1999	1,300
2000	1,427

Source:
HM Customs and Excise

Forecasts for 2001 are not published.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the control measures in other countries which export meat and meat products to the UK. [152418]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* All consignments of meat imported into the UK must have been produced in accordance with the harmonised Community rules laid down in Council Directive 64/433/EEC (as amended) (fresh meat) and Council Directive 77/99/EEC (as amended) (meat products). Among other things, these Directives set out the licensing, structural and veterinary supervision requirements to be applied in meat plants.

Ensuring that all member states comply with their Community obligations in properly implementing and applying the Directives is the responsibility of the European Commission, whose Food and Veterinary Office carries our regular programmes of inspection visits to all member states. Depending on the perceived health risk, checks at destination may be random or 100 per cent. Following the recent identification of specified risk material in imports of meat from Germany and the current foot and mouth disease problems in the UK, the Meat Hygiene Service has been instructed to step up levels of

inspection at cutting plants and cold stores to ensure that increased volumes of imports can be checked for the necessary health marks and correct documentation. The Food and Veterinary Office is also responsible for carrying out inspections in the third countries from which fresh meat is imported into the Community.

All meat imported into the UK from third countries must enter at designated UK border inspection posts (BIPs) where it is subject to veterinary inspections. All consignments are subject to documentary and identity checks and at least 20 per cent. of consignments undergo physical checks. These ensure import conditions are met and that the products remain in a satisfactory condition. They are carried out by official veterinary surgeons employed by the local authority in which the BIP is located. In line with Community rules, random spot checks at destination may be carried out on consignments of fresh meat imported into the UK from other EU member states.

Agrimonetary Compensation

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will break down the amounts paid by *(a)* the EU and *(b)* the UK Government for each year the UK has drawn down agrimonetary compensation. [151829]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer my right hon. Friend the Minister gave to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) on 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 337W.

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to claim agrimonetary funds from the EU; and if he will make a statement. [152283]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) on 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 103W.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will publish the results of his investigations into the source of each outbreak of foot and mouth disease in England and Wales. [152019]

Ms Quin: Initial epidemiological evidence suggests that the outbreak appears to have started in one premises in north-east England and spread from there. The main cause of spread appears to be the movement of sheep for trade purposes. Investigations are continuing into the original source. Information on the initial epidemiological findings will be published.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what criteria he uses to judge when an outbreak of foot and mouth disease is called an epidemic; and if he will make a statement. [151918]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Based on a definition of an epidemic as a large number of cases occurring simultaneously in the livestock population, it is too early to say whether the current outbreak represents an epidemic.

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps have been taken to identify the cause of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease and its point of origin. [151936]

Ms Quin: *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Detailed epidemiological investigations are being undertaken for each of the confirmed outbreaks. Initial findings suggest that the outbreak appears to have started in one premises in north-east England and spread from there. The main cause of spread appears to be the movement of sheep for trade purposes. Investigations are continuing into the original source. Information on the initial epidemiological findings will be published.

Sea Defences

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many sea defence projects *(a)* are in progress and *(b)* were completed in (i) 1999 and (ii) 2000. [152884]

Mr. Morley: Information is only readily available in relation to schemes undertaken by the Environment Agency, local authorities and internal drainage boards, for which the Ministry is providing grant aid.

Currently, 64 such sea defence schemes are in progress. The numbers of sea defence schemes for which the Ministry was notified of substantial completion in 1999 and 2000 were 34 and 14 respectively.

Meat Imports (Africa)

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he was first informed of the risk to animal health arising from *(a)* legitimate and *(b)* smuggled meat from Africa; and what action was taken. [152840]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The importation into the Community of fresh meat from third countries is governed by harmonised Community legislation. Under these rules, imports are only permitted from those countries or parts thereof where there is not considered to be a risk to human and animal health.

All meat imported directly into the UK from third countries must enter, and is subject to veterinary inspections, at designated UK border inspection posts (BIP). All consignments are subject to documentary and identity checks and at least 20 per cent. of consignments are subject to physical checks in accordance. These checks are to ensure that conditions of import have been complied with and that the products have remained in a satisfactory condition during transport. They are carried out by official veterinary surgeons employed by the local authority in which the BIP is located.

With regard to illegal imports of meat we are aware of continuing risk that meat could be brought into the UK either from third countries or via other Member States which do not comply with UK import conditions. Both MAFF and Customs officials take immediate action and as soon as such consignments are identified. Any meat identified as illegal is seized and destroyed.

Haddock Stocks

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact on haddock stocks resulting from the closure of North Sea cod areas. [152839]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* Given the prevalence of juvenile haddock in the northern North Sea urgent consideration is being given to improved technical conservation measures. These are necessary whether or not there has been diversion of effort from cod to haddock.

Export of Hides and Skins

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received from businesses exporting hides and skins; and if he will make a statement. [153436]

Ms Quin: We have had a number of inquiries from businesses concerning the export of hides and skins. They have been advised that such exports can take place so long as they meet the requirements of Commission Decision 2001/172/EC.

Under Commission Decision 98/256/EC (as amended), however, bovine hides may not be exported to a destination outside the UK if they are intended for use in human food, animal feed, cosmetic, pharmaceutical and medical products.

Agricultural Employment

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what his estimate is of the number of people employed in agriculture in each of the past 15 years; and what the percentage change was in each year. [152696]

Ms Quin: The information for England is provided in the table.

Total labour force on farms (England)

Year	*Number (Thousand)*	*Percentage change*
1986	488.5	—
1987	477.9	−2.2
1988	469.9	−1.7
1989	457.4	−2.7
1990	455.9	−0.3
1991	445.0	−2.4
1992	440.2	−1.1
1993	437.7	−0.6
1994	430.9	−1.6
1995	425.2	−1.3
1996	420.5	−1.1
1997	417.0	−0.8
1998	415.0	—
1999	397.7	−4.2
2000	373.9	−6.0

Note:
In 1998, fundamental changes were made to the June Census labour questions which may have affected response. Therefore, figures from 1998 onwards are not strictly comparable with those for earlier years.
Source:
June Agricultural and Horticultural Census

Compulsory Slaughter

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on what basis farmers whose healthy livestock are compulsorily slaughtered are compensated. [152328]

Ms Quin: The level of compensation is set out in Schedule 3 of the Animal Health Act 1981. Where the animal slaughtered was affected with foot and mouth disease, compensation shall be the value of the animal immediately before it became affected. In every other case, (eg animals exposed to infection but not affected) compensation shall be the value of the animal immediately before slaughter.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the rates of compensation are for farm animals destroyed under foot and mouth control orders. [152416]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The level of compensation is set out in Schedule 3 of the Animal Health Act 1981. Where the animal slaughtered was affected with foot and mouth disease, compensation shall be the value of the animal immediately before it became affected. In every other case, (eg animals exposed to infection but not affected) compensation shall be the value of the animal immediately before slaughter.

Farming (Young Entrants)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what encouragement the Government give to young entrants to farming; and if he will make a statement. [152291]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Young people can most effectively be helped through policies, such as those under the Action Plan for Farming, that support an efficient, competitive and environmentally aware agricultural industry that will be sustainable in the future. Further measures under the England Rural Development Programme will be targeted at young entrants where appropriate.

Export Refund Certificates

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what discussions he has had with the European Commission on the regime of control regarding export refund certificates; [152184]

(2) if he will make a statement on the decision of the European Union to apply a cut-off at the end of each application period for the operation of export refund certificates; [152186]

(3) what discussions he has had with the European Commission on its decision to restrict refunds on processed goods by introducing the export refund certificate system; [152183]

(4) if he will make a statement on the mechanism recently introduced by the European Union to split the year into six application periods for the operation of export refund certificates; [152185]

(5) if he will make a statement on the policy of the EU to apply reducing co-efficients to exports and on the impact this will have upon *(a)* the exporting agents and *(b)* the principal's budgets. [152187]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The EU is committed under the WTO Uruguay Round agreement to reducing expenditure on export refunds. This applies to export refunds for both agricultural raw materials and to processed agricultural products. These refunds are provided to compensate for the higher price of EU raw agricultural materials which is supported under the CAP and is higher than prices on the world market.

The UK's long-term aim is the reform of CAP to lower EU prices and to remove the need for export refunds—but this will take time. Meanwhile our priority is to ensure that WTO and CAP budgetary commitments are honoured with minimum damage to export competitiveness of UK industry. In consultation and with the support of our industry my Department has been active in developing these arrangements with the Commission.

A system of refund certificates was introduced last year with the agreement of member states to keep expenditure within WTO limits. Under this system there are six tranches available in which traders may obtain time-limited refund certificates. These tranches are intended to facilitate planned access to refunds by traders throughout the year. If demand for certificates exceeds funds allocated within a tranche, access to refunds is adjusted by means of a reducing coefficient. The intention at times of such shortfall is to provide increased flexibility to enable processors to access raw materials at (cheaper) prices from the world market.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Numbers

8. **Mr. Baldry:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he next expects to meet the chief constable of the Thames Valley to discuss Oxfordshire police numbers. [151706]

Mr. Straw: I have discussions with the chief constable, Charles Pollard, from time to time, the latest of which took place this morning.

The Thames Valley force is in a strong position in terms of the resources available to it. The force has been allocated a total of 325 crime fighting fund recruits. In the next financial year, the force will receive funding support of £245.1 million, an increase of £13.4 million or 5.8 per cent. over 2000–01. The force will also receive £1.3 million from the rural policing fund. The national recruitment campaign should boost recruitment to the force and has already led to 437 expressions of interest being passed to Thames Valley.

As a result of the range of measures we have taken, the chief constable has told me that he is "quietly hopeful" of the positive impact which they will have on police numbers in his force.

Further to this, I am pleased to announce to the House today that I have accepted the police negotiating board's (PNB's) recommendation that there should be an additional annual allowance paid to officers in eight forces in the south-east.

In the five forces bordering the Metropolitan Police service—Thames Valley, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent and Surrey—the allowance will be £2,000 per annum. In the remaining three forces in the south east—Bedfordshire, Hampshire and Sussex—the annual allowance will be £1,000. The new allowance will be payable with effect from 1 April 2001 and will be paid to officers and rejoiners appointed on or after 1 September 1994 who are not in receipt of housing allowance.

This is a good deal for forces in the south-east. The new allowance should help them both to recruit more constables and to retain experienced officers, and ensure that officers in these forces can meet the higher costs associated with living in the region.

The allowance, combined with the unprecedented funding that we are now investing in the police service as a whole, will help ensure that the recent upturn in police numbers is sustained in Thames Valley, in the south-east more generally, and across the country.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many serving police officers there were on 31 March and 30 September for each year between 1997 and 2000. [151676]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* Police numbers on 31 March and 30 September for each year between 1997 and 2000 are given in the table.

Police numbers 1997 to 2000

Year	*As at 31 March*	*As at 30 September*
1997	127,158	126,862
1998	126,814	126,679
1999	126,096	125,394
2000	124,170	124,614

Note:
Full-time equivalents
Source:
Home Office Statistical Bulletin, 'Police Service Strength 2/01' (to September 2000)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers there were in Sussex *(a)* in May 1997 and *(b)* on the last date for which figures are available. [151783]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) on 7 February 2001, *Official Report,* column 614W.

Prison Accommodation

12. **Gillian Merron:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the existing and future provision of prison accommodation. [151711]

Mr. Boateng: The total certified operational capacity of the prison estate was 71,461 on 2 March 2001. A new 800-place prison, Dovegate prison in Staffordshire, is scheduled to open in July this year.

The Prison Service has also been funded to increase capacity by a further 2,660 by 2004.

Street Watches

14. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will introduce uniformed street watches in urban areas to support the work of the police. [151715]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My Department and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions are already jointly funding a neighbourhood wardens programme across England and Wales. The majority of the schemes are within urban areas. Neighbourhood wardens have a supportive and complementary role to the police, local authority and local partnerships to help tackle antisocial behaviour, make environmental improvements in a neighbourhood, have a real effect on the quality of life of local communities, and reduce crime and the fear of crime.

Early Release Scheme

15. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners have been released under the early release scheme before serving half their sentences. [151716]

Mr. Boateng: Prisoners sentenced to four years imprisonment or less may be released before serving half their sentences under the provisions of the home detention curfew scheme. From the inception of the scheme in January 1999 until 26 February 2001, 32,510 prisoners have been released on home detention curfew.

Asylum Support

16. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the functioning of the national asylum support scheme. [151717]

Mrs. Roche: The new asylum support arrangements were brought in on a phased basis from 3 April 2000 and by 29 August the national asylum support service (NASS) had assumed responsibility for the majority of all new asylum seekers. In addition, since 25 September all eligible disbenefited cases are now the responsibility of NASS. This has limited the responsibility of local authorities in providing support for asylum seekers.

22. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the national asylum support service. [151724]

Mrs. Roche: The new asylum support arrangements were brought in on a phased basis from 3 April 2000, and by 29 August the national asylum support service (NASS) had assumed responsibility for the majority of all new asylum seekers. In addition, since 25 September 2000 all eligible disbenefitted cases are now the responsibility of NASS. As at the end of January 2001, NASS was providing voucher only support on 9,960[1] asylum seekers including dependants and 19,820[1] asylum seekers, including dependants, had been allocated accommodation.

[1] All figures are provisional and rounded to the nearest ten.

Drug-related Crime

17. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to reduce the level of drug-related crime. [151718]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Measures in hand include national roll-out of the drug treatment and testing order from October 2000 and the development of arrest referral schemes where virtually all police custody suites will be covered by April 2001, 12 months ahead of schedule.

New initiatives planned include piloting the extension of drug testing across the criminal justice system from spring 2001. Consideration will also be given to the use of specialist drug review hearings to handle cases involving drug misusing offenders and the scope for setting up a police register for drug dealers similar to that which already exists for sex offenders.

In addition, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced on 7 March extra funding over three years for the fight against drugs. This includes £220 million to be channelled through crime and disorder reduction partnerships to help the police and local communities to disrupt local drug markets and drive out the drug dealers. We will also be announcing shortly details of further funding for programmes to tackle drug-related crime.

Illegal Immigrants

18. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with French Ministers regarding illegal immigrants; and if he will make a statement. [151719]

Mrs. Roche: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has frequent discussions with French Ministers about illegal immigration and related issues. In particular, he had full discussions with them at the United Kingdom/ French summit on 9 February.

The summit confirmed the joint intention to introduce juxtaposed controls at the Eurostar terminals in June. In addition, French Ministers agreed to legislate quickly to ensure that all passengers travelling by train between France and the United Kingdom will be subject to the relevant controls, regardless of their destination.

In addition, on 9 March my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary met his French, German, Spanish and Italian counterparts in London to discuss immigration and other issues of common interest.

Cemeteries

19. **Mr. Burgon:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what consultations he has had with local authorities regarding the increase of cemetery provision. [151720]

Mr. Boateng: None. Provision of cemetery facilities is a matter for local decision, but we plan to convene an advisory group consisting of the key professional and representative organisations, including the local authorities, to consider a range of issues concerning burial law, practice and resources.

Liquor Licensing Reform

20. **Mr. Grogan:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what conclusions he has drawn from the consultation on the Government's liquor licensing reform White Paper. [151722]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is presently considering the responses we have received to the White Paper. He hopes to announce his final decisions on the way forward very soon. We have been pleased by the level of support for the proposed modernisation of the system.

34. **Ms Coffey:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received regarding proposals to reform licensing hours in England and Wales. [151736]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The White Paper "Time for Reform: the Modernisation of our Licensing Laws" (Cm 4696), published on 10 April 2000, included a proposal to introduce flexible opening hours to minimise public disorder resulting from fixed closing times, subject to consideration of the impact on local residents. Of the 420 responses which commented specifically on licensing hours, 56 per cent. were in favour of this proposal.

CCTV

21. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the take-up of funding under the Government's scheme for supporting local CCTV systems since its inception. [151723]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the crime reduction programme closed circuit television (CCTV) initiative, more than £64 million has so far been allocated to crime and disorder reduction partnerships to help set up, extend or improve over 350 CCTV schemes in England and Wales.

Further initial funding applications submitted by partnerships under the second round of the CCTV initiative are currently under assessment. We expect to advise partnerships of the outcome of the applications very shortly.

Immigration and Asylum

23. **Mr. Corbyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are being held in detention under provisions of immigration law. [151725]

Mrs. Roche: The most recent information relates to the number of people detained under the Immigration Act 1971 as at 31 January 2001. At that date a total of 1,334 people were recorded as detained.

Current information on people detained who have claimed asylum is not available and could be obtained only at a disproportionate cost.

31. **Mr. Gerrard:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if the detention centre rules 2001 will apply to all asylum seekers subject to detention. [151733]

Mrs. Roche: Detention centre rules 2001 apply to all those detainees accommodated in dedicated immigration detention centres. Persons detained in Prison Service establishments are governed by prison rules.

35. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* illegal immigrants and *(b)* asylum seekers have been (i) refused asylum and (ii) deported since 1 January. [151737]

Mrs. Roche: In January 2001, 485 people were removed from the United Kingdom following illegal entry action. Of this number, 255 had sought asylum at some point.

The number of initial decisions to refuse asylum and exceptional leave to remain taken in January 2001 was 10,935. The total number of unsuccessful asylum seekers removed in January 2001 was 635.

Information on the number of illegal immigrants refused asylum is not readily available and could be produced only by examination of individual case files at disproportionate cost.

I regret that data for February are not yet available. Figures given in this reply are provisional and have been rounded to the nearest five.

Persistent Young Offenders

24. **Dr. Iddon:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to deal with persistent young offenders. [151726]

Mr. Charles Clarke: As part of their youth justice reforms, the Government have introduced a range of new and improved community and custodial sentences to improve the options available to the courts. Most recently, we have introduced curfew orders for 10 to 15-year-olds. Work also continues to deliver the youth justice pledge, halving the arrest to sentence time for persistent young offenders. We have already cut nearly 50 days from the 1996 average. This year we will be introducing new intensive supervision and surveillance programmes, targeting the 2,500 most persistent young offenders in the community each year. In the Criminal Justice and Police Bill, we have proposed extending the juvenile secure remand criteria to include those with a recent history of repeatedly committing imprisonable offences while on bail or in local authority accommodation. We have also proposed electronic monitoring to supplement supervised bail.

Electoral Fraud

25. **Mrs. Brinton:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the means of preventing electoral fraud relating to false claims of residence for voting purposes. [151727]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Electoral registration officers have a duty to ensure that their registers are accurate. They are entitled to investigate any claims for registration which they consider may be fraudulent and can remove names from the register if they have information which suggests that a person is not resident at the registered address. I am confident that electoral registration officers carry out their duties thoroughly and diligently.

Metropolitan Police (Recruitment)

26. **Ms Buck:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to increase the recruitment of black people and ethnic minorities in the Metropolitan police service. [151728]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In 1999, my right hon. Friend published "Dismantling Barriers", which set all forces targets and an action plan for the recruitment, retention and progression of minority ethnic officers. The Metropolitan police's target is for 25 per cent. of its officers to be from minority ethnic communities by 2009. The force has established a positive action team to take

forward "Dismantling Barriers" through a range of initiatives which include the appointment of trained local recruiters with particular responsibility for minority ethnic recruitment; a programme to provide support to members of minority ethnic people who wish to join the police service; and a project to increase the number of minority ethnic graduate police officers.

Referendums

27. **Mr. Linton:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Government plan to hold a referendum on the voting system for elections to the House. [151729]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government remain committed to holding a referendum on the voting system, but no decisions have been made as to its timing, or the question to be asked.

28. **Mr. Leigh:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the arrangements his Department makes for administering referendums. [151730]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Section 128 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 provides that the chairman of the Electoral Commission (or a person appointed by him) is to be the chief counting officer in any national or regional referendum to which part VII of the Act applies (save in the case of a referendum held in Northern Ireland only where the chief electoral officer is designated chief counting officer). It will be for the chief counting officer and the Electoral Commission to oversee the conduct of a referendum poll in accordance with an order made under section 129 of the Act.

Police Morale

29. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement about the state of police morale. [151731]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) on 11 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 65W.

By 2003–04, funding for policing will have risen by almost £1.6 billion against the provision for this year, which is a rise of nearly 21 per cent. in cash terms and 11.8 per cent. in real terms. The crime fighting fund will enable police forces to recruit 9,000 police officers over and above the number previously planned in the three years 2000–01 to 2002–03, with the aim of bringing numbers overall to record levels.

By 30 September 2000, police strength was up 444 compared with strength at 31 March 2000. The number of police recruits starting their initial residential training in the period April 2000 to February 2001 (6,096) was up 72 per cent. on the same period in the previous financial year.

Non-Custodial Sentences

30. **Mr. Pickthall:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he is taking to strengthen public confidence in non-custodial sentences. [151732]

Mr. Boateng: It is vital that both the public and sentencers have confidence in non-custodial penalties. The following measures have been taken to achieve this aim:

we have made it clear to the Probation Service that it must raise its performance on enforcement of community sentences. Independent enforcement audits on cases commenced early and late in 1999 showed that the correct enforcement of breach procedures for community sentences improved significantly from 44 per cent. to 62 per cent. of cases being dealt with properly. This is welcome but there is still a long way to go. A third national audit is being conducted to keep up the pressure for further improvement;

in April 2000, new national standards were introduced that tightened the standards for enforcement of community sentences so that offenders are returned to court no later than after second unacceptable failure to comply rather than, as previously, the third such failure;

new enforcement measures contained in section 53 of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 provide that where the court finds an offender in breach of his community order and takes the view that he is unlikely to go on successfully to complete the order it must impose a custodial penalty, other than in exceptional circumstances;

we are developing a range of high-quality offending behaviour programmes in the community, and we have set up a new process of accreditation, involving an independent panel of experts to ensure that only the most effective and cost-effective, evidence-based programmes are rolled out across the country;

from April, responsibility for the execution of warrants, including fine warrants, will pass from the police to magistrates courts. This will provide a clearer focus than the present arrangements and deliver better enforcement;

we are conducting a study under the crime reduction programme to identify best practice for fine enforcement. At present, various strategies are being piloted in a number of courts, and the results will be assessed later this year;

from April, measures in the Access to Justice Act 1999 will be implemented enabling, under certain circumstances, the Department of Social Security to provide the court with up to date address details of fine defaulters. This should reduce the number of fines that are currently written off;

more generally, the new national standards require local probation areas to ensure that they have a strategy to inform both sentencers and the general public about their work and the services they perform; and

last year we made a grant to an organisation called Payback in connection with the promotion of community sentences.

Drug Use

32. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will propose amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 to make lawful the medicinal use of cannabis. [151734]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government believe that it would be premature to amend the misuse of drugs legislation to allow the prescribing of cannabis before the quality, safety and efficacy of a medicinal form of the drug has been scientifically established and a marketing authorisation issued by the Medicines Control Agency. This is the procedure that all prospective new medicines have to go through in order to protect public health.

The Government welcome and have encouraged research into the possible medicinal uses of cannabis. The Home Office has licensed a number of laboratory and medical research in this area, including a large-scale research project aimed at producing a cannabis-based

medicine with applications for multiple sclerosis and intractable pain conditions. Early clinical trial studies are now being conducted.

If the clinical trials into cannabis are successful and lead to a medical preparation which is approved by the Medicines Control Agency, the Government have made it clear that they would be willing to amend the misuse of drugs regulations to allow the prescribing of such a medicine.

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will prepare an assessment of the impact of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 on illegal drug use. [151713]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: No. Such an exercise would serve little useful purpose and would not inform the development of anti-drugs policies. However, the Government do have a broad research programme designed to track the progress of the national drugs strategy. This will assist our understanding of what the drug problems are and what works best against them.

"Make Your Voice Heard"

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost was of producing the documents "Make Your Voice Heard". [152662]

Mr. Straw: The "Make Your Voice Heard" documents are two leaflets created to inform the general public about changes to the electoral system under the Representation of the People Act 2000. The changes make it easier both to get on the electoral register and to vote by post.

Each publication was produced in Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, English, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, Somali, Turkish, Urdu, Vietnamese and Welsh. Each was approved by the Plain English Campaign. Special formats including Braille and a British sign language video were also produced.

Leaflet costs were as follows[1]:

"Make your voice heard"—electoral registration form inside £119,683.

"Make your voice heard"—how to vote by post £22,085.

[1]Figures include, design, print, photography and translation.

Private Prisons

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the privately run prisons in England and Wales. [152816]

Mr. Boateng: There are currently nine privately managed prisons in England and Wales: Altcourse, Ashfield, Blakenhurst, Doncaster, Forest Bank, Lowdham Grange, Parc, Rye Hill and Wolds. A further privately run prison, Dovegate, is due to open on 9 July 2001. Blakenhurst will transfer to Prison Service management on 19 August 2001.

Correspondence

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letter to him dated 23 January from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Mrs. R. Kavsar. [152454]

Mr. Straw: I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 12 March.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he intends to reply to the letters to him dated 17 January from the Right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regard to Maqsood Ahmed Mirza. [152453]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* I wrote to my right hon. Friend on 9 March.

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152655]

Mr. Straw: A new Home Office corporate identity was introduced in 2000. The costs involved in developing this identity including design, research, project management and drawing up style guidelines for printed and electronic media were £155,000. This is offset by anticipated savings of £160,000 a year generated by the new identity.

The four Home Office agencies, the Prison Service, the Forensic Science Service, the United Kingdom Passport Agency and the Fire Service College each have separate logos developed before May 1997.

The police recruitment and crime reduction logos were developed by the advertising agencies which competed for the campaign work, at no direct cost to the Home Office.

The "Fire Kills" logo was developed separately for use with all fire safety campaigns and materials. The costs, which include research with the general public, were £42,000.

Other logos developed since 1 May 1997 cost as follows:

	£
Crime and Disorder Act 1998	4,000
Crime Prevention Agency	6,000
Crime Prevention—Plant Security	1,500
Human Rights	4,500
Metropolitan Police Authority	5,000
National Probation Service—costs to date	10,000

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) under which categories his Department's annual statistics are recorded for *(a)* palatability trials, *(b)* digestibility trials, *(c)* faeces screening studies and *(d)* other tests carried out by commercial pet food companies; [153274]

(2) how many dogs from non-designated breeders were used in licensed procedures at designated scientific establishments in *(a)* 1998, *(b)* 1999 and *(c)* 2000. [153271]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Dogs are primarily used in pharmaceutical research and development, or in pharmaceutical safety and efficacy evaluations. They are also used, when no other species is suitable, in the evaluation of cardiovascular and cardiorespiratory

problems in humans. Such work contributes to advances in human health care. Dogs are also used in the development of veterinary medicines and techniques.

The work undertaken by commercial pet food companies is for the purpose of ensuring that food products for pets are safe, effective and nutritionally complete. Most of the procedures conducted are so mild as to not require licensed authority. The procedures which come under licence are very mild. There are pet rehoming schemes in place for animals once tests have been completed. If these procedures were not carried out we would be less aware of the risk to household pets.

The number of procedures using dogs obtained from non-designated sources in 1998 and 1999 is given in table 2 in the annual publication "Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals, Great Britain", copies of which are in the Library. It is not possible to give the actual number of dogs so obtained but it is likely to be close to the number of procedures referred to above. Figures for the year 2000 are not yet available.

Not all of the studies referred to in this question would necessarily be regulated procedures, depending on the design of the study. Where they are regulated they would normally be returned as nutrition studies, which are shown in table 5 of the annual publication "Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals, Great Britain", copies of which are in the Library. It is not possible to isolate work done by commercial pet food companies from other licencees carrying out research into nutrition.

Schengen Agreement

Mr. Colman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will make a statement on the acceptability of the certificate of identity to countries within the Schengen agreement; [151714]

(2) if he will make a statement on the outcome of the meeting of 14 February between the hon. Member for Putney and the Minister of State, Home Office, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Mrs. Roche), about amendments to the certificate of identity that would make it acceptable as a valid travelling document to all signatories of the Schengen agreement. [152661]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Office certificate of identity (CID) is a travel document issued to foreign nationals, other than refugees, who are resident in the United Kingdom and cannot obtain a passport from their national authorities. This type of document is not issued under an international convention, but on a discretionary basis. Holders of CIDs who travel abroad are entitled to return to any United Kingdom port on a date within the CID's validity, and a visa is not required. Under the Immigration Rules, readmission after examination by an immigration officer is not an automatic entitlement but would normally be granted on the basis that residency here is to be resumed.

A number of European Union member states have declined to recognise the CID, so holders may find their ability to travel abroad restricted because visas are not always issued.

When I discussed this problem with my hon. Friend on 14 February, he expressed interest in altering the wording of the CID to state that holders of the document had an automatic right of return to the United Kingdom. This suggestion was not acceptable because it would place CID holders in a special position under the Immigration Rules compared to other categories of people who acquire residence status in the United Kingdom and wish to spend time abroad. The only residents of the United Kingdom who have an unconditional right to be readmitted at the ports after a stay abroad, no matter how long they have been away, are British citizens, and other Commonwealth citizens who have the right of abode here.

Since the meeting, United Kingdom officials have discussed the issues with colleagues from the countries that have concerns. Assurances have been requested about the return of CID holders to the United Kingdom, and other matters. I am hopeful that the information provided in response to this request will prove a significant step towards securing full acceptance of the CID by all our European partners.

Departmental Policies (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153284]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office annual reports. A copy of the most recent report, "Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000", is available in the Library. The next annual report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by basic command unit and crime and disorder partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East constituency or the immediate locality:

Reducing Burglary Initiative

Cleveland police, in partnership with Redcar and Cleveland borough council, received £12,300 under round two of the reducing burglary initiative, for a scheme in New Skelton, Cleveland. Interventions include target hardening of relatively modern local authority housing, which is predominantly occupied by single young females.

Targeted Policing Initiative

Closed circuit television (CCTV)—Redcar and Cleveland borough council, in partnership with Cleveland police, were awarded £114,200 for two schemes under round two of the CCTV initiative;

Guisborough CCTV partnership scheme was awarded £43,700 for a five-camera project covering Guisborough town centre. The town centre has problems of alcohol-related violence, shoplifting and vehicle crime. The scheme aims to reduce vehicle crime by 30 per cent. over three years and other types of crime by 10 per cent. in that time.

Saltburn CCTV partnership was awarded £70,500 for a six-camera project covering Saltburn town centre. The town centre has problems of alcohol-related crime, shoplifting and vehicle crime linked to drug dependency. The high level of anti-social behaviour and the fear of crime are recurring issues for the town. The scheme aims to reduce vehicle crime by 30 per cent. over three years and other types of crime by 10 per cent. in that time.

Neighbourhood Warden schemes

The William Sutton Trust was awarded £152,300 for a community wardens scheme in Middlesbrough South-West. The scheme will cover the Linthorpe estate in Saltersgill, and aims to reduce property crime, crimes against the person and car crime.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000;

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Dr. Ali Dizaei

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what involvement he has had in the case of Dr. Ali Dizaei; [152396]

(2) if ministers authorised telephone tapping of Dr. Ali Dizaei; [152389]

(3) which Ministers were briefed on the surveillance of Dr. Ali Dizaei, indicating when they were told and what were they told. [152388]

Mr. Straw: The suspension of Dr. Dizaei is a matter for the Metropolitan police. It has been the longstanding practice of successive Governments neither to confirm nor deny whether a warrant authorising interception of communications exists, or has existed, in any specific case.

Police Deployment

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in *(a)* reducing administration in the police service and *(b)* ensuring police officers spend more time on operational duties. [151709]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Last year we issued a revised "Manual of Guidance for the Preparation, Processing and Submission of Files" designed to remove unnecessary paperwork. Of 40 forms which officers may fill in before submitting Crown Prosecution Service files, we have removed 11 and are phasing out another six. This, combined with improved communications and new technologies, will ensure that officers maximise time spent on front-line policing.

Crime and Disorder Audit

Mr. Michael: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to ensure that chief executives of local authorities and local police divisional commanders in England and Wales have agreed timetables and arrangements for completing the new crime and disorder audit, with the full participation of their local partners and the community, to have a fresh local strategy in place by April 2002. [151712]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The timetable for completion of local audits is a matter for individual crime and disorder reduction partnerships. We have provided an extensive programme of support over the past two years to assist partnerships in the audit and strategy process. This has been complemented by the appointment of crime reduction directors in the regions of England and in Wales. They are working with partnerships to ensure that they have the necessary support to complete the audit process and develop local strategies by April 2002.

Burglary (Disadvantaged Communities)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to reduce burglaries in disadvantaged communities. [151721]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the reducing burglary initiative, which is part of the crime reduction programme, we have to date granted a total of around £24 million to 246 projects in areas or communities with the highest burglary rates. These communities all have high rates of burglary, and many of them are also among the most deprived areas of the country.

Extradition

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish the review of extradition he announced on 2 March 2000. [153494]

Mr. Straw: I have today published a consultation document entitled "The Law on Extradition: A Review" and copies have been placed in the Library.

I announced the review to Parliament in the course of my statement on Senator Pinochet on 2 March 2000. *Official Report*, column 571W. It is the outcome of an exercise started in 1997 to consider the legislative requirements of two European Union conventions on extradition. However, it developed into a much more extensive inquiry, following the adoption at Tampere in October 1999 of the principle of mutual recognition of judicial decisions by the member states of the European Union.

The consultation document makes far-reaching proposals in relation to all aspects of current extradition law and practice. The greatest changes are proposed in respect of the United Kingdom's procedures for dealing with extradition requests received from member states of the European Union and Schengen states. Our present

procedures for dealing with extradition requests from these states contain cumbersome controls and outdated requirements, some of them derived from 19th century extradition legislation. Such procedures are no longer necessary, nor do they provide an efficient means to deal with the growing difficulties caused by organised and international crime. For these extradition partners a simple backing of warrants procedure is proposed. This would replace the current multi-staged system in which all extradition requests are examined by both the Secretary of State and the courts, with a single, streamlined hearing before a district judge (Sheriff in Scotland). The documentation required to support an extradition request would also be significantly simplified, to reduce the current burdens placed on our European partners in their efforts to bring fugitives to justice. The proposals retain a statutory right of appeal in order to ensure that fugitives' rights are protected, but also propose that the grounds for appeal be tightened to eliminate time-consuming delays where fugitives appeal on grounds which are not relevant, or are more properly for consideration by the court of trial.

The simplified requirements of a backing of warrants scheme would put the mutual recognition principle into practice in the field of extradition. Mutual recognition may be defined as the judicial decisions of one jurisdiction being recognised as valid in another, with the minimum of formality.

The review recognises that while major reforms are required to our extradition procedures in respect of our closest neighbours, there is also a clear operational need to reform the procedures for dealing with requests from our extradition partners outside the European Union. Here a final decision in the case by the Secretary of State would be retained, but there would be a significant reduction in the present duplication of my role and that of the courts in deciding cases, with the aim of making extradition quicker and simpler, while protecting fugitives' fundamental human rights.

The consultation period for the review proposals is three months. Copies are being made widely available to people and organisations with a professional interest in the subject. Members of the public will be able to apply for a copy from the Home Office, or obtain one from the Home Office website at www.homeoffice.gov.uk/oicd/jcu/jcu.htm.

Many of the proposals in the document will require primary legislation to implement, which would take place when the legislative timetable allows.

I welcome comments on the proposals.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the IT projects his Department plans to undertake in the next year; and if he will state in each case the *(a)* expected date of commencement and completion and *(b)* cost. [151479]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The new information technology (IT) projects that are being undertaken in this calendar year within my Department and its agencies (excluding non-departmental public bodies) are listed in the table. The information in the table covers those IT projects where *(a)* the cost or value of the project exceeds £5 million or *(b)* the project is essential for the delivery of our core objectives or services. I also refer my right hon. Friend to the answer to him on the IT projects currently undertaken by my Department given on 6 March 2001, *Official Report,* column 130W, and the reply to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) on 30 January 2001, *Official Report,* column 165W.

In addition to the projects listed in the table, the Fire Service College is undertaking a number of modernising projects in the current year addressing the shortcomings of the existing software applications. These projects are essential to the delivery of their business. They include an accounting system, library upgrade and a management system to upgrade the teaching facilities. The projects will be started and concluded in 2001 at an estimated total cost of £155,000.

The Prison Service Quantum project is planning future work packages in the development of a strategy for an IT-based business change on a partnership basis. Future work packages are still in the planning stage although it is likely that the user specification for at least one of these will be developed in the forthcoming financial year.

The Forensic Science Service is considering replacing their current work management system with an enhanced system based upon an enterprise resource planning model. The project will need approval by the Forensic Science Service Board once contract negotiation on time scales and cost have been finalised.

The Home Office Sirius programme has identified a number of initial business change projects in the areas of finance, personnel and communications for the current year but these are presently at the scoping stage.

IT projects being undertaken in the current calender year 2001

IT project	*Date/Expected date of commencement*	*Expected date of completion*	*Cost (as per approved proposal)*	*Comments*
Probation Service—Phase 1 Contract Procurement Project	15 January 2001	31 January 2002	Approximately £600,000	
Probation Service—Phase 2 Contract Procurement Project	Late 2001	31 January 2004	Dependent upon options selected	Because this project has not yet been initiated it is impossible to give any details about costs
Probation Service—Offenders Assessment System (OASys)—joint prison/probation offender assessment system. Probation element	April 2001	Dependent on technical option selected. Earliest date April 2002	Dependent on technical option selected.	Business case to be completed March 2001.

Asylum Claimants System (Siemens)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the *(a)* payments made since 1996 and *(b)* payments due to be made, by his Department to Siemens for the caseworking system for asylum claimants. [151482]

Mrs. Roche: The contract between the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) of the Home Office and Siemens Business Services (SBS) contains a complex charging mechanism, details of which are commercially confidential. Elements include a productivity-related charge linked to the achievement of reductions in the unit cost of all IND's caseworking activities (not merely of asylum casework) and a fixed monthly charge for a range of technical services specified in the contract. By the end of the current financial year, we would expect to have paid SBS about £25 million in total since the contract began in 1996. The basis of future payments is under discussion with SBS following the joint decision to discontinue the development of the full casework application.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 13 March 2001

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Departmental Policies (South Shields)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the South Shields constituency, the effects on South Shields of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153082]

The Solicitor-General: In 1999, in line with national policy, the Wearside branch of the Crown Prosecution Service, in liaison with the police, South Tyneside magistrates court and the defence, introduced the Narey proposals. All defendants charged with a criminal offence where a guilty plea is anticipated now make their first appearance before South Shield magistrates court within five working days. All other cases appear in court within 48 hours. Present figures suggest that 50 per cent. of all defendants have their cases finalised far more quickly than previously was the case.

In April 2001, Crown Prosecution Service Northumbria will be altering its structure in line with the proposals of the Glidewell review. This will enable the Crown Prosecution Service to place greater emphasis on the more serious crime cases in Newcastle Crown court. The Crown Prosecution Service, together with other agencies, also helped to draw up a protocol with social services relating to unused material which assists in expediting cases involving child witnesses. The Crown Prosecution Service also has a "fast track" procedure for persistent young offenders cases with the Crown court and youth courts. All these changes illustrate the Government's successful policy of speeding up the work of the criminal justice system.

Since May 1997, the Crown Prosecution Service has successfully prosecuted a number of cases arising in the South Shields area. Of particular note is a "sting operation", set up by undercover police officers in South Shields, in the spring of 1998. This resulted in the recovery of thousands of pounds worth of stolen property and the convictions of 35 defendants who were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, two of them for 11 years and 12 years respectively. In January 2000, the Crown Prosecution Service also successfully prosecuted two juveniles for the murder of a 46-year-old man in the South Shields area. Following a trial at Newcastle Crown court, they were both convicted of murder and detained during Her Majesty's pleasure.

Actions and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office affect my right hon. Friend's constituency only indirectly.

Departmental Policies (Houghton and Washington, East)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Houghton and Washington, East of the Attorney-General's Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [152989]

The Solicitor-General: In October 1999, in line with national policy, the Wearside branch of the Crown Prosecution Service, in liaison with the police, Houghton-le-Spring magistrates court and the defence, introduced the Narey proposals. All defendants charged with a criminal offence where a guilty plea is anticipated now make their first appearance before Houghton-le-Spring magistrates court within five working days. Present figures suggest that 40 per cent. of all defendants have their cases finalised far more quickly than previously was the case.

In April 2001, Crown Prosecution Service Northumbria will be altering its structure in line with the proposals of the Glidewell review. This will enable the Crown Prosecution Service to place greater emphasis on the more serious crime cases in Newcastle and Durham Crown courts. The Crown Prosecution Service, together with other agencies, also help to draw up a protocol with social services relating to unused material which assists in expediting cases involving child witnesses. The Crown Prosecution Service also has a procedure for "fast tracking" persistent youth offenders cases with the Crown court and youth courts. All these changes illustrate the Government's successful policy of speeding up the work of the criminal justice system.

Since May 1997, the Crown Prosecution Service has successfully prosecuted a number of significant cases arising in the Houghton-le-Spring area. In December 1998, the Crown Prosecution Service successfully prosecuted Stephen Urwin for the murder of an elderly occupant in his home. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. In August 1999, Colin Bainbridge abducted Laura Kane, aged 9, whom he knew, and subsequently raped and murdered her. He was found guilty at a trial at Newcastle Crown court and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Actions and policies of the Treasury Solicitor's Department and the Serious Fraud Office affect my hon. Friend's constituency only indirectly.

DEFENCE

Defence Analytical Services Agency

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what performance targets have been set for the Defence Analytical Services Agency for 2001–02. [153897]

Mr. Spellar: Key Targets have been set for the Chief Executive of the Defence Analytical Services Agency for Financial Year 2001–02. The targets build on the progress already made by the Agency since it formed in 1992 and are as follows:

Delivery of customer service and quality

The majority of the Agency's business is covered by Service Level Agreements with customers, which set out the targets for timeliness and quality of work. For parts

of the business where Service Level Agreements are inappropriate, project agreements are in place. The Agency is committed to continuous improvement in the range and quality of the services it provides to customers. Key Targets are:

(a) To meet at least 95 per cent. of the timeliness and quality targets set in Service Level Agreements and project agreements.

(b) To have at least 90 per cent. of customers saying they are at least satisfied with the timeliness, quality of work and helpfulness of staff in the annual Customer Satisfaction Survey.

(c) In the annual Customer Satisfaction Survey, to have at least 25 per cent. of customers who received DASA services in 2000–01 and 2001–02 report an improvement in the services provided and no more than 10 per cent. report a deterioration.

(d) To conduct a National Statistics quality review of the content and dissemination of "UK Defence Statistics" by consulting existing and potential customers inside and outside the Department, and to produce an action plan for implementing improvements in time for UKDS 2002.

(e) To review the production and publication of armed forces medical Statistics against National Statistics quality standards, and make recommendations on how to improve their quality and scope.

(f) To implement the approved recommendations from the review of armed forces and civilian personnel statistics conducted in 2000–01.

Efficiency

The Agency plans to make efficiency savings in 2001–02 as well as meeting the additional demands placed on it by new Departmental studies and initiatives.

The Key Target is to deliver output-based efficiency gains with a value of 3 per cent. of the initial running cost allocation.

Armed Forces Pay Review Body

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about reappointments to the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. [153898]

Mr. Hoon: I am pleased to announce that I have re-appointed Lord Gladwin of Clee and Professor David Greenaway each to a second three-year term. These appointments have been conducted in accordance with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments' guidance on appointments to public bodies.

Aircrew Retention

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to review aircrew retention, following the publication of the 2001 report of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body and the chairman's supplementary letter. [153899]

Mr. Spellar: The Ministry of Defence is conducting a Comprehensive Review of Aircrew Retention to examine the reasons why aircrew leave the Services. A study team including representatives from the three Services, HM Treasury and external consultancy will be reviewing our overall need for aircrew against today's employment patterns, their career structures, the flying training system, the current structure of additional flying pay and the commercial airlines recruitment policies and financial packages. This work has now started and I expect to be able to report the outcome to the Armed Forces Pay Review Body in autumn this year.

Shoeburyness

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what dates depleted uranium shells have been *(a)* tested and *(b)* demolished at (i) the Shoeburyness Range and (ii) adjacent mud flats/sandbanks. [149517]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* No reference can be found in Shoeburyness range records to open air firings of depleted uranium projectiles and none is believed to have taken place.

DERA Shoeburyness took over the adjacent Foulness site from the Atomic Weapons Establishment in 1999. This site had an indoor facility, in which some small experimental DU projectiles were fired during the 1980s. The building in which the firings took place was designed to prevent any escape of particulate DU into the atmosphere. It is no longer in use and was decontaminated in 1997.

No DU munitions have been destroyed at Shoeburyness or indeed any other DERA site.

Between September 1999 and June 2000, small quantities of DU long rod penetrators were held temporarily in transit at Shoeburyness, having been delivered to DERA for trials to be conducted by the Eskmeals team at Kirkcudbright.

Depleted Uranium (Dundrennan Range)

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many DU penetrators have landed on the land area of the base since test firing of DU shells at Dundrennan range began; and, of these, how many have not been located. [151846]

Mr. Spellar: Since test firing of depleted uranium (DU) penetrator rounds first began at Kirkcudbright in 1982, there have been 14 strikes within the range area, including 10 projectiles that struck the ground itself and four that struck the target gantry. The four striking the gantry are believed to have proceeded directly out to sea. Three of those striking the ground have been recovered intact, two are believed to have proceeded out to sea and the other five remain buried in known locations.

The path a penetrator would take when entering the soil at high velocity is not easy to predict so, while their entry point is known with reasonable accuracy, the ultimate position of the buried penetrators is not. Recovery attempts would involve a prohibitively large area and depth to be excavated for each round, incurring exceptional cost and with little chance of success.

As I mentioned in the Adjournment debate on 7 February 2001, we are now planning to undertake a survey using a device called an Exploranium of the areas where fragmentation of projectiles may have occurred—ie firing points, landing areas, target areas—in order to locate remaining and hitherto undetected small pieces of DU. This survey is unlikely to be able to detect the buried rounds because of their depth. The contamination caused by fragments remaining on or just below the surface is regarded by the experts as minimal. However, should any areas be found to be contaminated they will be fenced off.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if test firing of DU shells at the Dundrennan range is exempt from regulation under the Ionising Radiations Regulations. [151847]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave, in relation to the Ionising Radiations Regulations 1999, to the Member for Ceridigion (Mr. Thomas) on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 419W. The Ionising Radiations Regulations 1999 contain some specific exemptions relating to the Ministry of Defence and military activities, but these have not been invoked in the case of DU firing. It is, moreover, our policy that, where UK statutory regulations are not applicable, we undertake by agreement with the Government Departments concerned that the principles and spirit of the regulations are to be followed, and arrangements introduced will be, so far as is reasonably practicable, at least as good as those required by legislation.

Operational Tour Intervals

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what the average *(a)* length of operational tour and *(b)* interval between tours was for Defence Medical Services personnel in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement; [151803]

(2) what length of tour and interval between deployments his Department assesses to be optimal for Defence Medical Services personnel; and if he will make a statement. [151800]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 7 March 2001]:* Operational tour lengths for Defence Medical Service personnel can vary from one month to two years, depending on their Service and their particular speciality. For example, on average consultants deploy for one month, nurses deploy for three months while others deploy for six months. Additionally, Royal Navy personnel are considered operational when serving at sea which can last up to two years although they may not be away from the UK for the whole of this period. On average, consultants deploy up to three times a year while others will deploy about once a year. Tour intervals are not always as long as we would wish due to a shortage of manpower in some specialities. It is not possible to provide averages for each calendar year separately, without disproportionate effort, bearing in mind that many deployments span more than one calendar year.

For all personnel, the Royal Navy aims that deployments, as opposed to normal operational tours, should be no longer than nine months and that total deployment time in any three-year period should not exceed 18 months. The Army's preferred tour interval is 24 months. The RAF seeks to maintain periods of at least 18 months between tours and to ensure that no individual is away for more than 140 days per annum or 280 days aggregated over a two-year period.

Plastic Baton Rounds

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what guidance is issued to soldiers carrying plastic baton round weapons concerning children's health and safety; how many PBRs have been fired in each of the last 10 years; and how many *(a)* deaths and *(b)* injuries have resulted. [152872]

Mr. Spellar: Soldiers are trained in the use of baton guns and when deployed are issued with guidelines about their use. Plastic baton rounds may be fired, if authorised by the commander at the scene, when absolutely necessary to protect against physical violence. In all circumstances, soldiers are trained to use no more force than is absolutely necessary.

The number of PBRs that have been fired over the last 10 years and the deaths and injuries that have resulted are set out in the table:

Year	*PBRs fired*	*Deaths*	*Injuries*[1]
1991	88	—	10
1992	49	—	8
1993	26	—	14
1994	36	—	13
1995	—	—	7
1996	1,387	—	73
1997	440	—	25
1998	63	—	5
1999	1	—	1
2000	4	—	3
2001[2]	2	—	0

[1] Information on injuries has been provided by the RUC.
[2] As at 28 February 2001.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many plastic baton rounds were discharged on the evening of 16 February 2001, in Lurgan, Co. Armagh; for what reason they were discharged and by members of which regiment; and what the age was of individuals targeted. [152871]

Mr. Spellar: On 16 February 2001 a group of around 30 stone-throwing youths attacked a patrol from the 3rd Battalion the Royal Irish Regiment as they passed the Kilwilkie Estate, Lurgan, Co. Armagh. Two plastic baton rounds were released in order that the patrol could defend themselves and effect a withdrawal from the area.

The patrol was at the request of the RUC, following a number of telephone warnings about a device on the adjacent railway line.

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152045]

Dr. Moonie: Information on the Ministry of Defence's procurement of timber will be included in the annual report from the Green Ministers Committee.

Mines

Mr. Frank Cook: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received concerning anti-handling devices on anti-vehicle mines; and if he will make a statement. [152601]

Mr. Spellar: We have received a copy of the Landmine Action report, "Alternative anti-personnel mines—The next generations". As far as we can establish we have received no other representations in the past year.

Anti-tank mines in service with the UK armed forces are fully compliant with our obligations under international law, including the Ottawa Convention.

Devonport Dockyard

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to transfer work carried out at Aldermaston to Devonport dockyard. [152857]

Mr. Spellar: There are no plans to transfer work from Aldermaston to Devonport dockyard.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans there are for Trident submarines to go to Devonport dockyard for routine maintenance work. [152858]

Mr. Spellar: It is planned that all Vanguard Class submarine refitting and refuelling work will be undertaken at Devonport dockyard. Smaller packages of routine maintenance work will normally be carried out at the submarines' home port at the Clyde Naval Base.

Nuclear Submarines

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to store redundant nuclear submarines in the River Tamar prior to disposal. [152860]

Mr. Spellar: We have no plans to store decommissioned nuclear submarines in the River Tamar prior to disposal. Such submarines have been stored safely afloat in the Dockyard at Devonport since 1991. It is the Ministry of Defence's aim to have a land storage facility in place before 2012, although it is likely that the move from afloat to land storage will need to be staged over a period of several years. Meanwhile, the current arrangement for storage afloat at Devonport will continue.

Muslims (Services)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Muslims serve in HM forces; and what proportion of service personnel this represents. [153062]

Mr. Spellar: The number of Muslims serving in the armed forces is set out in the table:

	Number	*Percentage*
Naval Service[1]	15	0.04
Army[2]	130	0.12
RAF[2]	66	0.12
All Services	211	0.10

[1] Figures are taken from "live" naval personnel data system, i.e. at the day before the date of the data request (7 March 2001).
[2] Figures are the latest available statistics as at 1 February 2001.

Procurement Projects

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the total overspend on defence procurement projects since 1971. [153449]

Dr. Moonie: I will answer shortly.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Electoral Fraud

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures he proposes to introduce to combat electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. [153798]

Dr. Reid: Today I have laid before the House a White Paper outlining the Government's proposals to combat electoral abuse in Northern Ireland. This Government are determined to minimise opportunities for abuse, while avoiding putting obstacles in the way of people's legitimate exercise of the franchise. The White Paper sets out a comprehensive strategy to address the weaknesses in the electoral procedures that have allowed electoral fraud to take place. It is important to note that these measures will apply only to Northern Ireland, where electoral abuse is believed to be a more serious problem than elsewhere in the UK.

The extensive consultation and investigations that we have undertaken have ensured that our proposals are practical and realistic, and will make a real difference. Several of the proposals contained within that paper will require changes to the law, and we intend to bring forward legislation at the earliest possible opportunity.

In addition, I welcome the measures which the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland has put in place to combat fraud in future elections. The provision of enhanced training and guidance for electoral staff is under way. The Electoral Office already co-operates closely with the police in investigating suspected cases of electoral fraud, and this liaison has intensified recently in the run-up to the local elections. The processing of absent vote applications has been returned to the local electoral offices in order to allow local knowledge to inform the scrutiny of these applications.

I am happy also to be able to announce the initiation of a research project designed to measure the true extent of electoral fraud. This research will inform our continuing efforts to stamp out electoral fraud.

Convention on the Rights of the Child

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what measures have been taken since the UK ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to ensure that practices of the police and criminal justice agencies offer the full range of protection under international law. [150596]

Mr. Ingram: Since the UK ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 legislation has been introduced and recommendations have been made further to ensure the protection of the rights of the child in the justice system. Particular highlights include: the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which removed the power of the juvenile court to give a custodial sentence for the care and protection of non-attendance at school; the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, which reserved custodial sentences for only the most serious and/or persistent offenders; and the Criminal Justice (Children)(Northern Ireland) Order 1998, which introduced short determinate sentences, half of which is served in custody and the other half under supervision in the community. On 1 March 1999, as a result of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Northern Ireland Human

Rights Commission (NIHRC) came into existence. It has taken a keen interest in the welfare of children in the justice system, taking as one of its first investigations the impact of custody on the rights of children. The Human Rights Act 1998, which came into force on 2 October 2000, formally incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into domestic law. On a Quinquennial basis the Government are required to submit a report to the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child. Such reports include details of measures that exist within domestic law, practices and procedures, to ensure the rights of children who come into contact with the police and other criminal justice agencies.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps he has taken to familiarise officers of the RUC with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; and what mechanisms are in place to monitor effective compliance. [150600]

Mr. Ingram: A recent Force Order on the provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998 highlighted other relevant International Standards, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In drafting the Force Order the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was consulted. No separate monitoring mechanisms are currently in place. However, consideration is being given to their introduction in line with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, when the Royal Ulster Constabulary becomes a 'delegated authority' for the purpose of that Act.

Police Powers

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will *(a)* list those sections of emergency legislation where the exercise of police powers involves officers making contact with members of the public and *(b)* specify those areas of their powers where police have a responsibility to ascertain whether the member of the public is an adult. [150598]

Mr. Ingram: Such powers are currently governed by the provisions of Parts IV, V and VII of the Terrorism Act 2000, its related Schedules 5, 7, 8, 10 and 14; as well as the relevant Codes of Practice issued under the Act which stipulate an express requirement on the police to ascertain if an individual is a juvenile. For example in the Detention Code (in Northern Ireland issued under Section 99 of the Act) Section 1.7 states:

"If anyone appears to be under the age of 17 then he or she shall be treated as a juvenile for the purposes of this Code in the absence of clear evidence to show that he or she is older".

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland further to his answer of 30 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 135–36W, if he will list and place in the Library the guidance that has been issued to police officers governing the treatment of minors under emergency legislation, under *(a)* Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 rules and *(b)* other rules. [150595]

Mr. Ingram: 'Minors', i.e. children under 10 years of age, have no criminal liability in law in Northern Ireland and are therefore not subject to PACE etc. Any intervention by the police, therefore, is from a 'care and welfare' perspective as provided for by the Common Law and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. 'Juveniles', i.e. under 17 years of age, have the same rights as adults, with such additional safeguards as are stipulated in the various Codes of Practice issued under PACE, the Terrorism Act 2000, the Royal Ulster Constabulary manual and Force Order.

In common with the exercise of police powers in all other areas of the United Kingdom, Royal Ulster Constabulary officers have been receiving training and guidance on the principles arising from the Human Rights Act 1998.

The relevant legislation and Codes of Practice, except police operational documents, are available in the Library.

Police Guidance (Young Persons)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what *(a)* guidance, *(b)* instructions, *(c)* training and *(d)* rules have been issued to the police governing treatment of traveller children and children of other ethnic minorities. [150597]

Mr. Ingram: There is no specific guidance issued to police officers about the treatment of traveller children and children from other minority groups. Treatment of these groups is governed by the safeguards which are in place in respect of all children in the form of the statutory Codes of Practice issued under PACE (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 and the Terrorism Act 2000, with their additional safeguards in respect of juveniles. Language difficulties are overcome with the involvement of trained interpreters. Additional training and guidance is provided on Human Rights and Equality issues.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if he will list the other written notices that have been circulated in the past five years *(a)* for the attention of and *(b)* to be communicated to officers having dealings with members of the public the responsibilities they have towards the exercise of their powers in respect of children. [150599]

Mr. Ingram: The Royal Ulster Constabulary operates under the Codes of Practice issued under the provisions of PACE (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, the Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act 1996, the Terrorism Act 2000 and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Other than addendum's to the Royal Ulster Constabulary manual held by each officer explaining aspects of the law, no other notices have been issued or communicated to the police in this respect.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

TB

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the Government's policy is on the proposal for a new global TB drug facility to help eradicate TB in developing countries. [153031]

Clare Short: The global TB drug facility will be launched on World TB day (24 March 2001), and is intended to increase the availability, affordability and quality of TB drugs. The UK Government support the aim

of the "STOP TB" initiative, which includes the global TB drug facility, to expand and improve strategies to control TB. The initiative promotes the wider use of existing strategies to interrupt TB transmission and improve clinical care by increasing access to effective treatment, including strengthening health systems.

Kosovo

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will estimate the amount spent on aid in Kosovo. [152821]

Clare Short: Up to the end of 2000, £760 million was pledged in humanitarian and development assistance. In addition to this donors contributed £70 million to the 2000 Kosovo consolidated budget.

UK commitments up to the end of 2000 totalled £116.25 million. In addition the UK share of the EC programme was £108 million over the same period. We have committed £15 million over the next three years for technical assistance and have contributed £6.9 million to the 2001 consolidated budget.

Debt Relief

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development which countries have agreed to adopt *(a)* poverty relief and *(b)* education programmes in order to qualify for debt relief and further aid. [152823]

Clare Short: All countries that access the concessional resources of the World bank and the IMF, including those that are eligible for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, need to produce a national poverty reduction strategy. These strategies, developed by Governments in consultation with civil society, set out policies and programmes to tackle poverty, and provide a budgetary framework for the allocation of all development resources, including the savings arising from debt relief. Improving the quality of education, and particularly action to attain the international development target of universal primary education, will be an important component of all countries' strategies.

By the end of 2000, the following 22 countries had qualified for debt relief under the HIPC Initiative: Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Guyana, Honduras, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Niger, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

In addition, by the end of January 2001, the following countries had had their national poverty reduction strategies accepted by the boards of the World bank and IMF as an appropriate basis for these agencies to deliver their assistance to these countries: Albania, Cambodia, Central African Republic, Chad, Georgia, Ghana, Kenya, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, and Tajikistan.

A number of donors, including the UK, have agreed to provide development assistance to a country in support of its national poverty reduction strategy.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Active Community

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action he has taken in response to the recommendations of the report of the working group on the active community, "Giving Time, Getting Involved". [153894]

Mr. Boateng: A table summarising what action the Government are taking to address the recommendations arising from "Giving Time, Getting Involved" has been placed in the Library.

Refugee Integration Challenge Fund

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Home Office refugee integration challenge fund. [153895]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Office has allocated £500,000 for each of the next three years to a Challenge Fund which has been set up to complement the Refugee Integration Strategy launched on 2 November 2000. It seeks to promote innovative projects that address specific social needs among refugee communities, and funding is available from 2 April 2001.

Asylum Seekers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers were supported by local authorities under the previous support and dispersal system in the last 12 months of the system; and if he will make a statement. [153606]

Mrs. Roche: Information is not available in the form requested.

The numbers of asylum seekers being supported by local authorities in London when the previous support arrangements began to be phased out (end of March 2000) is available from the Association of London Government (ALG). Information for the week ending 31 March 2000 shows that 20,550[1] single adult asylum seekers, 11,745[1] asylum seeker families and 3,520[1] unaccompanied asylum seeking children were being supported by local authorities in London.

Information on asylum seekers supported by local authorities outside London is not available.

[1] Rounded to the nearest five

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers have been housed in each local authority area under the new support and dispersal arrangements; and if he will make a statement. [153607]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested is not currently available.

Ms Oona King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for asylum from claimants originating from Afghanistan have been determined in each of the last 12 months; and if he will make a statement. [152881]

Mrs. Roche: The available information on the number of asylum applications from nationals of Afghanistan that have had an initial decision is provided in the table.

Month	*Number of initial decisions*[1,2,3]
February 2000	n/a
March 2000	n/a
April 2000	135
May 2000	135
June 2000	130
July 2000	135
August 2000	220
September 2000	220
October 2000[4,5]	365
November 2000[5]	510
December 2000[5]	545
January 2001[5]	1,020

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest five

[2] Information is for initial determination decisions, excluding the outcome of appeals or other subsequent decision

[3] Provisional figures

[4] From October 2000, the source data on decision changed. The nationality breakdown is therefore not directly comparable with previous months

[5] Decisions may include some cases decided under the backlog criteria

This information is published monthly on the Department's website at www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds.index.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his Department's long-term plans are for the detention of asylum seekers in England and Wales. [152819]

Mrs. Roche: The 1998 White Paper "Fairer, Faster, Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum" identified the need to increase the immigration detention estate in order to meet the challenge of increased removal targets of both immigration offenders and failed asylum applicants.

In order to meet these commitments, a new, 900-bed, dedicated immigration detention centre is under construction at Yarl's Wood in Bedfordshire with a 550-bed centre at Harmondsworth near Heathrow similarly well advanced. Both should become available by the end of this year. A further facility in Kent is currently at the planning stage.

The Government remain committed to decreasing the use of Prison Service accommodation for immigration detainees while recognising that there will always be a need to utilise such facilities in the minority of cases where a higher level of security is required.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many contracts have been entered into by NASS to provide housing for asylum seekers; how many bed spaces have been provided; and in which areas of the country. [152880]

Mrs. Roche: The number of contracts entered into by the National Asylum Support Service is 17 of which seven (including Northern Ireland) are with local authorities and 10 in the private sector.

The numbers of bedspaces provided by region are:

Region	*Number of bedspaces provided*
East Midlands	1,631
East of England	280
Greater London	586
Kent and Sussex	305
North East	6,118
North West	6,551
Northern Ireland	113
Scotland	6,103
South Central	67
South West	604
Wales	290
West Midlands	4,026
Yorkshire and Humberside	7,616

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are held in prisons; and if he will make a statement. [152877]

Mrs. Roche: The most recent information relates to persons detained under Immigration Act 1988 powers as at 31 January 2001. At this date 920 persons were recorded as being detained in Prison Service establishments.

Currently, it is not possible to identify those persons detained in prison who have claimed asylum at some point.

Prisoners (Employment)

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners were *(a)* employed in prison workshops and *(b)* in other employment, expressed as a percentage of the prison population, in each year from 1995 to present; and if he will make a statement. [153608]

Mr. Boateng: The table sets out the number of prisoners employed in prison workshops, expressed as a percentage of the average prison population for the year from 1995 to the most recently available data.

Statistics on the numbers of prisoners in other employment for the period requested are not readily available in the Prison Service. However, information produced in May 2000 on the number of prisoners employed outside workshops in adult male training prisons, showed a total of 8,205 prisoners were employed on work activities such as kitchens, gardens, agricultural business, prison maintenance and cleaning.

Year	*Number of Prisoners Employed in Workshops*	*As a percentage of Average Annual Prison Population*
1995–96	8,844	17.14
1996–97	7,601	13.41
1997–98	7,615	12.16
1998–99	9,699	14.94
1999- 2000	9,527	14.70

Prisoner Treatment Programmes

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners completed

(a) an offending behaviour programme and *(b)* a sex offenders treatment programme in each year since 1996 to present; and if he will make a statement. [153605]

Mr. Boateng: The number of prisoners completing an offender behaviour programme can be found in the table.

Year	*Number of accredited offending behaviour programme completions in the Prison Service*
1996–97	1,373
1997–98	2,240
1998–99	3,132
1999–2000	4,669
1 April 2000 to 31 January 2001[1]	4,034

[1] The most recent date for which statistics are available

The number of prisoners completing a Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) can be found in the table.

Year	*Number of accredited SOTP completions in the Prison Service*
1996–97	663
1997–98	671
1998–99	456
1999–2000	588
1 April 2000 to 31 January 2001[1]	332

[1] The most recent date for which statistics are available

The figures for 1996 to 2000 do not represent the gross number of offending behaviour completions by the Prison Service during those years. Each establishment is audited annually on the quality of programme delivery and their number of completions adjusted in line with the score that they are awarded. However, the figures for completions during the present financial year have not yet been adjusted in this way.

Prison Televisions

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy on the availability of televisions in prisoners' cells. [152878]

Mr. Boateng: Access to in-cell television is an earnable and forfeitable privilege within the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme, which is intended to motivate prisoners to good behaviour, and to participate in work and constructive activity. Where the technology is available, in-cell television is being used increasingly to provide information to prisoners on developments within the prison, including education courses, visits times, work availability and canteen facilities.

Prisoners with in-cell television pay a weekly charge of £1 per set, and the scheme is broadly self-financing, with the costs of televisions and their replacements, warranties and wall brackets being met from the charge on prisoners.

Prisoner Restraint

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions in 2001 prison inmates, taken to hospital for medical treatment, have been shackled while in hospital; and if he will make a statement. [152817]

Mr. Boateng: No central records are maintained of the number of prisoners taken to hospital for medical treatment or the number of those who are held under restraint, and the information requested can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The application of restraints to prisoners at hospital is determined by a risk assessment but restraints are not applied to women attending for antenatal treatment or to give birth. Once applied, restraints may be removed subject to a risk assessment, and will be removed where a healthcare professional seeks their removal because of an immediate risk to the health of the prisoner, or because the prisoner is in pain or discomfort, or because the restraints are impeding essential treatment.

Prisoners (Ethnic Breakdown)

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the ethnic breakdown is of inmates in *(a)* Strangeways Prison and *(b)* UK prisons. [153228]

Mr. Boateng: The figures for all prisons in England and Wales and for Manchester prison (Strangeways) as at 31 January 2001, are provisionally recorded as follows:

Ethnicity	*All prisons*	*Manchester prison*
Asian		
Bangladeshi	196	0
Indian	641	4
Other	1,099	17
Pakistani	1,038	15
Black		
African	1,393	19
Caribbean	4,989	24
Other	2,165	72
Chinese	115	0
Not known	46	0
Other	1,447	4
White	50,845	908
Total	63,974	1,063

Prison Service Programmes

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Prison Service programmes RESPOND and RESPECT, and on plans for similar programmes in the Police Service. [153463]

Mr. Boateng: The Prison Service RESPOND (Race Equality for Staff and Prisoners) programme unveiled in February 1999, consists of five main strategies:

- Confronting racial harassment and discrimination.
- Ensuring fairness in recruitment, promotion, appraisal and selection.
- Developing and supporting minority ethnic staff.
- Ensuring equal opportunities for minority ethnic prisoners.
- Recruiting minority ethnic staff.

The RESPOND programme enjoys the support of the Prison Service trade unions and staff associations, and £3 million was earmarked to take it forward over the first three years.

A key element of the RESPOND programme is the development of RESPECT (Racial Equality for Staff), a national minority ethnic staff support network aiming to eliminate racism in the workplace. Around 1,500 delegates attended the launch of RESPECT in January 2001 at the International Convention Centre (ICC) in Birmingham.

RESPECT is able to provide support to minority ethnic staff who claim to suffer from racial harassment or discrimination. A free-phone support-line will be operational from Monday, 2 April 2001. Specially trained volunteers will offer the alleged victim a sympathetic ear and help them to identify courses of action available to them. RESPECT complements the help and support that is available through existing channels such as Prison Service Staff Care and Welfare Services, and trade unions and staff associations. RESPECT has around 900 members.

The Home Secretary's Action Plan, published in response to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, sets out a comprehensive programme to improve community and race relations. The 70 recommendations are wide-ranging, and those which apply to the police are concerned with tackling discrimination both internally within the service and as a service provider. On 22 February the Home Secretary published the Second Annual Report on Progress against the Action Plan. The Action Plan contains elements common to the RESPECT and RESPOND programmes in the Prison Service, such as targets on the recruitment, retention and progression of minority ethnic police officers and a programme of racism awareness training within police services to be delivered to all front-line staff by the end of 2002.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Hammond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reason the Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant report (No. 73) has been withdrawn. [152959]

Mrs. Roche: Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 73) contained a technical error and has therefore been withdrawn.

The report has been corrected and is being reprinted. It will be resubmitted as Local Government Finance (England) Special Grant Report (No. 77), for consideration by the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments on 13 March 2001.

Cyclists

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cyclists were fined for riding a bicycle without lights in the UK in 2000. [152814]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Statistics for 2000 are not yet available, but the available information from the Home Office Court Proceedings database shows that there were 332 persons fined in England and Wales in 1999 for lighting and reflector offences connected with pedal cycles (Road Traffic Act 1988, section 81(2) and RVL Regs 1989).

Information relating to Scotland and Northern Ireland are matters for Ministers in the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Police Numbers

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* police officers and *(b)* civilian staff are employed in each constabulary. [152998]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Information on police and civilian numbers for 30 September 2000 can be found in Table 3 and Table 6 of the Home Office Statistical Bulletin No. 2–01, "Police Service Strength", which was published on 16 January. A copy has been placed in the Library.

Burglary

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many offences of burglary were admitted to by those serving sentences in Prison Service establishments during *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 2000. [152885]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The number of previous offences of burglary admitted by prisoners has not been collected centrally since 1 April 1999, when the counting rules for detections changed. The new counting rules provide more precise and rigorous criteria for securing a detection, with the underlying emphasis on the successful result of a police investigation. Detections secured through 'prison visits' were omitted under the new counting rules. The total number of burglaries in England and Wales which were cleared up by the police from 'prison visits' in the year ending March 1999 was 58,898, 32 per cent. of all detections of burglaries in that year.

Street Robberies

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many street robberies occurred in London during the six months ending 28 February. [152822]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The most recently available figures, provided by the Metropolitan police, show that there were 18,094 street robberies involving personal property in their area in the six months ending January 2001.

Departmental Policies (South Shields)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the South Shields constituency, the effects on South Shields of his Department's polices and actions since 2 May 1997. [153084]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office annual reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The next report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. 'Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000' and 'Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000' can be found in

the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder Partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the South Shields constituency or the immediate locality:

Reduced Burglary Initiative

South Tyneside All Saints, South Shields were awarded £60,000 under Round One of the Reducing Burglary Initiative. Interventions include: Offender based strategies, use of mobile video recording system and electronic intruder detection measures; crime prevention measures, target hardening. Community based strategies.

Targeted Policing

Northumbria police in partnership with Tynesdale district council, local parish councils and the Northumberland Social Services and probation service were awarded £40,000 under the Targeted Policing Initiative for a project to develop an integrated strategy to tackle crime and disorder in rural towns and remote villages. The project will tackle both localised offending and crime resulting from travelling criminals. A local multi-agency safety group will develop intelligence about offenders and identify 'hot spots'. The project will employ a range of interventions including a mobile police station and the use of Closed Circuit Television.

CCTV

Under Round One of the Crime Reduction Programme's CCTV Initiative, South Tyneside Community Safety Board were awarded around £121,000 for the South Tyneside District Hospital CCTV Project. The project updated and extended the CCTV coverage of South Tyneside District Hospital including the car parks and the staff residential blocks, with the aim of reducing fear of crime, car crime, criminal damage and burglary.

Neighbourhood Warden Schemes

South Tyneside Metropolitan borough council have been awarded £228,000 until 2002–03 for a scheme covering central and eastern Jarrow and western South Shields. The project started on 4 December 2000.

Youth Offending Teams (YOT's)

The local YOT is involved in a number of schemes including establishing restorative approaches and working with victims of crime and has held successful restorative conferences. 35 per cent. of reparation orders/requirements have included an element of direct reparation to victims. There is a very successful project in Biddick Hall where 22 young people involved in serious youth disorder did reparation in the same area repairing damage to a primary school, cleaning off graffiti etc. It has been very well received by local community/residents (and by parents of young people). It is too early to say definitively what the effects of these actions are on re-offending and reducing levels of youth crime. Recent police figures have however led to some concern about youth disorder. In relation to this, there has recently been a seminar funded and facilitated by Government Office for the North East, and in response to the concern the YOT will be taking appropriate action within the context of a proposed youth disorder strategy.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of South Shields to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000;

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

Departmental Policies (Houghton and Washington, East)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Houghton and Washington, East of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [152993]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The next report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder Partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Houghton and Washington, East constituency or the immediate locality:

Targeted Policing Initiative

Northumbria police in partnership with Tynedale district council, local parish councils and the Northumberland Social Services and probation service were awarded £40,000 under the Targeted Policing Initiative, to develop an integrated strategy to tackle crime and disorder in rural towns and remote villages. The project will tackle both localised offending and crime resulting from travelling criminals. A local multi-agency safety group will develop intelligence about offenders and identify "hot spots". The project will employ a range of interventions including a mobile police station and the use of Closed Circuit Television.

Youth Offending Teams (YOT's)

Houghton and Washington is covered by the Sunderland YOT. The YOT has worked closely and collaboratively with Sheffield University and KPMG as part of the evaluation of YOT pilots. This involved interviews with parents, evaluation of case files and qualitative interviews with a range of staff. The Social

Software (YOIS) system was installed in March 2000, has been "bedded in" and is being fully utilised. The Service was involved at the national level in the Youth Justice Board commissioned work with the Trust for the Study of Adolescence to develop a parenting video to use with parents of adolescents. This built upon some of the successful work that had been undertaken in Sunderland as a pilot area for Parenting Orders.

The Service was subject to inspection through the Joint Review of Social Services, which was undertaken in 2000. The following is a direct quotation from the report:

"The Service has been established with extensive multi-agency co-operation and involvement. This extends beyond the expected contributing agencies to include others, such as the Fire Service and the HAZ (Health Action Zone), which have also been involved in securing resources to achieve the objectives of the Service with regard to specific themes. The local authority and partner agencies have invested significantly in the successful establishment of the Service."

Voice verification is currently being piloted and is being used with bail and remand cases and those subject to community cases. All Pathway projects have been fully developed and have begun to demonstrate their effectiveness. Projects have offered workshops at various conferences and have opened their doors to sharing practice. A partnership has been developed with Gateshead YOT and the Kolvin Regional Forensic Unit to pilot and to evaluate a 10-session cognitive-behavioural programme for young people who offend.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Houghton and Washington, East to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000;

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website: www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Departmental Policies (Hemsworth and Wakefield)

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly to the locations as possible, the effects of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997 on *(a)* Hemsworth constituency and *(b)* Wakefield district. [153003]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office Annual Reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The next report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. "Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000" and "Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000" can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder Partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the *(a)* Hemsworth constituency and *(b)* Wakefield district constituency or the immediate locality:

Reducing Burglary Initiative:

West Yorkshire police in partnership with Wakefield Metropolitan district council, were awarded around £12,000 under Round Two of the Reducing Burglary Initiative for a scheme covering City Estate, Wakefield.

Targeted Policing Initiative:

West Yorkshire police were awarded £488,000 under the Targeted Policing Initiative to roll-out across the force the lessons they have learned from a project run in Killingbeck (Leeds) on tackling domestic violence, and to apply those lessons to other forms of hate crime including racist and homophobic incidents. The project involves a graded response that includes working with both victims and offenders.

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV):

Wakefield District Community Safety Partnership were awarded £274,000 for the Castleford CCTV initiative under Round One of the Crime Reduction Programme's CCTV Initiative. The project covers Castleford town centre, and aims to combat vehicle crime, shoplifting and criminal damage.

Wakefield District Community Safety Partnership have submitted two bids, to a total capital of £542,000 under the second round of the CCTV Initiative. Both bids are currently under consideration.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of *(a)* Hemsworth constituency and *(b)* Wakefield district to a greater or lesser extent. For example:

376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established;

racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998;

the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000;

good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website (www.homeoffice.gov.uk).

Citizenship

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will assess the desirability of amending the British Nationality Act 1981 to ensure that those born outside the United Kingdom to contract supplemented officers working overseas are eligible for full British citizenship. [153386]

Mrs. Roche: I have no reason to question the present arrangements.

Police (North-west)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what measures he has introduced to increase the recruitment of police officers in Greater Manchester; what the cost of these measures was; and what evaluation has been made of their success. [152809]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The Crime Fighting Fund (CFF) will enable police forces to recruit 9,000 additional officers over and above the number previously planned in the three years to 2002–03. Under the CFF, Greater Manchester police have been allocated a total of 588 extra recruits.

According to the latest information provided by Greater Manchester police, the force now expects to recruit 147 CFF recruits this financial year. CFF grant payments made to Greater Manchester police so far this financial year total £1,388,171. CFF grant payments to forces are paid on the basis of anticipated recruitment of CFF officers. Variations in actual recruitment may affect total amounts due to individual forces, any overpayment may be reclaimed or offset against future payments.

The CFF is successfully helping Greater Manchester police to recruit officers over and above the force's previous plans.

To help forces meet their recruitment targets, the first ever National Recruitment Campaign was launched on 30 August. To 4 March 2001 over 121,000 responses had been received to the campaign advertisements. These had generated over 25,500 Expressions of Interest (EOIs) to forces, 1,598 of which had been passed to Greater Manchester police. The total expected campaign spend in 2000–01 is £6.98 million excluding value added tax. The costs of the campaign cannot be broken down by individual police force as media for the campaign have been bought nationally.

The campaign has been very successful in generating inquiries and Expressions of Interest. Responsibility for processing EOIs rests with forces. Forces are being asked to report on the outcome of the EOIs with a view to assessing the effectiveness of the campaign.

For an indication of the expected impact of these measures and of the force's local recruitment activity on force strength, I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to her on 9 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 387W.

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many members of the Metropolitan police had previously served as police officers in the north-west region in each year since 1990. [152812]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* I understand from the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis that it is not possible to provide the information for each year since 1990. I am told, however, that a survey of serving officers indicates that there are currently 100 officers in the Metropolitan police who previously served as officers in a force in the north-west region of England.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) on what grounds exemptions are granted for the use of dogs from non-designated breeders to be used in licensed procedures; [153272]

(2) what steps are taken to ensure that animal experiments by commercial pet food companies comply with section 5(4) of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; [153275]

(3) how many exemptions were granted in *(a)* 1998, *(b)* 1999 and *(c)* 2000 under section 10(3)(a) of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986; [153270]

(4) if he will make a statement on how his Department monitors the conditions in which dogs are bred and reared in non-designated breeding establishments. [153273]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* Dogs are primarily used in pharmaceutical research and development, or in pharmaceutical safety and efficacy evaluations. They are also used, when no other species is suitable, in the evaluation of cardiovascular and cardiorespiratory problems in humans. Such work contributes to advances in human healthcare. Dogs are also used in the development of veterinary medicines and techniques.

The work undertaken by commercial pet food companies is for the purpose of ensuring that food products for pets are safe, effective and nutritionally complete. Most of the procedures conducted are so mild as to not require licensed authority. The procedures which come under licence are very mild. There are pet re-homing schemes in place for animals once tests have been completed.

Under the terms of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 dogs and cats can be used only where animals of no other species are suitable. Together with primates and horses, the overall use of these species represented less than 1 per cent. of the total animals used in scientific procedures in 1999.

The numbers of exemptions under section 10(3)(a), allowing the use of dogs and cats bred or obtained from non-designated breeding establishments in the last three years are:

1998: 7
1999: 7
2000: 40

Under section 10(3) of the Act, the non-availability of suitable animals from designated breeders is the only justification for such exemptions.

To comply with section 5(4) of the Act, any application to use protected animals in research must be subjected to a detailed cost/benefit assessment by Home Office inspectors. The likely adverse effects on the animals concerned must be weighed against the benefit likely to accrue as a result of the proposed programme of work. Such an assessment is applied to applications made by commercial pet food companies, as to any other. Information about the cost benefit assessment is set out in the paper by the chief inspector published as part of the Animal Procedures Committee annual report for 1997.

There is no authority under the 1986 Act to monitor conditions in non-designated breeding establishments.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the manufacture, assembly, testing and storage of depleted uranium ammunition is covered by *(a)* international environmental treaties, *(b)* verification and reporting under the Chemical Weapons Convention and *(c)* European Union and national environmental regulations; and if potentially hazardous releases or emissions have been reported to the relevant environmental and safety regulators. [150995]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* I am not aware of any international environmental treaties which cover depleted uranium ammunition. The Chemical Weapons Convention does not cover depleted uranium ammunition.

Within the European Union civil uses of nuclear materials are regulated under the Euratom Treaty and subsidiary legislation. The Government's position is that the Euratom Treaty does not apply to military activities. The Radioactive Substances Act 1993 makes provision for the regulation of radioactive substances. The licensing provisions of the Act are applied to companies involved in the manufacture and assembly of depleted uranium ammunition and permits have been issued covering a number of such premises. Premises occupied on behalf of the Crown for the purposes of the armed forces or the Ministry of Defence are exempt from the provisions of the Act. However, the Environment, Agency does regulate these premises by administrative rather than statutory means.

Apart from the small amount of contained firing at Foulness and Aldermaston, test firing of depleted uranium has been concentrated on two sites. One site at Eskmeals in Cumbria has not been used since 1995. The Environment Agency believes from environmental monitoring reports it has seen that there have not been any potentially hazardous releases or emissions of depleted uranium to the environment from this site. The other site is at Dundrennan in Kirkudbright, Scotland from which shells are fired into the Solway Firth. A long-term environmental monitoring programme on the effects of depleted uranium test firing has been in place in Kirkudbright since 1983. In 1993, W. S. Atkins Ltd. was commissioned to produce an independent environmental impact assessment for Kirkudbright. The report concluded that the firing programme produced a negligible effect on the local environment.

Buses

Mr. Best: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress towards upgrading buses. [152949]

Mr. Hill: Our Ten Year Transport Plan sets out the broad agenda for improving the quality of bus services and securing passenger growth. We are underpinning this with new powers under the Transport Act 2000, now largely in force, and with additional funding through local transport plans, increased support for rural buses, a new urban bus challenge scheme to improve services in deprived areas and, most recently, enhanced fuel duty rebate following the Budget. In addition, regulations under the Disability Discrimination Act now require new buses and coaches used on local and scheduled services to be accessible to disabled people, including wheelchair users. We will be monitoring these initiatives to ensure that they deliver the necessary quantity and quality improvements for bus users.

EU Environment Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the outcome was of the Environment Council held in Brussels on 8 March; what the Government's voting record was at the Council; and if he will make a statement. [153134]

Mr. Meacher: I represented the UK at the Environment Council in Brussels on 8 March, accompanied by Sam Galbraith, Scottish Executive Minister for the Environment, Sport and Culture. The UK, along with other member states, except Germany who abstained, voted in favour of the common position on the proposed Directive on motorcycle emissions. The Council adopted three sets of conclusions.

The Presidency proposed a compromise text on a Directive to limit emissions from motorcycles in two stages, 2003 and 2006. In supporting the proposed text on tighter limits from 2003, providing between 60 and 70 per cent. reduction in hydrocarbons and 30 to 60 per cent. reduction in carbon monoxide, member states accepted my amendment to extend the deadline for "enduro" bikes to assist the small UK manufacturers in adapting to the new limits. Germany proposed binding limits for 2006 to be agreed now, in advance of the Commission's proposed limits due by the end of 2002, which will be based on a new test cycle currently under development. The UK, along with the majority of member states, agreed to accept Germany's proposed limit values for 2006 as indicative non-binding limits only and the Council achieved a Common Position, with German abstention, that meets both our environmental and our manufacturers' needs.

Short Council conclusions on climate change were agreed reaffirming the EU's commitment to reaching agreement on the Kyoto Protocol at the resumed COP6. Following a presentation by the Commission of a Communication preparing for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10) in 2002, Council conclusions were agreed listing strategic objectives for the Summit. Council conclusions were also reached on a Communication reviewing future Bathing Water policy. These will guide the Commission in preparing its proposal for a revised Directive.

A public policy debate was held on the Sixth Environment Action Programme, which will set out the EU's environmental priorities for the next 20 years, primarily climate change, nature and biodiversity, environment and health and sustainable management of natural resources and waste. It was clear from the debate that there was a general wish to make the Programme more specific by adding some key objectives and

deadlines, although, since the proposal has only recently been published, there were not many concrete suggestions. Delegations also generally wish to see a short, clear programme. The negotiations on this dossier will proceed throughout the remainder of the Swedish Presidency with the aim to reach Common Position at the June Council.

A policy debate was also held on a White Paper on a future EU Chemicals Strategy. This proposes a new framework for risk assessment and management of both existing and new chemicals. It follows an initiative launched by the UK under its Presidency in 1998. Member states expressed broad support of the Commission objectives. The next stage will be detailed consideration of the practicalities of how these objectives can be met. The Presidency aim to complete Council Conclusions in June to direct the Commission in developing proposals for an effective and workable system.

The Commission and Presidency updated the Council on progress on an EU Sustainable Development Strategy. The Commission presented their Green Paper on Integrated Product Policy, which seeks to address the environmental impact of products at all stages of their life-cycle. The Presidency gave progress reports on a number of current legislative proposals expected to reach common position at the June or October 2001 Environment Councils. The Commission reported on progress in drafting a new proposal on the traceability and labelling of GMOs. The Council also had an informal discussion on climate change at the end of the day's business.

Lewes-Polegate Railway Line

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much departmental money was spent *(a)* from 1 January 1989 to 30 April 1997 and *(b)* from 1 May 1997 to 31 December 2000 in connection with the Lewes-Polegate railway line. [153434]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* This information is not available in the form requested.

Between 1 January 1989 and 25 May 1996, passenger rail services on the Lewes-Polegate railway line were operated by the British Railways Board, to which the following amounts of central Government grant were paid in 1988–89 to 1996–97.

Central Government grants

	Cash prices £ million
1988–89	551
1989–90	479
1990–91	637
1991–92	902
1992–93	1,194
1993–94	926
1994–95	1,783
1995–96	1,650
1996–97	1,257

Between 26 May 1996 and 31 December 2000, passenger rail services on the Lewes-Polegate railway line were operated by Connex South Central, to which the following amounts of franchise support were paid by the Franchising Director in 1996–97 to 1999–2000.

Franchise support

	Cash prices £ million
1996–97	76
1997–98	76
1998–99	58
1999–2000	50

Franchise support for Connex South Central is the Franchising Director's contribution to the company's total expenditure on the provision of all its passenger services. The company is responsible for the detailed allocation of that expenditure between services on particular railway lines.

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people in each of the four areas of England established for the purpose of administering the home energy efficiency scheme *(a)* have had new boilers fitted and *(b)* have had boilers repaired since June 2000; and how many are currently waiting for (i) boiler repairs and (ii) new boilers. [153472]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The table sets out the number of households that have had work completed and those where orders have been placed:

	Number of households that require new heating systems including boiler		*Number of households that required repairs to existing heating systems*		
Scheme manager	*Fitted and invoiced*	*Order with installer*	*Repairs completed and invoiced (of which require replacement boiler)*	*Those awaiting repair*	*Those awaiting replacement boiler*[1]
Eaga (Lot1)	736	891	1,439 (469)	739	458
Eaga (Lot 3)	2,161	3,639	2,912 (1,117)	1,845	1,102
Eaga (Lot 4)	1,092	3,216	2,265 (811)	1,107	808
Eastern (Lot 2)	1,956	3,952	1,358 (459)	1,986	4,879

[1] Due to the one to six week delay between the completion of the work and the issue of invoices by contractors it is likely that work has already been completed in some of these households.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how the Government ensures that the cost of work carried out by contractors under the home energy efficiency scheme does not exceed the price which would be charged by local contractors registered with CORGI; [153532]

(2) how the Government are ensuring that grants paid to contractors for work under the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme does not exceed the value of the work done. [153533]

Mr. Meacher: Scheme managers are contractually required to appoint insulation and heating sub-contractors following the requirements set out under the UK's Public Procurement Regulations. In the case of heating contractors, I understand that both scheme managers advertised widely in the trade press and wrote to all CORGI registered gas heating engineers inviting them to tender. The scheme managers were required to accept those tenders that were the lowest in price and technically compliant.

The scheme is designed so that independent surveyors visit householders and advise the measures to be installed. Orders are then placed with the sub-contractors for the package of measures to be installed in each home. The scheme managers operate monitoring systems to ensure work orders are correctly carried out to the relevant specifications.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on what date and by what means tenders were invited for the management of grant payments under the home energy efficiency scheme towards the cost of heating systems; how many tenders were received; and on what criteria contracts were awarded. [153530]

Mr. Meacher: The scheme manager contracts were awarded in accordance with UK Public Procurement Regulations. An advertisement was placed in the Official Journal of the European Community and written tenders were invited on 29 October 1999.

Six compliant bids were received. These were assessed by a tender panel, which included external representatives. The panel unanimously recommended the award of contracts to the Eaga Partnership Ltd. and Eastern HEES Ltd. on the basis of providing the lowest priced, technically compliant bids.

The contract with Eaga Partnership includes a stepped clawback provision, whereby up to 75 per cent. of any profit in a given financial year is returned to the Department. Eastern HEES Ltd. is a not-for-profit company who are committed to refunding to the Department all surpluses that occur.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list those contractors authorised to carry out installations of new boilers under the home energy efficiency scheme in each of the four areas of England established for the purpose of administering the scheme. [153445]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The following is a list of heating contractors authorised to carry out installations of new boilers under the home energy efficiency scheme in England. There are variations in the coverage of each installer, some are national, while others provide a regional service.

Heating contractors—Eaga Partnership Ltd. (North East, North West, London, West Midlands, South East, South West regions)

Amadeus Insulation Ltd.
Ashley and McDonough (Huyton) Ltd.
Concept Heating Systems
Dawsetway Ltd.
Domestic and General Insulation Ltd.
Domestic Gas Services
Downs (Insulation and Electrical) Ltd.
Everwarm Services Ltd.
Excelsior Insulation Services Ltd.
Fenhams Contracts
F. J. Jones Heating Engineers Ltd.
Gas Services
Gascare Central Heating Ltd.
Gascare 1A Autoheat Ltd.
Gilwood Engineering Services Ltd.
Home Energy Efficiency Ltd.
Huyton Plumbing and Heating Ltd.
Interglow
J. and L. National Energy Saver Ltd.
Kershaw Contracting Services Ltd.
Kingsleigh Holdings Ltd.
Lionheart Heating Services
N. W. Heating Maintenance
P. H. Jones Plumbing and Heating Ltd.
P. J. Shankster
Plumbing and Gas Services Ltd.
Premier Services
PTC Construction Group Ltd.
Quake Energy
Quality Heating Services Ltd.
Simpson and Gregg Ltd.
S. J. White (Engineers) Ltd.
Taverner (UK) Ltd.
Vale Heating and Plumbing
Viscount Insulations and Security
W. H. Joce and Sons

WTS (Holdings) Ltd.*Heating contractors—Eastern HEES Ltd. (Eastern region)*

British Gas Services
Dewsbury Civil Engineering Ltd.
East Coast Gas Services
Eastern Contracting Ltd.
Energy Efficiency Centre Ltd.
Jeakins Weir Ltd.
Kershaws Contracting Services
L. and W. Insulation Ltd.
Maclean and Nutall
N. W. Heating Maintenance
Perry Electrical Ltd.
P. H. Jones Ltd.
Paul Brant Plumbing and Heating
Rhiengold
Rule and Parker
Shore Energy Ltd.
Sun Realm Heating Company Ltd.
Thorpete Associates
Swift Services
Trolhurst
Viscount Home Insulation
Yorkshire Plumbing and Heating Services Ltd.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what tendering processes were undertaken prior to the appointment of the

Eaga Partnership to administer the scheme for grant payments towards the cost of new central heating boilers for vulnerable people. [153529]

Mr. Meacher: The Eaga Partnership Ltd. was awarded the contract to manage the home energy efficiency scheme in the Northern, West and South of England from the start of the new scheme on 1 June 2000. Prior to this date no grants for heating measures were available under the scheme that had run since 1991. Instead only a single main insulation measure was available.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the estimated cost to public funds in 2000–01 is of the Government's advertising of the UK home energy efficiency scheme. [153471]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The responsibility for marketing the home energy efficiency scheme in England rests with the scheme managers, Eaga Partnership Ltd. and Eastern HEES Ltd. The costs for this activity are included within their overall contract price. The scheme managers report that a total of £3.05 million will be spent on advertising the scheme in this financial year, including the cost of the Warm Front Team campaign.

Energy efficiency is a devolved area. It is therefore the responsibility for the respective Parliament and Assemblies to comment on the situation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the television advertising campaign for Warm Front commenced in the Meridian television area; how many advertising slots are involved; and what the cost is to *(a)* public funds and *(b)* agents acting on the Government's behalf. [153446]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The television advertising campaign for the Warm Front Team is being piloted in the Meridian area for four weeks from 23 February to 23 March. The campaign is intended to stimulate interest in an area where there is a low take-up of home energy efficiency scheme (HEES) grants. 85 advertising spots are planned for off peak times, when the target audience is most likely to be watching television. The cost of the television slots is around £80,000, with the advertisements themselves costing some £95,000 to produce. The HEES Scheme Managers are responsible for the quantity and type of advertising used, with the cost included within the overall contract price paid by the Department.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the total value of work carried out in 2000–01 by contractors in each of the four areas of England established for the purpose of administering the home energy efficiency scheme. [153444]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The total value of work carried out since June 2000 by contractors in each of the four areas of England established for the purposes of administering the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme is set out in the table:

	East	*North-east and north-west*	*London and south-east*	*South-west and west-midlands*
Total value of heating and insulation work (£)	6,088,350	10,474,401	3,940,122	5,543,556
Total value of security work (£)	117,919	387,084	91,431	173,717
Total value of HEES work (£)	6,206,269	10,861,485	4,031,553	5,717,273
Number of households treated	16,945	29,594	12,426	17,346
Number of households waiting for work to be carried out	[1]18,386	[1]17,946	[1]9,250	[1]12,662
Total value of work waiting to be carried out (£)	[1]8,500,000	[1]16,820,086	[1]6,687,893	[1]11,905,199

[1] Due to the one to six week delay between the completion of the work and the issue of invoices by contractors it is likely that work has already been completed in some of these households

Departmental Policies (South Shields)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the South Shields constituency, the effects on South Shields of his Department's polices and actions since 2 May 1997. [153090]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The principal kinds of funding that this Department has provided to South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council in 1997 to 2002 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on South Shields. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02* [1]
Revenue Support Grant	67.806	71.803	77.809	76.875	81.201
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	34.132	35.529	38.344	43.029	41.716
Housing Investment Programme	3.203	3.652	3.693	10.809	[2]3.284
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	17.224	15.952	15.527	15.741	[3]—
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.896	3.128	3.065	n/a	[3]—
Loan Charges Defective Housing	0.062	0.062	0.062	0.062	0.062
SRB funding	[4]1.857	[4]6.382	[4]8.448	[4]7.941	[4]6.983
Neighbourhood Renewal Funding	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	2.692
ERDF funding	0.386	0.522	0.828	0.671	[3]—

£ million

Nature of funding	1997–98	1998–99	1999–2000	2000–01	2001–02 [1]
Transport Supplementary Grant	0.409	0.254	0.536	0	0
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	0.409	0.254	0	0	0
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	0.880	0.880	1.400	1.876	3.171
Rural Bus Challenge Grant	0	[4]1.255	[4]0.361	[4]0.560	[3]—
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant	0	[4]0.054	[4]0.059	[4]0.082	[3]—
Capital Challenge	0.788	1.222	0.990	0	0
(Supplementary Credit and Basic Credit Approvals)	[4]0.399	[4]1.118	[4]0.0001	0	0

[1] £ million (where known)
[2] This figure does not include the Major Repairs Allowance allocated to the authority which amounts to £11.071 million
[3] Not known
[4] 1997–98 SRB figure includes Round 3 funding for "South Shields Challenge"
1998–99 SRB figure includes Round 4 funding for "People, Employment and Pride"
1999–2000 SRB figure includes Round 5 funding for "Extending the South Shields Challenge"
2000–01 SRB figure includes Round 6 funding for "Jobs and Community"
[5] Figures quoted are the full amounts given to the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Executive of whom the authority is a partner
[6] Tyne and Wear Fire Brigade also received Capital Challenge funding. This was spent on the training centre at Barmston Mere, Washington, although the whole of Tyne and Wear benefited from the investment

East Coast Main Line

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce a decision on the franchise for the east coast main line; when the pause in the franchise process announced on 14 February by the Strategic Rail Authority will be ended; and if the guidance given to the SRA includes a new alignment for the east coast main line. [153196]

Mr. Hill: The Strategic Rail Authority (SRA) announced on 2 March that they were lifting the pause they imposed on the replacement process for the East Coast Main Line (ECML) franchise. A decision will be announced in due course. No guidance has been given to the SRA on a new alignment for the ECML.

Mr. Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what the estimated costs of track renewal on the east coast main line are under the franchise bids by *(a)* GNER and *(b)* Virgin; [R] [153625]

(2) what assessment he has made of the employment implications of the GNER bid for renewal of the east coast main line franchise. [R] [153624]

Mr. Hill: Details of the bids put forward by GNER and Virgin for the replacement of the East Coast Main Line franchise are commercially confidential.

Main Sewers

Mr. Andy King: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many parliamentary constituencies in England and Wales have constituents who have unadopted main sewers; [R] [153708]

(2) how many households in England and Wales have unadopted main sewers. [R] [153709]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: There is currently no reliable information on the extent of private (unadopted) sewers. My Department, as part of a review of private sewers and drains, is preparing a research contract to assess the likely numbers and condition of these sewers.

Environmental Impact Assessments

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the reasons for which an environment statement is required for the Slapton to Streetgate road. [153192]

Ms Beverley Hughes: An environmental statement is required for any development listed in Schedule 1 or in the case of developments listed in Schedule 2 where it is likely to have significant effects on the environment by virtue of facts such as size, nature and location, of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (England and Wales) Regulations 1999. In this case it is for Devon county council to determine whether the work they propose to undertake requires an Environmental Statement. The Secretary of State can be called upon to give a Direction on the need for and/or scope of any EIA and it would be inappropriate for me to comment further on this case.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make a statement about the criteria used in deciding whether to apply environment impact regulations; and how many times they have been invoked in the last year in the consideration of planning applications; [153190]

(2) under what circumstances an environment statement is required prior to approval of planning applications. [153191]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (England and Wales) Regulations 1999 give effect to the requirements of Directive 85/337/EEC on the assessment of the effects of certain public and private projects on the environment. The Regulations apply to categories of projects specified in Schedules 1 and 2 of the Regulations. For development listed in Schedule 1 of the Regulations environmental impact assessment is always required before planning permission may be granted. For development listed in Schedule 2, an assessment is required if the development is likely to have significant effects on the environment by virtue of factors such as its nature, size or location.

Local planning authorities are required to screen all planning applications for projects that fall within a class

of development listed in Schedule 2 of the Regulations to identify development requiring EIA. In doing so they have to take account of prescribed selection criteria relating to the characteristics, location and potential impact of the development.

An environmental statement is required in support of every planning application which is subject to EIA. It is estimated that approximately 300 applications have been subject to EIA in the last year.

Grant Distribution

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how his plans for a revised grant distribution system will meet the needs of authorities which have urban and rural characteristics. [153078]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Last September's local government finance Green Paper consulted on options for making the current grant distribution system for local authorities fairer. A White Paper will be published later this year setting out our decisions on the way forward.

Any reforms to the revised grant distribution system will first be discussed with local government. Like the present grant distribution system, it would be expected to take account of a wide range of factors, including the needs of authorities with different characteristics.

Concessionary Bus Fares

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to reduce the financial pressure on local authorities resulting from the implementation of the Government's policy on concessionary bus fares. [153053]

Mr. Hill: Our estimate of the overall extra annual cost to local authorities in England of the statutory minimum requirement for local authority concessionary fares introduced in the Transport Act 2000 is £54 million. The Local Government Finance Settlement 2001–02 takes account of this additional cost.

Grant System

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how the reform of the local government grant system will take account of the services provided by district authorities which have urban and rural characteristics. [153079]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Last September's local government finance Green Paper consulted on options for making the current grant distribution system for local authorities fairer. A White Paper will be published later this year setting out our decisions on the way forward.

Any reforms to the revised grant distribution system will first be discussed with local government. Like the present grant distribution system, it would be expected to take account of a range of factors, including services provided by authorities in urban and rural areas.

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce a local government grant system based predominantly on populations. [153051]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Last September's local government finance Green Paper consulted on options for making the current grant distribution system for all local authorities fairer. A White Paper will be published later this year setting out our decisions on the way forward.

The existing formulae for distributing revenue grant are based predominantly on local authority population figures including relevant client groups (such as schoolchildren or elderly people). Were we to decide to continue to distribute grant by formula, this would continue to be the case.

As with the present system, such a formula could be modified to take other factors into account. However, the overall aim of any change would be to have a system that is more transparent and comprehensible as well as fairer, than that at present.

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he is taking to ensure an equitable distribution of Government grant to district councils. [153052]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Last September's local government finance Green Paper consulted on options for making the current grant distribution system for all local authorities fairer. A White Paper will be published later this year setting out our decisions on the way forward.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Walter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reason district councils have been excluded from the local public service agreements pilot scheme; and what plans he has to include such councils in public service agreement schemes. [153050]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The local PSA pilot was taken forward with top-tier authorities rather than district councils because the majority of the national PSA targets that relate to local authority services relate to the services of top-tier authorities. But we will consider how we might involve district councils in the future. The Local Government Association are working with a group of district councils on how the PSA approach might be applied to districts, and we will consider any proposals they make.

Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the Strategic Rail Authority to publish its strategic agenda. [153749]

Mr. Hill: The Strategic Rail Authority has published its strategic agenda today. Copies have been placed in the House Libraries.

Demolition Control (Conservation Areas)

Ms Bridget Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what

progress he has made reviewing the control of demolition in conservation areas following the House of Lords judgment in the Shimizu case. [153750]

Mr. Raynsford: The Shimizu judgment had the effect of weakening controls over partial demolition of unlisted buildings in conservation areas. We share the concern that the character of conservation areas could be adversely affected as a result. Following a consultation exercise last year we therefore propose to require submission of a planning application where in a conservation area it is proposed to demolish any boundary wall, gate, fence and other means of enclosure, and a chimney or porch on a dwellinghouse. This will give local planning authorities the opportunity to consider the impact that such works are likely to have on a conservation area. We shall bring forward the necessary amendments to the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 in due course.

This measure is designed to address the direct effects of the Shimizu judgment. We are currently considering the recommendation in English Heritage's report 'Power of Place' for removal of a wide range of permitted development rights in conservation areas.

Referendums

Mr. Paul Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to lay before Parliament draft regulations governing the conduct of referendums to be held under part II of the Local Government Act 2000. [153751]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have today laid before Parliament a draft of the Local Authorities (Conduct of Referendums) (England) Regulations 2001.

It is now for the House to consider this draft. To assist the House, I have placed in the Library and the Vote Office copies of draft proposed guidance to English local authorities on the holding of referendums in accordance with these Regulations.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Mobile Phones

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the comments his Department made to the Department of Health on that Department's leaflet 'Mobile Phones and Health' before publication. [153257]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The Department made a number of comments on various versions of the leaflet while they were in the drafting stage. Our view was that the leaflet should explain in clear language the health advice and precautionary approach recommended by the Export Group chaired by Sir William Stewart. The text of the leaflets was discussed widely with a number of Government Departments which had an interest. The final version was agreed by all and signed off by the Chief Medical Officers.

Fuel Poverty

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many jobs he estimates have been created by the fuel poverty initiatives introduced by the energy companies. [153454]

Mr. Hain: The Government welcome the involvement of energy companies in tackling fuel poverty. Company schemes cover a variety of initiatives—special tariffs for low-income customers, advice on debt management, benefit checks and measures to improve the energy efficiency of people's homes. These schemes will improve referral networks and support the Government's programme for improving the energy efficiency of the housing stock, especially for the fuel poor. Some of this activity will result in the creation of new jobs, however, most of these initiatives are in the early stages of their operation and it is therefore not possible to separately identify, and quantify, the number of new jobs created as a direct result of these schemes.

Collieries (Operating Aid)

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria the independent panel uses to decide which collieries will receive operating aid. [153457]

Mr. Hain: Under the UK Coal Operating Aid Scheme, as approved by the European Commission on 15 November 2000, applications for aid are considered under eight criteria. The full text of the Scheme is available on the DTI website at www.dti.gov.uk/support/coal.htm, but the criteria include: degression of costs must be demonstrated by the production unit; the level of subsidy must not cause the delivered price to undercut third country coal of an equivalent quality sold on equivalent terms; the coal covered by the application must be used for electricity generation or industrial purposes; no single undertaking will be eligible for more than £75 million.

Applications which satisfy these criteria will be submitted to the European Commission for approval. It is not for the Import Parity Price (IPP) Panel to decide which collieries will receive operating aid. However, the panel will advise my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the IPP in respect of contracts related to an application for subsidy. This advice will help my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry to ensure that the level of subsidy paid does not cause the delivered price of coal to undercut third country coal of an equivalent quality sold on equivalent terms. The panel's response to consultation on its methodology for advising on the IPP is also available on the internet at www.dti.gov.uk/support/coal.htm.

Electricity and Gas (Competition)

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if electricity and gas customers have accurate information on which to make decisions which allow them to benefit from competition in the market. [153455]

Mr. Hain: Accurate information on the competitive domestic energy market is widely available. The Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) publishes fact-sheets on gas, electricity and dual-fuel prices, which consumers can obtain from a freephone number—0800 88 77 77. Ofgem also produces more detailed price information and information on customer complaints, which is available from its website.

In January, Ofgem introduced website links to internet price comparison companies, which enable consumers more easily to decide which supplier is offering the tariff best suited to their needs. Ofgem has a voluntary code that includes stipulations on accuracy of data and independence to which companies must sign up before being linked to its website. Two companies, which customers can also contact by telephone, have so far met these criteria.

Energywatch, the Gas and Electricity Consumer Council, is developing a matrix of information on suppliers' standards of service, which will complement the price information. It will also raise awareness of customers' options and rights in the competitive market as part of its programme of fostering confident, assertive consumers.

Consumers without internet access are able to access websites via libraries and advice centres.

Gas Network

Mr. Clapham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many households in the UK do not have access to the gas network; and what initiatives he plans to encourage companies to extend it. [153456]

Mr. Hain: Approximately 5 million households in GB do not have access to the gas network.

The legislative position is that under the Gas Act 1986 (as amended) a Gas Transporter only has a duty to connect premises 23 meters from the gas mains. The same Act gives Ofgem a duty to ensure that all reasonable requests for gas through pipes are met, providing this can be done economically.

The Gas Act 1995 provided three ways a household can be connected to the mains. First, a consumer can go to one of the many competing Gas Transporters. Secondly, the Gas Transporter can apply to Ofgem to use a system of supplemental charges where the cost of making the gas connection is recovered over a period of typically 20 years by means of an additional charge on each unit of gas. Thirdly, the consumer can purchase the pipes and hire a specialist company to lay them for him—the so called "self-lay" system.

The Government are aware that many households which are not currently connected to the mains would like to be and, in the coming months, they will be working with Ofgem and the industry to ensure that the gas network provides the widest viable coverage.

Departmental Policies (South Shields)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the South Shields constituency, the effects on South Shields of his Department's polices and actions since 2 May 1997. [153083]

Mr. Caborn: It is not possible to quantify the direct effect of all the Department's policies and actions. However, we do hold statistical information on the programmes administered by the Department and the expected effects of that funding in the South Shields constituency are set out.

Nature of funding	*Number of companies*	*Amount offered*	*Jobs created*	*Jobs safeguarded*
1997–98				
Regional Selective Assistance	5	485,000	68	82
Enterprise Grants	0	0	0	0
SMART	0	0	0	0
1998–99				
Regional Selective Assistance	2	42,000	10	0
Enterprise Grants	0	0	0	0
SMART	0	0	0	0
1999–2000				
Regional Selective Assistance	3	131,000	54	2
Enterprise Grants	0	0	0	0
SMART	0	0	0	0
2000–01				
Regional Selective Assistance	2	610,000	169	80
Enterprise Grants	1	19,500	0	17
SMART	0	0	0	0

Colombia

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the export credit guaranties given to UK firms trading with Colombia for each of the last five years. [153118]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The information is as follows:

Year	*Company*	*Details*	*Value of ECGD cover £ million*
1996	International Gas Apparatus Ltd.	Gas pressure reducing and metering stations	5.5
1997	British Aerospace	Two Airbus A3202	22.5
1998	None	None	0
1999	None	None	0
2000	None	None	0

Industrial Gas Prices

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will made a statement on the change in industrial gas prices over the past six months; and what steps he is taking to help the UK's heavy industry deal with this change. [148302]

Mr. Hain: I apologise for the delay in replying but I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to his question, number 148300, on 6 February 2001, *Official Report*, columns 464–65W. The delay was caused by an administrative error.

Footwear Industry

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the future of the footwear industry in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* Norwich. [152824]

Ms Hewitt: Although UK footwear manufacturers supply only 10 per cent. of the UK market, the industry features some world-renowned brands and overall remains

buoyant. Despite the weak euro, exports continue to rise and currently account for 54 per cent. of UK production. I hope that these positive trends in exporting can continue.

In Norwich, two leading footwear manufacturers have taken part in a DTI-supported project which included supply chain management. A manufacturer has also made a substantial investment in new machinery. Another company is the world's leading manufacturer of ballet and dancing shoes. I remain confident that through strategic planning such companies have the best chance of remaining internationally competitive and leading in the market sectors or niches in which they operate.

Departmental Policies (Houghton and Washington, East)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Houghton and Washington, East of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [152990]

Mr. Caborn: It is not possible to quantify the direct effect of all the Department's policies and actions. However, we do hold statistical information on the programmes administered by the Department and the expected effects of that funding in the Houghton and Washington, East constituency are set out in the table.

Nature of funding	*Number of companies*	*Amount offered (£)*	*Jobs created*	*Jobs safeguarded*
1997–98				
Regional Selective Assistance	15	1,080,000	373	1
Enterprise Grants	0	0	0	0
SMART	1	45,000	[1]—	[1]—
1998–99				
Regional Selective Assistance	25	2,984,000	683	70
Enterprise Grants	0	0	0	0
SMART	0	0	0	0
1999–2000				
Regional Selective Assistance	21	2,238,000	480	15
Enterprise Grants	0	0	0	0
SMART	0	178,400	5	33
2000–01				
Regional Selective Assistance	4	4,606,000	242	3,500
Enterprise Grants	6	185,250	30	0
SMART	0	0	0	0

[1] Not known

Departmental Policies (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East constituency of his Department's policies and action since 2 May 1997. [153285]

Mr. Caborn *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* It is not possible to quantify the direct effect of all the Department's policies and actions. However, we do hold statistical information on the programmes administered by the Department and the expected effects of that funding in the Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East constituency are set out.

Nature of funding	*Number of companies*	*Amount offered (£)*	*Jobs created*	*Jobs safeguarded*
1997–98				
Regional Selective Assistance	13	1,308,000	340	0
Enterprise Grants	0	0	0	0
SMART	1	176,721	[1]—	[1]—
1998–99				
Regional Selective Assistance	9	1,378,000	476	0
Enterprise Grants	0	0	0	0
SMART	0	0	0	0
1999–2000				
Regional Selective Assistance	8	665,000	163	26
Enterprise Grants	0	0	0	0
SMART	2	90,000	4	0
2000–01				
Regional Selective Assistance	0	0	0	0
Enterprise Grants	4	43,435	15	0
SMART	0	0	0	0

[1] Not known

Promotional Campaigns

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153413]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* *(a)* Departmental television, radio and newspaper advertising through COI was as follows:

£ ex. VAT

Period/Job title	*TV*	*Radio*	*Press*
1996–97			
Queens Awards	—	17,457.00	75,407.00
Export Licence Announcements	—	—	4,214.00
Import Licence Announcements	—	—	57,603.00
Biotechnology Means Business	—	—	110,543.00
Business Links	—	460,240.00	868,119.00
Miscellaneous	—	—	74,446.00
Total	—	477,697.00	1,190,332.00
1997–98			
Languages for Export	—	—	21,175.00
Import Licence Announcements	—	—	57,057.00
Export Licence Announcements	—	—	6,113.00
Business Links	—	—	1,258,319.00
It for All	—	320,319.00	420,541.00
Queens Awards	—	—	66,258.00
Miscellaneous	—	—	-157,770.00
Total	—	320,319.00	1,987,233.00

£ ex. VAT

Period/Job title	TV	Radio	Press
1998–99			
Queens Awards	—	—	110,765.00
Firework Safety	—	—	49,800.00
Import Licence Announcements	—	—	47,889.00
Export Licence Announcements	—	—	7,208.00
Working Time Regulations	—	—	599,995.00
Business Links	—	—	432,585.00
Carbon Monoxide	—	37,702.00	—
Trade UK	—	—	7,068.00
IT For All	—	98,911.00	—
National Minimum Wage	—	—	752,765.00
Total	—	136,613.00	2,008,075.00
1999–2000			
Export Awareness	—	—	19,049.00
National Minimum Wage	15,250.00	177,940.00	15,476.00
Import Licence Announcements	—	—	57,356.00
Export Licence Announcements	—	—	14,080.00
Information Society Initiative	—	—	439,757.00
Miners Compensation Ad	—	—	149,939.00
Queens Awards	—	—	47,884.00
Metrication	—	—	19,311.00
Carbon Monoxide	—	64,226.00	—
Export USA	—	—	2,436.00
Foresight	—	—	61,900.00
Miscellaneous	—	—	14,839.00
Total	15,250.00	242,166.00	842,027.00
2000–01			
National Minimum Wage (Youth)	—	260,024.00	284,165.00
Import Licence announcements	—	—	15,364.00
Export Licence announcements	—	—	10,418.00
Small Business Services	—	—	100,552.00
Distance Selling	—	—	16,366.00
Minimum Wage (Autumn)	1,919,559.00	306,790.00	679,388.00
Miners Compensation Ad	—	—	134,674.00
Smart Awards	—	—	138,128.00
UK Online for Business	—	225,230.00	763,436.00
Miscellaneous	—	—	4,606.00
Total[1]	1,919,559.00	792,044.00	2,147,097.00

[1] To 31 January 2001

Information on other Departmental promotional campaigns is not held centrally and could be produced only at disproportionate cost.

Since its establishment in May 1999, British Trade International, which brings together international trade and investment support previously led by the DTI and FCO, has made the following expenditure on Trade Partners UK advertising:

Year	Amount £
1999–2000	0
2000–01	1,586,000

(b) Agency expenditure

Newspaper advertising/promotions for Companies House for the last five years

Year	Amount £
1996–97	255,246
1997–98	245,316
1998–99	282,500
1999–2000	391,012
2000–01[1]	381,584

[1] To date

Newspaper advertising and promotions for the Patent Office for the past five years

Year	Amount £
1995–96	1,963
1996–97	1,719
1997–98	8,908
1998–99	12,364
1999–2000	2,951
Total	28,175

Note:
Expenditure to date for current financial year is £5,116

The Small Business Service has spent £111,899 on directory advertising since its inception on 1 April 2000.

The Employment Tribunal Service, the Insolvency Service, and the National Weights and Measures Laboratory have not incurred any expenditure on television, newspaper or radio advertising or on any other promotional campaigns during the last five years.

(c) Information on advertising and other promotional campaigns by NDPBs is not held centrally and could be produced only at disproportionate cost.

Paid Holiday (Wansbeck)

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many workers in Wansbeck have gained an entitlement to four weeks paid holiday. [153139]

Mr. Alan Johnson: There are no data currently available at constituency level concerning the number of workers who have gained an entitlement to four weeks paid holiday. However, 3.1 million workers have benefited nationally from the introduction of the entitlement to paid leave.

Post Offices

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has made to Post Office Counters Ltd. about the impact of the network re-invention programme on the number and location of post offices. [152834]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The size of the post office network and precise location of post offices is an operational matter for the Post Office, taking account of the formal requirement to maintain the rural network and to prevent any avoidable closures of rural offices and of the Postal Services Commission's advice on accessibility of public post offices.

Universal Banking Services

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what calculation has been made of the cost of the introduction of a magnetic card for the payment of benefits and pensions from sub-post offices. [R] [153604]

Mr. Alan Johnson: It is too early to say what the setting up and running costs of the Post Office Card Account element of Universal Banking Services will be.

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what payment per transaction will be made to sub-post offices for payments of benefit and pensions by a magnetic card. [R] [153599]

Mr. Alan Johnson: The development of Universal Banking Services are at an early stage (they are not due to come on stream until 2003). Payment arrangements will be subject detailed to contractual negotiations between the Government and the Post Office.

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his estimate is of the reduction of fraud through the introduction of a magnetic card for the payment of benefits and pensions. [R] [153602]

Mr. Alan Johnson: By making payments directly into bank accounts, the Government expect to achieve savings of around £100 million in current Instrument of Payment fraud.

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what incentives the Government will give to individuals to encourage the utilisation of Universal Banking Services by benefit and pension recipients; and what is their cost. [R] [153600]

Mr. Alan Johnson: It is the Government's intention to identify and deploy effective incentives to encourage the utilisation of Universal Banking Services by benefit and pension recipients. The concept of Universal Banking Services are at an early stage (they are not due to come on stream until 2003) and a lot of detailed work will be necessary before decisions can be taken on what form that incentives structure might take.

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on progress in the discussions with the banking sector on the creation of the Universal Banking Services. [R] [153601]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Discussions with the banks are at an advanced stage. I hope that they will be resolved shortly.

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his Department's estimate is of the annual running cost of the Universal Banking Services and the percentage division of this cost between Government and the banking sector. [R] [153603]

Mr. Alan Johnson: It is too early to say what the setting up and running costs of the Post Office Card Account element of Universal Banking Services will be; or what might be the percentage division of costs between the Government and the banking sector. The banks have agreed in principle to make a contribution but the precise figures are subject to commercial negotiations which we expect to be resolved shortly.

Bank Notes

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he took to ensure that all post offices were informed of the date when old £20 notes ceased to be legal tender; and what publicity material was supplied to them. [152863]

Mr. Alan Johnson: This is an operational matter for the Post Office. I understand that the Post Office informed post office outlets of the date when old £20 notes ceased to be legal tender principally by issuing articles in a monthly internal publication sent to all front-line staff. The first of these articles appeared at the end of August 2000. In addition, a national helpline is available to front-line staff should they require further assistance.

Youth Parliament

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will meet members of the UK Youth Parliament to discuss their manifesto proposals in relation to the minimum wage and other issues. [152964]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I will be pleased to meet members of the UK Youth Parliament provided, of course, that a mutually convenient date can be found.

Miners

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what decision he has made in respect of the pension entitlement of ex-miners dismissed during the 1984–85 miners' strike; and if he will make a statement. [153236]

Mr. Hain: My Department issued a consultative document in May last year which elicited some starkly conflicting views, and highlighted a range of difficult moral, legal and equity questions. As a result of the complexity of the issues raised it is taking time to reach a decision on the way forward. None the less, the Government wish to see a just outcome to resolve this long standing matter. Having spoken to those involved, I do recognise the strong feelings there are about an early resolution.

Mr. Alan W. Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many medical assessment procedures were conducted on average each week in respect of the miners' compensation claims for chest diseases for *(a)* January to March 2000, *(b)* April to June 2000, *(c)* July to September 2000 and *(d)* October to December 2000 and the individual weekly totals from 1 January to date. [153379]

Mr. Hain: A breakdown of the number of medical assessments is available only from June 2000 onwards.

Between January and June 2000, Healthcall, the company contracted to undertake the Medical Assessment Process, completed a total of 1,163 MAP assessments.

The average weekly number of MAPs between July and September 2000 is 276. Between October and December 2000 (excluding the two-week Christmas holiday period), an average of 371 MAPs were undertaken.

The individual weekly totals from 1 January 2001 to date are as follows:

Week ending	Number of MAPs
7 January	340
14 January	497
21 January	455
28 January	570
4 February	417
11 February	655
18 February	559
25 February	515
4 March	645

The total number of MAPs undertaken to date is 13,218.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Arms Sales (Morocco)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department followed the European Code of Conduct on arms sales, Criterion 4, when granting the export licence for artillery spare parts to Morocco. [149615]

Mr. Wilson: The export licence application for artillery spare parts to Morocco and the subsequent appeal were judged against the EU Code of Conduct, as are all export licence applications considered by this Department. It is of course the Department of Trade and Industry which co-ordinates the export licence application process and actually grants licences.

"Your Britain, Your Europe"

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 96W, what date has been set for a roadshow visit; what political parties he will meet; what advice he has sought and received on marketing the roadshow among *(a)* young people and *(b)* people whose nationality is not British; in what publications he will advertise; what the budget breakdown is for this initiative; and if he will ensure the use of flags and emblems that underline the inclusive nature of the European message. [153241]

Mr. Vaz: Due to diary pressures we have now had to cancel this visit.

Kashmir

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last held discussions with the US Government on Kashmir. [153159]

Mr. Wilson: Ministers and officials regularly discuss Kashmir and other regional issues with their US counterparts.

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he last held discussions with the *(a)* Pakistan and *(b)* Indian Governments regarding (i) human rights violations in and (ii) self-determination for the people of Kashmir; and what plans he has for further discussions. [153158]

Mr. Wilson: The Foreign Secretary most recently met his Indian counterpart, Jaswant Singh, in London in November. They discussed a range of issues, including Kashmir and human rights. Officials in our High Commission in Islamabad also regularly discuss Kashmir with the Pakistani Government. We will continue to urge both Governments to build on the recent positive developments in Kashmir and return to dialogue to find a solution to this issue. We also believe any solution must involve, and reflect the view of, the people of Kashmir.

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what further action he intends to take regarding the provision of independent human rights observers in Kashmir. [153161]

Mr. Wilson: FCO Ministers have consistently urged the Indian Government to allow access to Kashmir for human rights organisations, including Amnesty International, and for UN human rights Rapporteurs. We will continue to impress upon them the benefits of transparency and importance of investigating abuses.

Foot and Mouth (KwaZulu-Natal)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the British Government have received from the *(a)* South African Government and *(b)* British High Commission South Africa regarding the outbreak of foot and mouth disease in KwaZulu-Natal last year. [153357]

Mr. Wilson: The British High Commission in Pretoria and the Consulate-General in Durban were informed of the outbreak of FMD in KwaZulu-Natal last year, and received briefing from the South African Ministry of Agriculture and Land Affairs.

The South African Government made no formal representations to us, either here or in Pretoria.

Saudi Arabia

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent meetings have been held with human rights groups in Saudi Arabia by British representatives in Jeddah; and if he will make a statement. [153505]

Mr. Wilson: There are currently no non-governmental human rights groups in Saudi Arabia. At UNHCR 56 a Saudi representative announced Saudi Arabia's intention to establish governmental and non-governmental human rights committees. From discussions between the British Embassy in Riyadh and the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, we understand that details of the governmental committee are being finalised. Progress to establish a non-governmental committee has been slower.

We will continue to raise this issue with the Saudi authorities as part of our dialogue with them on human rights.

Sri Lanka

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions with *(a)* the LTTE and *(b)* other Tamil groups in Sri Lanka have been undertaken by British representatives during the last year. [153595]

Mr. Wilson: Staff in our High Commission in Colombo regularly meet representatives from all communities in Sri Lanka, including the Tamil community. Foreign Office representatives have met the LTTE's Political Adviser in London to get across important messages about the need for the LTTE to stay engaged in the peace process. We have made clear to all concerned that we fully support Norway's efforts to facilitate peace talks, and that Britain stands ready to help, if asked.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent contact he has had with the Norwegian Government concerning the peace process in Sri Lanka; and what contribution the United Kingdom Government have made to this. [153596]

Mr. Wilson: We remain in regular contact with the Norwegian Government. I met Norwegian State Secretary Raymond Johansen on 13 February 2001, and we continue contacts at official level. We fully support Norway's efforts to facilitate peace talks between the Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This offers the best chance of peace. We remain in contact with the parties to the conflict and have made it clear to them that Britain stands ready to help, if asked.

Proscribed Organisations

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consultations were held between his Department and the Home Department in drawing up proposals for including organisations in the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2001. [153504]

Mr. Battle: Close consultations were held at official and ministerial level.

Pelindaba Treaty

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the United Kingdom intends to ratify its signature of protocols I and II of the African nuclear weapons' free zone treaty, the treaty of Pelindaba. [153913]

Mr. Wilson: The Foreign Secretary signed the UK's Instrument of Ratification of protocols I and II to the treaty of Pelindaba on 27 February 2001. The Instrument has been sent to our Embassy in Addis Ababa for deposit with the Organisation of African Unity. I will arrange for a copy of the Instrument, together with the Declaration made on deposit of the Instrument, to be placed in the Library of the House.

TREASURY

Minimum Wage (Amber Valley)

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) how many *(a)* male and *(b)* female workers in Amber Valley are receiving the national minimum wage; [153496]

(2) what is his estimate of how many workers in Amber Valley will benefit from the forthcoming uprating of the national minimum wage. [153497]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Judy Mallaber, dated 13 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent questions about the number of people in Amber Valley who are receiving the national minimum wage (NMW) and the number who will benefit from the uprating of the NMW (153496, 153497). I am replying in his absence.

The Office for National Statistics has published estimates of the number of jobs paid at less than specific hourly pay thresholds for all workers in the United Kingdom for Spring 2000, disaggregated by gender. These estimates are based on an improved methodology using data from the New Earnings Survey (NES) and Labour Force Survey (LFS). This methodology provides the best estimates for the number of jobs in the UK paid below low hourly rate thresholds. These estimates are posted on the National Statistics website at: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/nsbase/themes/labour__lowpay__tables.asp

The new methodology has been developed to overcome the deficiencies inherent in the two surveys, the NES and LFS, in measuring low pay. Estimates based on this methodology are not available for the area requested.

Family Credit

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many claimants of Family Credit there were in *(a)* Newcastle City and *(b)* Newcastle upon Tyne, Central in 1997; what the average benefit for a (i) full-time and (ii) part-time worker was; how many claimants of Working Families Tax Credit there are; and what the average benefit was for a (1) full-time and (2) part-time worker. [153636]

Dawn Primarolo: At May 1997 there were an estimated 4.2 thousand families receiving Family Credit (FC) in the Newcastle upon Tyne local authority and 1.2 thousand in the Newcastle upon Tyne, Central constituency.

For estimates of the number of families receiving the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) at August 2000, I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Mr. Dawson) on 22 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 425W.

There is no single definition of what comprises full-time work. The table shows the estimated average value of FC awards in May 1997, and of WFTC awards at August 2000, to families in the north-east region in each band of hours worked. There are too few cases in the 5 per cent. sample used for these analyses to yield reliable separate estimates for Newcastle City and Newcastle upon Tyne, Central.

Families in the north-east region receiving Family Credit at May 1997, and Working Families Tax Credit at August 2000, by band of hours normally worked by the main earner: number and average weekly values of the awards

Hours normally worked per week by main earner	Families receiving Family Credit at May 1997 (thousand)	Average weekly value of award (£)	Families receiving Working Families Tax Credit at August 2000 (thousand)	Average weekly value of award (£)
16 less than 20	13.5	69	16.0	92
20 less than 24	5.8	65	8.3	87
24 less than 30	3.9	58	4.6	80
30 less than 36	5.7	64	9.3	78

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Families in the north-east region receiving Family Credit at May 1997, and Working Families Tax Credit at August 2000, by band of hours normally worked by the main earner: number and average weekly values of the awards

Hours normally worked per week by main earner	Families receiving Family Credit at May 1997 (thousand)	Average weekly value of award (£)	Families receiving Working Families Tax Credit at August 2000 (thousand)	Average weekly value of award (£)
36 less than 40	8.4	40	15.3	57
40 and over	8.7	52	12.3	64
All cases	45.9	58	65.8	75

Note:
Estimates based on 5 per cent. sample of awards, and therefore subject to sampling error.

Departmental Policies (South Shields)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the South Shields constituency, the effects on South Shields of his Department's polices and actions since 2 May 1997. [153088]

Miss Melanie Johnson: South Shields, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the General Election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 825, or 19 per cent. youth unemployment is down by 73 per cent. and long-term unemployment has fallen by 50 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24 year olds had helped 2020 young people in South Shields constituency gain valuable skills and experience—900 (45 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,200 families in South Shields constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 16,400 in South Shields, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 10,600 in South Shields.

Net Cash Requirement

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the difference between the central Government net cash requirement forecast for 2000–01 in the pre-Budget report and the equivalent figure in the Financial Statement and Budget report (HC 279). [153389]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Table C20 of the Financial Statement and Budget Report (FSBR) for March 2001 shows that the central Government net cash requirement (CGNCR) is forecast to be a repayment of £34.3 billion in 2000–01. This compares with the pre-Budget report forecast of the CGNCR of a repayment of £28.1 billion in 2000–01. The difference in these forecasts largely reflect differences in the forecasts of net borrowing, which are fully explained in Tables C6, C8 and C12 and paragraphs C26 to C57 of the FSBR.

Departmental Policies (Jarrow)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information, relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Jarrow of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [153544]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Jarrow, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the General Election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 736, or 22 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 75 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 63 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,544 young people in Jarrow constituency gain valuable skills and experience—728 (47 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 1,900 families in Jarrow constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 15,600 in Jarrow, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to free TV licence since November 2000—including around 9,900 in Jarrow.

Departmental Policies (Don Valley)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Don Valley constituency, the effects on Doncaster of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153527]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Don Valley, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the General Election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 1,427, or 48 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 86 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 80 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 1,164 young people in

Don Valley constituency gain valuable skills and experience—577 (50 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 2,200 families in Don Valley constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 16,000 in Don Valley, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to free TV licence since November 2000—including around 9,700 in Don Valley.

Bank Notes

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what estimate he has made of the number of old £20 notes which were not returned to banks before they ceased to be legal tender; [152864]

(2) on what basis £20 notes which are no longer legal tender can be exchanged for new ones; and if he will make a statement. [152879]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Legal tender status was withdrawn from the old style £20 notes on 28 February 2001. After this date, most banks will continue to accept these notes and, as with all genuine Bank of England notes which are no longer legal tender, they will remain payable at the Bank of England for all time, at face value.

Imports (Israel)

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his answer of 6 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 156W, if *(a)* Ahava cosmetics since 11 August 2000, *(b)* dates since 31 October 2000, *(c)* carpets from Barkan since 17 August 2000, *(d)* wines since 13 November 2000 and *(e)* other items, as listed, since 20 November 2000 have been imported from Israel. [153097]

Dawn Primarolo: The following number of Customs declarations have been made since the dates in question:

(a) Cosmetics: 5

(b) Dates: 71

(c) Carpets from Barkan: 9

(d) Wines: none

(e) Other items: None for brandy and liqueurs; three for pencils; 35 for plastic household items; 77 for key blanks and locks; none for electric products; and 13 for other bath and skincare products.

Some of these products may be exported prior to Customs clearance. Further verification inquiries will be initiated as appropriate.

Budget

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on *(a)* the expected impact of the 2001 Budget and *(b)* the combined impact of the 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000 Budget measures on (i) women and (ii) men. [152856]

Dawn Primarolo: By October 2001, as a result of personal tax and benefit measures:

on average women will be £85 a year better off and men will be £80 a year better off from Budget 2001, compared with an indexed Budget 2000 base;

on average women will be £440 a year better off and men will be £225 a year better off from measures introduced over the Parliament as a whole, compared with an indexed 1997 base. For households, the average gain will be £590 a year.

In addition, families with children will gain from the maternity package announced in Budget 2001, including raising maternity pay to £100 a week and extending it from 18 weeks to 26 weeks by April 2003. As a result of these reforms:

All 360,000 mothers getting maternity pay a year will gain up to £1,200 extra;

maternity pay, together with the extra £10 in the Children's Tax Credit for families with children under one, will mean up to £2,200 extra in the first year for families with a new baby;

most women who worked beforehand will be guaranteed a minimum income of £200 a week for up to six months after the birth;

over 350,000 working fathers could be entitled to two weeks paid paternity leave after a birth, at the same flat rate as maternity pay;

adoptive parents will be able to take paid leave at the same flat rate and for the same period as maternity pay, when adopting a child.

WALES

Forestry

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has for additional transfer of responsibilities for forestry to the National Assembly of Wales. [150648]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Government and the National Assembly for Wales are currently considering the transfer of financial responsibility for the Forestry Commission in Wales to the National Assembly.

Policy and Strategy Units

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when his policy unit was established; which of its reports are placed in the public domain; how many departmental or non-departmental special advisers participate in its work; how many regular *(a)* non-departmental and *(b)* departmental staff participate in its work; and how many of these work for the unit on a full-time basis. [150374]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The Wales Office does not have a separate policy unit. Three policy branches advise respectively on: Social Affairs Policy (five policy staff); Economic Affairs Policy (four policy staff); and Finance, Administration, Reserved and Constitutional Policy (three policy staff).

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Job Vacancies

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received on the accuracy of the figures relating to the official total of vacancies held by Jobcentres. [151841]

Ms Jowell: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Clare Dodgson to Mr. Frank Field, dated 13 March 2001:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked Leigh Lewis to reply to your question, concerning representations he has received on the accuracy of the figures relating to the official total of vacancies held by Jobcentres. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to Mr Lewis as Chief Executive of the Agency. I am replying on Mr Lewis' behalf.

In answer to your question, I am not aware of any representations to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment regarding the accuracy of the figures relating to the official total of vacancies held by Jobcentres. That said, I am willing to discuss any issues you may have on vacancies held by Jobcentres.

I hope this is helpful.

Regeneration Initiatives

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the criteria for assessing applications for financial support for economic and physical regeneration initiatives for funds administered by his Department; and what account they take of the variation in *(a)* the availability of previously developed land and buildings and *(b)* other considerations of environmental capacity. [152341]

Mr. Wills: The Department for Education and Employment does not fund economic and physical regeneration initiatives.

School Closures (Foot and Mouth)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if he will list the schools in *(a)* Cumbria, *(b)* Devon and *(c)* Northumberland which have been closed on account of the foot and mouth outbreak; [152761]

(2) what advice he gives local education authorities on school closures on account of the foot and mouth outbreak; [152749]

(3) what advice is being given to parents on whether children should be withheld from school on account of the foot and mouth outbreak. [152762]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* As at Thursday 8 March, only five schools in Cumbria, three in Devon, and none in Northumberland were still closed because of a local outbreak of foot and mouth disease. The following schools in these areas had earlier been closed at some point during the last two weeks, but most have since reopened:

Cumbria

Blackford Church of England Primary School; Hayton Church of England Primary School; Kirkoswald Church of England Primary School; Lochinvar Secondary School, Longtown; Longtown Infant School; Longtown Junior School; and Yanwath Primary School.

Devon

Black Torrington Church of England Primary School; Boasley Cross Primary School; Bradford Primary School; Highampton Primary School; Shebbear Primary School; and Widecombe-in-the-Moor Primary School.

Northumberland

Belsay First School; Greenhead Church of England First School; Hugh Joicey Church of England First School, Ford; and Stamfordham First School.

My Department has advised local education authorities that, provided sensible precautions are observed and hygiene measures taken, adults and young people living in areas where restrictions are in place following confirmation of foot and mouth disease locally should normally be able to continue to travel to school, and that schools should endeavour to open and provide a full curriculum—or failing that at least to provide care for children to enable parents to go to work. The full advice on these and other aspects is available to all schools, parents and others on the Department's website, and has been sent to all Chief Education Officers in England, and to other education-interest groups.

Employment and Social Policy Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the outcome was of the Employment and Social Policy Council held in Brussels on 6 March; if he will set out the Government's voting records at the Council; and if he will make a statement. [152826]

Ms Jowell: Along with the Under-Secretary of State for Social Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle), I represented the UK at the Employment and Social Policy Council held in Brussels on 6 March.

This was a busy Council with the Standing Committee on Employment also meeting in the margins. Council and Committee business focused on preparations for the forthcoming European Council in Stockholm on 23–24 March. The Commission presented its synthesis report, which will inform the social/employment dimension of Stockholm, together with their Scoreboard on the implementation of the Social Agenda and their Communication on New Labour Markets. Ministers also noted the inputs from the Employment Committee and the Social Protection Committee in the discussion on the preparations for Stockholm. The UK emphasised the importance of remaining focused on the priorities agreed at Lisbon, working towards creating choice and mobility in a dynamic and flexible labour market and, with Commission support, pressed for concrete outcomes at Stockholm: particularly in terms of basic skills, the skills and mobility taskforce, action on the gender pay gap, women entrepreneurs and a European employment target for older workers.

The Council held an open debate on the sustainability of pensions systems and agreed that the Social Protection Committee would prepare a report for the European Council in Göteberg on 15–16 June. The Presidency reported on the agreement with the European Parliament for a series of amendments to regulation 1408/71 which co-ordinates social security for migrant workers moving within the EU.

The Presidency formally reported on the recent series of informal Ministerial meetings held in Sweden, at Luleå, Norrköping and Malmö.

Under any other business, the Commission raised the recent ILO measures against Burma concerning forced labour and the ratification of ILO Convention no 182 on the worst forms of Child Labour. No substantive discussion was necessary on these items. There was a brief discussion of the Commission's proposals for evaluating the European Employment Strategy, with the Presidency agreeing to remit the issue to the Employment Committee.

No votes were taken.

Children's Fund

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if school-based counselling services for children will be established as part of the Children's Fund. [152948]

Mr. Boateng: The Children's Fund will enable local partnerships to implement strategies for preventive services to ensure that children and young people at risk of social exclusion get the best start in life.

Children's Fund proposals will be built from the bottom up, responding to local needs. Our guidance makes it clear that mentoring and counselling services may be part of these strategies both within and outside the school environment.

New Deal

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress of the New Deal, specifying the number of businesses that have participated to date. [153126]

Ms Jowell: Over 83,000 employers have so far signed New Deal Employer Agreements. Together with many others across the country, these employers have helped 274,000 young people, 62,000 people aged over 25 and 75,000 lone parents find work through the New Deals.

Computers in Reach

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment for what reason the LS1 postcode was not included in the Computers Within Reach pilot scheme. [153222]

Mr. Wills: The Computers in Reach scheme is a cash-limited pilot scheme that is currently in its first phase. In order to ensure that there was not undue demand in the chosen localities it was agreed that the pilots needed both clear boundaries and be limited to certain areas in light of the number of potential customers and the supply available in that area.

In the case of Leeds the reasons for omitting the LS1 postcode included:

That it is the Central Business District of Leeds with fewer residential areas within it;

The area contains a number of town houses and flats and would have a very low percentage of the target group we were aiming at; and

If it were included it might have caused another postcode area with more of our target customers to be omitted.

Sibsey School

Sir Richard Body: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he received the request for approval of the transfer of land adjoining Sibsey School from Lincolnshire county council to the school's foundation trustees; and if he will agree to the transfer. [153359]

Jacqui Smith: There has been no application from Lincolnshire county council to the Secretary of State regarding the transfer of land to the Foundation Trustees of Sibsey Free Primary School. Section 77 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 requires local authorities to obtain the Secretary of State's consent before they can sell any playing field used by a school in the last 10 years. I understand that the land in question was previously agricultural land and has not yet been used as school playing field. Therefore, Lincolnshire county council does not need the Secretary of State's consent to transfer it to the School's Foundation Trustees.

Ferndown Leisure Centre

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make it his policy for the grant approved by his Department for 2000–01 towards the proposed public-private partnership at Ferndown leisure centre to be carried forward to 2001–02. [153507]

Jacqui Smith: Officers of Dorset county council have been in contact with my Department concerning the delays to the public-private partnership to improve the sports facilities at Ferndown leisure centre for the benefit of Ferndown Upper School. A re-phasing of the project has been agreed.

Departmental Policies (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East)

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153287]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

Departmental Policies (Constituency Information)

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out with statistical information relating as directly as possible to each of the local authorities in the former county of Berkshire, the effects on each authority of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997, with particular reference to schools. [152854]

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Houghton and Washington, East of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [152987]

Mr. Wills: The information requested has been placed in the Libraries.

School Clubs and Holiday Schemes

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* after school club places and *(b)* holiday playscheme places there were (i) in 1996 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available in (A) London and (B) each London borough. [152200]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* The available information is shown in the table. This includes information on out of school clubs and holiday schemes for March 1996 and March 2000.

The responsibility for day care provision transferred from the Department of Health to the Department for Education and Employment in March 1998.

All pupils under five in nursery and primary schools

	January 2000			*January 1996*		
		Percentage of population			*Percentage of population*	
	Number of pupils	*Nursery schools and nursery classes*	*Nursery and primary schools*	*Number of pupils*	*Nursery schools and nursery classes*	*Nursery and primary schools*
London	122,800	37	62	115,484	35	58
Inner London[1]	50,900	40	65	—	—	—
Camden	2,270	28	49	2,033	25	48
Hackney	3,860	35	59	3,839	33	57
Hammersmith and Fulham	2,330	42	55	2,290	44	58
Haringey	4,800	44	73	4,674	44	75
Islington	3,180	38	67	3,383	37	65
Kensington and Chelsea	1,480	25	42	1,219	27	39
Lambeth	4,360	34	55	3,489	31	45
Lewisham	4,610	40	67	3,876	37	52
Newham	7,520	57	88	5,854	52	67
Southwark	5,290	44	74	5,125	41	68
Tower Hamlets	5,250	50	82	5,092	61	87
Wandsworth	3,920	32	54	4,055	33	56
Westminster	2,020	32	48	1,790	32	45
Outer London	71,800	35	61	—	—	—
Barking and Dagenham	3,610	45	78	3,644	46	80
Barnet	4,960	31	58	4,697	31	57
Bexley	3,980	38	72	3,555	25	58
Brent	4,480	34	61	4,666	36	65
Bromley	2,720	5	36	2,578	3	36
Croydon	5,570	30	61	5,036	23	54
Ealing	6,080	45	73	6,279	46	76
Enfield	4,310	25	56	4,099	22	53
Greenwich	4,370	56	72	4,447	50	67
Harrow	2,680	20	48	2,634	19	47
Havering	2,650	16	51	2,495	10	47
Hillingdon	4,320	50	64	3,534	50	52
Hounslow	3,960	40	70	4,089	40	67
Kingston upon Thames	2,290	38	66	2,408	39	70
Merton	3,530	55	71	3,718	54	74
Redbridge	4,430	40	73	2,937	22	45
Richmond upon Thames	1,970	18	42	2,023	21	50
Sutton	1,940	41	43	2,023	40	42
Waltham Forest	4,010	46	60	3,868	39	54

[1] Includes City of London

Brain Injury (Vocational Services)

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the *(a)* total Employment Service funding and *(b)* average funding per client was for brain injury vocational services for each region in the last 12 months. [153690]

Ms Jowell: The Employment Service provides a wide range of employment programmes and services for disabled people, including those with brain injuries. It is not possible to identify separately the total spent specifically on behalf of people with brain injury.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Chardon LL

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Government were first informed of the length of official testing of Chardon LL in France. [144374]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* Concerns about the procedures for the DUS testing of maize in France were first aroused by the content of agenda papers for a Community Plant Variety Office Administrative Council meeting. The papers were first

received in MAFF on 6 October. Subsequent exchanges between MAFF and French officials were initially inconclusive but in view of the potential implications the concerns were drawn to the attention of Ministers on 30 October. The issue was then immediately placed in the public domain via a PQ and press release on 31 October.

Genetically Modified Organisms

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many of the samples taken from seed offered for sale and tested for purity between 1 May and 31 October were tested for the presence of GM varieties. [144344]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* The EU seeds directives do not at present lay down any standards for levels of GM seeds in conventional seed varieties. The legal powers to undertake GM monitoring and enforcement activities on seed imports rests with the DETR.

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what provisions are made in relation to GMOs in the UKROFS organic standard; and what plans he has to review these provisions. [153235]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Standards for Organic Food Production set by the UK Register of Organic Food Standards prohibit the use of genetically modified organisms, or their derivatives, in all production stages.

There are no current plans for the review of these provisions, which reflect the requirements of Regulation (EEC) No 2092/91 (as amended).

BSE Inquiry

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the cost was of the preparation and production of the Government's interim response to the report of the BSE inquiry, Cm 5049; and to whom it was distributed. [151596]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Government's interim response to the report of the BSE inquiry was prepared with contributions from Ministers and officials in many Government Departments in Whitehall and the devolved Administrations. Providing a figure for the costs of this work would be possible only at disproportionate cost. The production and distribution costs of the response are estimate at about £11,000.

The response was distributed to a very wide range of organisations. More than 500 copies were sent to organisations representing consumers, health and welfare organisations, food producers and manufacturers, pharmaceutical manufacturers, agricultural interests, environmental interests, scientific and research bodies and Government advisory committees.

The full list of those consulted was distributed with the response under cover of an official letter dated 9 February 2001, a copy of which is available in the Libraries of the House.

Animal Health (Intensive Farming)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the impact on animal health of intensive farming. [151827]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* All sectors of the livestock industry can experience animal health problems and whatever systems of production are employed, livestock are susceptible to notifiable diseases.

My right hon. Friend the Minister has indicated that once the present outbreak of foot and mouth disease has been eradicated, this and other issues will be reviewed.

Foot and Mouth

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what sources of information he used to reach an understanding of the natural history of the foot and mouth disease virus. [152414]

Ms Quin: The Ministry has access to the world reference laboratory and world experts at the Institute for Animal Health at Pirbright, Surrey. There is also a significant body of knowledge available in published scientific papers.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to pay higher compensation rates for pedigree livestock destroyed under foot and mouth control orders. [152417]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Compensation for animals destroyed to control foot and mouth disease is paid at the full market value of the animal immediately before it became affected with disease, or immediately before slaughter in all other cases. Animals are subject to an independent valuation prior to slaughter. This will take into account whether an animal's pedigree status or any other factor has a bearing on its value.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice his Department has given to zoos about the foot and mouth disease outbreak and the future of rare and endangered species. [152522]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* The Ministry has prepared advice with the Zoological Federation and its veterinary advisers for zoos, wildlife parks, city farms and similar establishments.

This advice has been posted on MAFF's website www.maff.gov.uk. It provides basic information on how the disease is spread and explains what can be done to reduce the risk of disease spreading to animals contained on these sites. For example, zoos should prevent contact between the public and animals and ensure that no waste food is fed to the animals. Disinfection procedures should be introduced or improved for staff, visitors and for any vehicles that enter compounds containing susceptible animals.

We have not provided specific advice on rare or endangered species.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when compensation payments to farmers for the slaughter of animals will start to be made. [152610]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Arrangements are in place to ensure that compensation claims will be processed and paid immediately.

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the risk assessment for the spread of foot and mouth disease on herds of wild deer will be published. [152686]

Ms Quin: Farmed deer are covered under the Animal Health Act 1981 and the Foot and Mouth Disease Order 1983 as ruminating animals, and are susceptible to foot and mouth disease.

An initial veterinary assessment indicates the risk of wild deer spreading the disease is low. As more information becomes available about the epidemiology of disease in the areas where there are wild deer, the risk assessment will be updated. The final risk assessment will be published soon.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what plans he has to help farmers who will lose income as a consequence of not being able to move cattle before the 30 month period; [153189]

(2) if he will make compensation payments to farmers who have incurred financial loss because of the outbreak of foot and mouth on neighbouring land. [152611]

Ms Quin *[holding answers 6 and 12 March 2001]:* Compensation is payable for the market value of animals slaughtered to control foot and mouth disease. It is not payable for the consequential losses caused by foot and mouth controls, for example when movement restrictions cause animals to become ineligible for the human consumption market. There are no plans to make such payments in response to the current outbreak, but the situation will be kept under review.

Irish Veterinary Regime

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will discuss with his counterparts in the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture and the Minister of Agriculture of the Irish Republic about creating a single veterinary regime for the whole island of Ireland. [151879]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Officials in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland already enjoy close links with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland. In addition, the Good Friday Agreement commits both jurisdictions to formalising those links. There have been preliminary discussions at ministerial level. Officials in Belfast and Dublin are working to develop a common approach to animal health issues on the island of Ireland and to even closer co-operation in dealing with matters of common concern.

Compulsory Slaughter

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list *(a)* farmed animals, *(b)* other organisms and *(c)* commodities in respect of which compensation is not payable to growers or owners in the case of compulsory slaughter; and if he will make a statement. [152326]

Ms Quin: Compensation is paid for any animal slaughtered or any thing seized (whether animate or inanimate) under the Animal Health Act 1981 in respect of the control of animal disease. Compensation is not payable for the consequential losses, for example caused by movement restrictions.

Compensation is not paid when the destruction of stock is imposed as part of an official exercise to eradicate a fish disease.

Compensation is not normally paid to growers or owners in the case of compulsory destruction under the Plant Health Act 1967 of plant or plant products which are, or are suspected of being, infected with a quarantine plant pest.

Swine Fever

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the causes of the recent classical swine fever outbreak. [152770]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* Extensive tracings were made of personnel, pigs, livestock, feed and other agricultural vehicles onto and off all 16 infected premises. Investigations to date support the initial findings that the second infected premises was the index case and that pigs there were exposed to CSF virus in early June 2000.

The most likely source is thought to be an infected pork product, since back-tracing failed to reveal any evidence of infection and no other local source was detected. Subsequent spread was caused by commercial pig movements or by lateral spread.

Organic Farming

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what systems are in place for the monitoring and evaluation of the schemes for converting to organic farming funded by the Government, with particular regard to the effect on yields. [153164]

Mr. Morley: An evaluation of the Organic Farming Scheme, which will contribute to the interim evaluation of the English Rural Development Programme, will begin in the summer of 2001. The study will aim to provide a comprehensive evaluation of MAFF's policies relating to conversion to organic production, including the rationale for such intervention and the effectiveness and efficiency achieved in meeting policy objectives. However, achieving particular yields either by farm or in total is not one of the objectives of the scheme.

Farm Product Prices

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make statement on trends in *(a)* farm gate and *(b)* retail prices of farm products over the last five years. [152298]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Farm gate prices as measured by the index of producer prices for agricultural products declined 26.3 per cent. over the five years to December 2000. Retail food prices increased 3.9 per cent. over the five years to January 2001 compared with an increase of 13.9 per cent. for all items RPI. Agricultural commodities account for a relatively small proportion of the retail price of food, with most of the costs accounted for by processing and distribution.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Millennium Dome

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the total operations and running costs were of the millennium dome for 2000. [147728]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 January 2001]:* The figure provided by the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) is subject to the Company's necessary external audit scrutiny. That work will begin shortly and will inform the content of the Company's Annual Report and Financial Statements for the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2000. The report and statements will be published in due course. NMEC has advised that total operating or running costs for the millennium dome in the calendar year 2000 was £145.5 million.

Athletics Championships (Funding)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the difference between cost and funds secured to date for staging Manchester 2002. [152516]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Minister of State for the Cabinet Office is responsible for co-ordinating Government involvement with the Commonwealth Games. Manchester 2002 Ltd. is raising income from a combination of sponsorship, television rights, merchandising and ticket sales to meet the estimated operating costs of £62 million of the Games. To date, they have attracted £18 million.

When bidding to stage the Games, Manchester city council undertook to underwrite the Games and that commitment remains.

Sports Clubs (Taxation)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had (1) with sports clubs concerning a more favourable regime with regard to *(a)* business rates and *(b)* VAT; [151832]

(2) with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on business rates and their impact on sports clubs; [151834]

(3) with the Treasury on VAT and its impact on sports clubs. [151833]

Kate Hoey *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* In the course of this year and last, I have held a number of meetings with ministerial colleagues and representatives from across the sports sector including the Central Council of Physical Recreation to discuss the general issue of the taxation burden facing community amateur sports clubs. I have also received a number of representations directly from voluntary sports clubs. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced, the Government will consult in the coming months on the best way for tax relief to help community amateur sports clubs.

Apsley House

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent representations he has received in concerning proposals to change the ownership of Apsley House; and if he will make a statement. [153431]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* I have not received any recent representations about changing the ownership of Apsley House, which is Crown property and will remain so. As I announced last year, I am reviewing the management arrangements for Apsley House and the Wellington Museum, but have yet to reach a final decision on those.

Seaside Resorts

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps he has taken to help rejuvenate English seaside tourist resorts in the last three years. [152883]

Janet Anderson: The regeneration of traditional resorts was identified as one of the key action points in "Tomorrow's Tourism", the Government's tourism strategy—published in 1999. The strategy set out a model regeneration plan and the Government, together with the English Tourism Council (ETC), have been working with regional and local authorities and the British Resorts Association to encourage the adoption of the model plan and the sharing of best practice. Resort regeneration has been extensively discussed at Ministerial Tourism Summits and the ETC have set up a Resorts Task Force, which has recently published its report "Sea Changes" which sets out a blueprint for seaside resort regeneration.

New assistance has been provided for many resorts through the new Structural Funds (Objective 2) and Assisted Areas maps. The Single Regeneration Budget has recently made £172 million available to coastal areas and £30 million has been provided from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund to benefit a number of major resorts, including Southport. National Lottery funding continues to assist numerous seaside resorts.

English seaside resorts have also benefited from actions to improve bathing water quality, with 95 per cent. now meeting EU directives and a number of coastal/resort transport schemes are progressing in line with the Government's transport strategy.

Cultural Property

Mrs. Mahon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the 1970 UNESCO convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property. [153912]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Following the recommendation in the report of the Ministerial Advisory Panel on the Illicit Trade chaired by Professor Norman Palmer, published in December, and after further consultations within Government, I am pleased to announce that the Government have taken the decision to accede to this convention once the normal Parliamentary and other formalities have been completed. We do so on the basis that no fresh legislative commitment is required and we intend to enter reservations on the basis of those outlined in Professor Palmer's Report.

Televised Sporting Events

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what his policy is on keeping important national sporting events free to TV viewers. [153032]

Janet Anderson: The Government believe that all television licence holders should have free access (on the BBC, the ITV Network or Channel 4) to those sporting occasions which have true national resonance. These events are listed under Part IV of the Broadcasting Act 1996.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Queen's Counsel

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if he accepts the findings of the Office of Fair Trading concerning the Queen's Counsel system; and if he will make a statement. [153598]

Mr. Lock: The report by the Director General of the Office of Fair Trading, on competition in the market for professional services, raises a number of complex issues which need to be considered. The Government will issue a consultation paper inviting comments.

Restrictive Practices

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the recommendations of the Office of Fair Trading report on restrictive practices in the legal profession; and if he will make a statement. [153597]

Mr. Lock: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry stated to the House on 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 458–59, the Government recognise the complexity of the issues raised by the Director of the Office of Fair Trading and will therefore issue a formal consultation paper addressing those issues and inviting comments.

Departmental Policies (Houghton and Washington, East)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Houghton and Washington, East of the Lord Chancellor's Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [152988]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

In particular, the Sunderland Community Legal Service Partnership (CLSP), which covers Houghton and Washington, East constituency, is one of 165 CLS Partnerships throughout England and Wales.

A wide range of organisations have come together to form the CLSP including Sunderland city council, the Legal Services Commission, local solicitors, Wearside Money Advice Unit, the University of Sunderland, the Family Mediation Service, the Benefits Agency, Shiney Row Advice and Resource Project and Washington CAB.

Within Houghton and Washington the Legal Services Commission has awarded contracts to solicitors with a total value in excess of £327,000. The contracts cover a range of categories, including family, debt and employment.

In addition, Wearside Money Advice Unit has a contract form the Commission to provide debt advice. Although based in Sunderland, they offer a service across the whole of Wearside. The contract is worth £41,514.

All of these organisations hold the Quality Mark at Specialist level. In addition a further eight organisations have expressed an interest in obtaining the Quality Mark.

The Magistrates' Courts Committees (MCCs) of Northumberland, Newcastle, Gateshead, South Tyneside, North Tyneside and Sunderland amalgamated to form the Northumbria MCC on 1 April 2000.

Departmental Policies (South Shields)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department if she will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the South Shields constituency, the effects on South Shields of her Department's polices and actions since 2 May 1997. [153089]

Jane Kennedy: The Lord Chancellor's Department is responsible for the administration of the courts and for legal services. We have taken steps to improve the management and effectiveness of the services we provide and to meet customer needs, including working closely with other agencies to provide a fair, swift and effective system of justice, improve the availability of affordable and good quality legal services and to improve the lives of children and help build and sustain strong families.

In particular over £750,000 in capital expenditure was allocated for the construction of the magistrates court in South Shields which opened in 1997.

South Shields constituency will be covered by the South Tyneside Community Legal Service Partnership. Discussions are taking place between the Legal Services Commission and South Tyneside MBC with a view to staging a launch seminar at the end of March or beginning of April 2001. There are already 165 Community Legal Service Partnerships throughout England and Wales.

Within South Shields solicitors firms have been awarded contracts whose total value amounts to over £770,000. The contracts cover a range of categories, including family, debt and employment. In addition South Tyneside CAB has also been awarded a contract worth £64,905 to provide debt and welfare benefits advice. Their main office is within South Shields.

All of the above organisations hold the Quality Mark at the specialist level. A further 11 organisations based in South Shields have expressed an interest in obtaining the Quality Mark.

The Magistrates Courts Committees (MCCs) of: Northumberland, Newcastle, Gateshead, South Tyneside, North Tyneside and Sunderland, amalgamated to form the Northumbria MCC on 1 April 2000.

Land Registry

Mr. Ivan Lewis: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what the key performance targets for HM Land Registry Executive Agency are for 2001–02. [153931]

Jane Kennedy: The table contains the key performance targets the Lord Chancellor has set for HM Land Registry for 2001–02.

Key performance indicator and targets 2001–02

Indicator	*Target 2000–01*	*Target 2001–02*
"Service First" Standards		
Speed		
Percentage of office copies and official search applications to be processed within two working days	98	98
Percentage of office copies and official search applications to be processed within three working days	100	100
Percentage of customers who are very satisfied/satisfied with the speed of service of office copies and official search applications	—	'92
Percentage of registrations to be processed within 25 working days	80	80
Percentage of customers who are very satisfied/satisfied with the speed of service of registrations	—	'90
Accuracy		
Percentage of registrations processed free of any error	98.5	98.5
Percentage of customers very satisfied/satisfied with the accuracy of registrations	'90	'90
Overall Satisfaction		
Percentage of customers who, overall, very satisfied/satisfied with the full range of services provided by the Land Registry	—	'92
Financial		
Percentage return on average capital employed	6	6
Efficiency[2]		
Cost per unit in real terms	£25.09	£23.95
Cost per unit in cash terms	£30.87	£29.97
Delivery of Electronic Services		
Percentage electronic delivery of all of the Land Registry's services	—	40
Percentage of titles in the land register capable of electronic delivery	96	97
Number of scanned pages of filed documents (millions)	11	28
Number of scanned Land Charges registrations, Writs and Orders in Bankruptcy (millions)	—	7

[1] Better than

[2] Based on GDP deflator issued by HM Treasury on 8 November 2000 (baseline: 1992–93). These are milestones towards the HM Treasury-agreed cost per unit target for 2004–05 of £21.43 (real terms) and £29.11 (cash terms).

Note:

Further details of HMLR's targets are published in its Business Plan

SOCIAL SECURITY

Timber

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if his Department's annual report on timber procurement to the Committee of Green Ministers will be published. [152109]

Mr. Bayley: The Department will be publishing its first annual report on sustainable development and the environment later this year and it will contain information on timber procurement. The Green Ministers' annual report will also report on this subject.

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much certified timber has been purchased by his Department over the past six months; and what proportion of total timber purchases this represents. [152116]

Mr. Bayley: The Department does not yet have a system in place to provide data on the proportion of certified timber purchased over the past six months.

The Department occupies serviced accommodation provided by Trillium. It is the policy of the Department and Trillium to increase the proportion of timber used from certified sustainable sources. The company that supplies timber for maintenance on the estate only accepts claims of environmental sustainability if they are backed by independent inspection.

Trillium is developing an Environmental Management System. In future this will provide the Department with data on timber procurement.

Departmental Policies (Hemsworth and Wakefield)

Mr. Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly to the locations as possible, the effects of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997 on *(a)* Hemsworth constituency and *(b)* Wakefield district. [153002]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of: eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10; promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000), sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Hemsworth constituency and the Wakefield Metropolitan Authority area since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about 7 million families receive Child Benefit, in Hemsworth 11,382 families benefit and in the Wakefield Metropolitan Authority area 40,427 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Hemsworth the number has reduced from 2,700, to 1,700, and in the Wakefield Metropolitan Authority area from 9,400 to 5,800. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally; in Hemsworth the number has decreased from 1,800 to 1,500 and in the Wakefield Metropolitan Authority area from 5,900 to 5,200.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Over 17,000 older people in Hemsworth have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter. Information on the number of Winter Fuel Payments received is not available by local authority area.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 15,600 pensioners in Hemsworth and 54,400 in the Wakefield Metropolitan Authority area will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State Pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s of whom we estimate there are about 5,900 in Hemsworth and 19,200 in the Wakefield Metropolitan Authority area. 2,500 pensioner families in Hemsworth and 10,400 in the Wakefield Metropolitan Authority area are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (Houghton and Washington, East)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Houghton and Washington, East of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [152994]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of: eradicating child poverty in 20 years, and halving it within 10; promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000), sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in Houghton and Washington, East since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001; nationally about 7 million families receive child benefit, and in Houghton and Washington, East 11,480 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in Houghton and Washington, East the number has reduced from 2,600 to 2,100. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally and in Houghton and Washington, East from 2,100 to 1,800.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty, so we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Over 16,000 older people in Houghton and Washington, East have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 14,800 pensioners in Houghton and Washington, East will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for single pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s of whom we estimate there are about 5,400 in Houghton and Washington, East. 3,500 pensioner families in Houghton and Washington, East are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our

poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Departmental Policies (South Shields)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the South Shields constituency, the effects on South Shields of his Department's polices and actions since 2 May 1997. [153087]

Mr. Rooker: The Department's policies and initiatives have made a significant contribution to the Government's overall objectives of: eradicating child poverty in 20 years; and halving it within 10; promoting work as the best form of welfare for people of working age while protecting the position of those in greatest need; and combating poverty and promoting security and independence in retirement for today's and tomorrow's pensioners.

These goals are being pursued nationwide and our achievements are set out in our annual "Opportunity for all" reports. Our second report, "Opportunity for all—One year on: making a difference" (CM4865, September 2000), sets out what progress has been made in the past year, as well as highlighting what more needs to be done. Nationwide statistical information is necessarily more complete than constituency level data, but the following provides a comparative guide to the effect of the Department's policies and actions in South Shields since May 1997.

Measures in our five Budgets so far will lift over 1.2 million children out of poverty. These include record increases to Child Benefit, the introduction of the Working Families Tax Credit, increases in income-related benefits, the minimum wage and tax changes.

Child Benefit will be worth £15.50 a week for the eldest child and £10.35 a week for other children from April 2001: nationally about seven million families receive child benefit, and in South Shields 10,358 families benefit.

We now have the lowest unemployment rate in 25 years. The New Deals have helped lone parents, the young unemployed, the long-term unemployed, the over-50s and partners of the unemployed to move from benefit into work. In the period since May 1997 the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance nationally has reduced from 1,562,400 to 1,044,900; in South Shields the number has reduced from 4,700, to 3,600. Since May 1997 the number of lone parents who claim Income Support has decreased from 1,013,500 to 894,100 nationally; in South Shields the number has increased from 2,000 to 2,100.

Older people are disproportionately affected by fuel poverty. So we have introduced Winter Fuel Payments to help with their heaviest fuel bill. This winter, the payment is £200 for households who qualify. Over 17,000 older people in South Shields have received a Winter Fuel Payment for this winter.

To demonstrate our commitment to combating pensioner poverty, this year we will spend £4.5 billion extra in real terms on pensioners. Some 16,400 pensioners in South Shields will benefit from the substantial increases in the basic State pension this April and next; this year's increase is £5 a week for singie pensioners and £8 for couples. In addition we have introduced free TV licences for the over-75s of whom we estimate there are about 6,300 in South Shields. 3,700 pensioner families in South Shields are receiving the Minimum Income Guarantee, which we introduced in April 1999 to help our poorest pensioners. From April they will be at least £15 a week, or £800 a year, better off in real terms as a result of Government measures since 1997.

Other reforms in the pipeline include: the new Pension Credit in 2003 designed to ensure that pensioners benefit from their savings; the launch of Stakeholder Pensions in April this year; and the introduction of the State Second Pension in April 2002 both of which will help provide greater security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Attendance Allowance

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people receive *(a)* higher and *(b)* lower rate Attendance Allowance. [152903]

Mr. Bayley: The latest available information, which relates to 31 August 2000, is that about 577,300 people were receiving the higher rate of Attendance Allowance, and about 693,200 were receiving the lower rate.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many recipients of Disability Living Allowance higher mobility component qualify because they are both blind and deaf. [152902]

Mr. Bayley: The latest information, which relates to 31 August 2000, is that 382 people with both at least 80 per cent. disablement from loss of hearing and 100 per cent. disablement from loss of sight were receiving the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance.

Discrete figures for deaf-blind recipients with lower levels of disability are not available. However, their entitlement is dependent not on their impairments themselves but on their resulting care and mobility needs, so full account is taken of combined disabilities. In total, almost 79,000 people with either blindness or deafness as their principal disabling condition were receiving Disability Living Allowance on the above date, including over 7,000 on the higher rate mobility component.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many Disability Living Allowance awards there are to *(a)* disabled people in general and *(b)* deaf people in particular; and how many of these were granted at (i) initial application and (ii) review or appeal, in (1) England, (2) Wales, (3) Scotland and (4) Northern Ireland. [152901]

Mr. Bayley: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Current awards of Disability Living Allowance broken down by country

Disability	*England*	*Wales*	*Scotland*
All disabilities	1,742,600	177,200	240,500
Deafness[1]	20,700	1,400	2,100

[1] Main disabling condition

Notes:

1. Information on how many current awards of Disability Living Allowance were originally made on initial claim and how many review or appeal is not available
2. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is responsible for social security in Northern Ireland

Source:

DSS Information Centre: 5 per cent. data

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will provide a breakdown of current Disability Living Allowance awards for which deafness is the main disabling condition by *(a)* the rate of each component and *(b)* age. [152900]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Current Disability Living Allowance awards for which deafness is the main disabling condition, broken down by age and rate of each component

Type of award	*All ages*	*0–15*	*16–39*	*40–59*	*Age 60 and over*
All rates of care	21,900	8,700	7,100	4,700	1,500
Higher rate care	900	600	[1]200	[1]100	[1]100
Middle rate care	15,100	7,600	4,500	2,400	700
Lower rate care	5,900	500	2,500	2,200	700
All rates of mobility	12,900	5,200	3,900	2,400	1,300
Higher rate mobility	1,500	[1]200	[1]300	[1]300	600
Lower rate mobility	11,400	5,100	3,600	2,000	700

[1] Number too small to be statistically reliable

Notes:

1. Figures relate to 31 August 2000
2. Figures do not sum due to rounding

Source:

DSS Information Centre: 5 per cent. data

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will provide a breakdown of Disability Living Allowance awards for which deafness is the main disabling condition by *(a)* age and *(b)* type of award, including (i) care only component, (ii) mobility only component and (iii) combined care and mobility components. [152899]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Current Disability Living Allowance awards where deafness is the main disabling condition, broken down by age and type of award

		Age			
Type of award	*All ages*	*0–15*	*16–39*	*40–59*	*60 and over*
All awards	24,100	9,000	7,900	5,200	2,000
Care only	11,300	3,800	4,000	2,800	700
Mobility only	2,200	400[1]	900	500	500
Care and mobility	10,600	4,900	3,100	1,900	800

[1] Number too small to be statistically reliable

Notes:

1. Figures relate to 31 August 2000
2. Figures do not sum due to rounding

Source:

DSS Information Centre: 5 per cent. data.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many Disability Living Allowance recipients there are and how many there were in each of the last seven years, whose main disabling condition is deafness. [152898]

Mr. Bayley: The latest available information, which relates to 31 August 2000, is that about 2,160,300 people were receiving Disability Living Allowance. Figures for recipients whose main disabling condition is deafness are in the table.

Disability Living Allowance recipients w hose main disabling condition is deafness

Year	*Recipients*
1994	10,100
1995	11,800
1996	13,900
1997	16,700
1998	20,400
1999	22,900
2000	24,100

Note:

Figures relate to 31 August each year.

Source:

DSS Information Centre, 5 per cent. data.

Mrs. B. E. Jones

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the appeal by Mrs. B. E. Jones of Verwood, Dorset against refusal of Disability Living Allowance will be heard; and if he will make a statement. [153040]

Mr. Bayley: The administration of appeals is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Appeals Service, Mr. Neil Ward. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Neil Ward to Mr. Christopher Chope, dated 12 March 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question. You asked when the appeal of Mrs B. E. Jones of Verwood, Dorset against refusal of disability living allowance would be heard.

I can tell you that Mrs Jones' appeal against refusal of disability living allowance has been listed for hearing at 10.00am, Tuesday 20th March 2001, at Bournemouth.

The Appeals Service received the appeal for submission for Mrs Jones on 27 September 2000. On 19 October Mrs Jones sent the Benefits Agency (BA) some further evidence. The evidence was considered by a decision maker in the BA but the decision was not changed.

On 5 March, Mrs Jones was informed that her appeal hearing was scheduled for hearing at 10.00am on 20 March at the Bournemouth venue.

On 6 March, the representative phoned saying that Mrs Jones knew the doctor. Rather than postponing her case we have changed the doctor assigned to the session so that Mrs Jones' hearing could proceed.

There was some delay in arranging the hearing for Mrs Jones and I would be grateful if you would pass on my apologies to Mrs Jones for this. We have been working hard in the Appeals Service to reduce the time it takes to bring appellants' cases to hearing. For the most part we have been successful and we are on track to meet the target set by the Secretary of State to arrange hearings within 14 weeks of the date the appeal is received in the Appeals Service.

That said, the time taken to arrange an appeal is dependent on a number of factors. This includes the number of appeals waiting for a hearing, the number of members required to sit at the hearing,

whether further evidence is required that would assist the tribunal in reaching its decision, the availability of the venue and the suitability of the type of hearing.

I hope this information is helpful.

Statistics (Newcastle)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many Jobseeker's Allowance claimants there are in (i) Newcastle and (ii) Newcastle upon Tyne, Central; how many there were in May 1997; and how many such claimants were continuous claimants of more than two years. [153034]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Jobseeker's Allowance recipients in Newcastle upon Tyne, Central constituency and Newcastle upon Tyne metropolitan authority area by duration—May 1997 and August 2000

Thousand

	Newcastle upon Tyne	
	Central PC	*LA district*
May 1997		
All cases	3.6	12.3
Duration two years or more	0.9	3.4
August 2000		
All cases	3.0	8.5
Duration two years or more	0.7	2.2

Notes:

1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.

2. Based on 5 per cent. sample therefore subject to sampling error.

3. Figures include cases receiving Income-based or Contribution-based JSA and those receiving no benefit and signing for National Insurance Credits only.

4. As JSA was only introduced in October 1996 the duration figures for May 1997 include those on Unemployment Benefit or Income Support for the unemployed prior to October 1996.

Source:

Jobseeker's Allowance Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, May 1997 and August 2000

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners receiving the State Pension there are in *(a)* Newcastle and *(b)* Newcastle upon Tyne, Central; how many there were in May 1997; and how many of these were aged over 75 years. [153035]

Mr. Rooker: We will increase basic State Pension from April 2001 by £5 for a single person and £8 per couple. This is at an overall cost of £1.3 billion and will benefit over 10 million British pensioners. Among them 14,700 reside in the constituency of Newcastle upon Tyne, Central.

Estimate of retirement pensioners in receipt of State Pension resident in Great Britain, Newcastle and Newcastle upon Tyne, Central constituency as at 31 March 2000

	Number of all pensioners in receipt of State Retirement Pension	*75 and under*	*Over 75*
Great Britain	10,150,400	6,351,600	3,798,800
Newcastle upon Tyne, Central	14,700	8,200	6,400

Estimate of retirement pensioners in receipt of State Pension resident in Great Britain, Newcastle and Newcastle upon Tyne, Central constituency as at 31 March 2000

	Number of all pensioners in receipt of State Retirement Pension	*75 and under*	*Over 75*
Newcastle upon Tyne, East and Wallsend	14,100	8,700	5,400
Newcastle upon Tyne, North	17,700	11,800	6,000

Notes:

1. The figures quoted are rounded to the nearest hundred.

2. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the 2000 version 1 of the Postcode Directory supplied by ONS.

3. Great Britain data exclude overseas and Channel Islands pensioners.

Source:

Based on a 5 per cent. sample taken from the Pension Strategy Computer system at 31 March 2000

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents on Income Support there are in *(a)* Newcastle and *(b)* Newcastle upon Tyne, Central; and how many there were in May 1997. [153055]

Mr. Bayley: The information is in the table.

Number of lone parents on Income Support

Thousand

Area	*May 1997*	*November 2000*
Newcastle upon Tyne City Council	6.8	5.9
Newcastle upon Tyne, Central constituency	1.6	1.5

Notes:

1. Figures have been rounded to the nearest hundred and quoted in thousands.

2. Based on 5 per cent. sample therefore subject to sampling error.

3. Lone Parents are single parents aged under 60 and not receiving the disability premium.

4. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency/local authority by matching the postcode against the relevant (i.e. 1997 and 2000 versions 1 or 2) of the ONS Postcode Directory. Parliamentary constituency boundaries are represented as at May 1997.

Source:

Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiries, May 1997 and November 2000.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners in *(a)* Newcastle and *(b)* Newcastle upon Tyne, Central were receiving Income Support in 1996–97; what their average benefit and average income was; how many pensioners were receiving the minimum income guarantee in 2000–01; and what their average benefit and average income was. [153037]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the tables.

Compared with when this Government came to office in 1997, the average incomes of pensioners in these constituencies have risen by around £16 weekly. Around a half of this increase can be attributed directly to help through the Minimum Income Guarantee. From this April, with the alignment of weekly Minimum Income Guarantee rates at the highest rate, no pensioner need live on less than £92.15 a week.

Income Support pensioners average weekly income and average weekly amount of Income Support as at November 1997

	Number of claimants	*Average weekly amount of income (£)*	*Average weekly amount of Income Support (£)*
Newcastle upon Tyne local authority	11,900	77.35	33.44
Newcastle upon Tyne, Central parliamentary constituency	3,800	74.56	34.34

Minimum Income Guarantee pensions average weekly income and average weekly amount of Income Support as at November 2000

	Number of claimants	*Average weekly amount of income (£)*	*Average weekly amount of Income Support (£)*
Newcastle upon Tyne local authority	11,800	93.10	40.29
Newcastle upon Tyne, Central parliamentary constituency	3,500	88.90	41.89

Notes:

1. The average weekly amounts of income quoted in the tables exclude help provided through Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

2. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample and are therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.

3. Figures are rounded to the nearest hundred and are expressed in thousands.

4. Parliamentary constituencies and local authorities have been allocated by matching postcodes against the relevant ONS postcode directory for each quarter, and represent constituency boundaries as at May 1997.

5. Pensioners are defined as benefit units where the claimant and/or partner are aged 60 and over.

6. Income is defined as all income and benefits (excluding IS), including income from partners and dependants, taken into account and disregarded for Income Support purposes.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries, November 1997 and 2000

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of children in *(a)* Newcastle and *(b)* Newcastle upon Tyne, Central who were receiving Child Benefit in (i) 1997 and (ii) 2001; what the rates of benefit were; and what the average annual income from Child Benefit was in *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 2001 for those areas. [153033]

Angela Eagle: The latest available information as requested is in the table.

	Number of children	*Average weekly amount per family (£)*
August 1999		
Newcastle	52,594	21.46
Newcastle, Central	16,524	21.84
Newcastle, East and Wallsend	17,955	21.40
Newcastle, North	18,115	21.19
November 2000		
Newcastle	52,602	22.93
Newcastle, Central	16,659	23.49
Newcastle, East and Wallsend	17,943	22.70
Newcastle, North	18,000	22.68

Notes:

1. Figures are from a 100 per cent. extract of the Child Benefit Centre Computer System.
2. Information from before 1999 is not available on this basis.
3. The average annual income from Child Benefit is not available.
4. Average weekly amounts are based on Child Benefit, Guardians Allowance and Child Benefit (Lone Parent). We are not able to split them into the individual components.
5. Cases are allocated to each parliamentary constituency by matching the postcode against the relevant (ie 1999 or 2000 versions 1 or 2) of the ONS Postcode Directory. Constituency boundaries are represented as at May 1997.

The rates of Child Benefit are as follows:
April 1999—£14.40 eldest child and £9.60 subsequent children
April 2000—£15.00 eldest child and £10.00 subsequent children.

HEALTH

Waiting Times

11. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what his plans are for reducing maximum waiting times *(a)* between GP referral and hospital consultant appointment and *(b)* between hospital consultant appointment and operation or treatment. [151959]

Mr. Denham: In our NHS Plan, published last year, we promised that by the end of 2005 the maximum wait for a routine out-patient appointment will be three months, compared with over six months today, and that the maximum wait for in-patient treatment will be six months, compared with 18 months today.

NHS Beds

12. **Liz Blackman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his plans for increasing the number of beds in the NHS. [151960]

Ms Stuart: Planning guidance, issued on 15 February, requires health authorities, in partnership with councils, to consider the action required to achieve the NHS Plan objectives that there should be an extra 2,100 general and acute beds and 5,000 extra intermediate care beds by 2004. Copies of the guidance are available in the Library.

No NHS region is to plan for a reduction in bed numbers.

Hospital Facilities (Warrington)

14. **Helen Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to improve hospital facilities in Warrington. [151962]

Yvette Cooper: A number of schemes are currently under way to help improve hospital facilities at the Warrington General Hospital. These include the purchase of the Daresbury Wing which can now provide orthopaedic surgery as well as improved ophthalmology facilities. Approval has also been given to the outline business case for a substantial redevelopment of the hospital's accident and emergency department.

Mary O'Donnell

15. **Mr. Best:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will examine the handling by the NHS of the medical needs of Mrs. Mary O'Donnell, a constituent of the hon. Member for Leeds, North-West. [151963]

Mr. Hutton: We are aware of the circumstances surrounding Mrs. Mary O'Donnell's treatment by the National Health Service and have every sympathy with people who suffer adversely as a consequence of medical treatment. The responsibility for the handling of Mrs. O'Donnell's medical needs rests with her local clinicians and we understand that she has annual hospital appointments to monitor her progress.

Surgical Treatments

16. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to enable *(a)* IVF treatment and *(b)* breast reduction operations to be made available throughout the country. [151964]

Yvette Cooper: We are asking the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to produce guidance on the management of infertility to improve services and reduce the postcode lottery in this area of health care.

Decisions whether to offer breast reduction surgery are made locally following clinical recommendations. This procedure has been proposed as a possible topic for consideration by NICE.

Nurses

17. **Mr. Ronnie Campbell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on recent changes in the number of nurses in the NHS. [151965]

Mr. Denham: Latest figures (Hospital and Community Health Services Workforce Census 2000) show that the number of nurses working in the NHS has increased significantly by 6,310 (1.9 per cent. between 1999 and 2000). This represents progress towards the NHS Plan work force target of 20,000 (headcount) extra nurses and midwives by 2004 and means there are now over 17,100 more nurses since 1997.

32. **Ms Ward:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made with increasing the number of nurses working in the NHS. [151981]

Mr. Denham: The NHS Plan set out to increase the number of nurses and midwives by 20,000 (headcount) from 1999 to 2004. We have already made substantial progress towards this target. From 1999 to 2000, the number of nurses has increased by 6,310.

Hospital Development (Greenwich)

18. **Mr. Efford:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the recent hospital development in Greenwich. [151966]

Mr. Denham: The new £93 million Private Finance Initiative-funded hospital at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Greenwich will be fully operational from 1 April 2001. The new hospital will provide improved quality of services and environment, and will speed the progress of modernisation for the residents of Greenwich.

PALS

19. **Mr. Patrick Hall:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health when patient advocacy liaison services will be available to patients in the primary care sector. [151967]

Ms Stuart: Chapter 10 of the NHS Plan states that Patient Advocacy and Liaison Services (PALS) will be established in every Trust, beginning with every major hospital, by 2002. It is anticipated that Primary Care Trusts will also have PALS services available by that date. Health authorities will be working with Primary Care Groups to ensure that they make PALS services available in the run up to them reaching PCT status.

Neurology Services

20. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the availability of neurology services in Barnsley and south Yorkshire. [151968]

Yvette Cooper: The health authorities responsible for commissioning neurology services in south Yorkshire are working collaboratively to achieve a common approach to the procurement and development of the service provided in Sheffield. The recently announced National Service Framework for long-term health conditions will focus on the needs of people with neurological conditions.

Bedford Hospital

21. **Sir Nicholas Lyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received since 16 January concerning Bedford hospital. [151969]

Mr. Denham: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has received a number of representations from Members of Parliament since 16 January 2001 concerning Bedford hospital.

Consultants (Recruitment and Retention)

22. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the recruitment and retention of consultants. [151970]

Mr. Denham: The number of consultants in the NHS has increased by 2,940 since 1997. We are committed to further increases as part of the NHS Plan—by 2004 there will be 7,500 more consultants working in the NHS. This will be helped by encouraging flexible careers and, in the short term, increasing international recruitment.

NHS (Redbridge and Waltham Forest)

23. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to visit King George Hospital, Ilford, to discuss the future of the National Health Service in Redbridge and Waltham Forest. [151971]

Mr. Denham: Ministers have no immediate plans to visit King George Hospital, part of Redbridge Health Care NHS Trust.

NHS Doctors

25. **Mr. David Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made in increasing the number of doctors in the NHS. [151974]

Mr. Denham: Since 1997, the number of doctors in the National Health Service has increased by around 6,700, and there are now 97,400 doctors working in the NHS. We are committed to further significant increases as part of the NHS Plan—by 2004 we expect there to be 7,500 more consultants and a minimum of 2,000 more general practitioners.

Hospices (Lancashire)

26. **Mr. Hoyle:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to end differences in funding for children's hospices and adult hospices in Lancashire. [151975]

Yvette Cooper: We are extending the Carer's Special Grant and the Quality Protects Programme from three years to five and have increased funding to improve palliative care services for children—including respite breaks. We are also going to provide, through the Lottery New Opportunities Fund, access to funding for palliative care for children and adults.

New Hospitals

27. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the number of new hospitals and hospital units opened since 1 January. [151976]

Mr. Denham: Eight new hospital units have opened since 1 January 2001. This number will rise considerably over the coming months as the many schemes currently under way become operational.

Modernisation Fund

28. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the allocations from the modernisation fund to each health authority. [151977]

Mr. Denham: Almost £2.3 billion has been allocated to health authorities from the Modernisation Fund. These funds have laid the foundation for the Government's modernisation agenda for the National Health Service. The Modernisation Fund will cease to exist in 2001–02. It has been superseded by the funding secured as part of SR2000 and the publication of the NHS Plan.

Health Care (Purchase)

29. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the volume of health care being purchased by the NHS from private hospitals and the criteria employed in making a decision to outsource health care. [151978]

Mr. Denham: The most recent figures for 1999–2000 indicate that £1.41 billion or 5.0 per cent. of total NHS expenditure on hospital and community services was spent with the private sector. It is for local commissioners and providers to confirm for themselves that the services provided by the private sector are of sufficiently high quality and cost-effective.

NHS Plan (Birmingham)

30. **Mr. Burden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the implementation of the NHS plan in Birmingham. [151979]

Yvette Cooper: Birmingham health authority, working with National Health Service trusts, primary care groups, primary care trusts and the local authority, is on course to implement and resource the radical programme of change over the next 10 years as set out in the NHS Plan.

As a result we expect to see improvements in tackling heart disease, in the delivery of cancer services and further improvements in mental health services in line with the NHS frameworks. In addition, there will be further modernisation of hospital facilities in Birmingham following my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's recent approval for a major new hospital development in South Birmingham and the development of an ambulatory care and diagnostic centre on the City Hospital site.

Rural Hospitals

31. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of the future of small acute general hospitals in remote rural areas. [151980]

Mr. Denham: The National Beds Inquiry (NBI) was set up to review long-term assumptions about the volume of general and acute health services and their implications for the whole system of care. It focused on the needs of older people and considered the scope for alternative models of care. The consultation on the NBI report demonstrated overwhelming support for "care closer to home" and the development of intermediate care services. The NHS Plan set a target of 5,000 extra intermediate care beds by 2004, some of which will be in community hospitals. In the light of the NBI report and consultation and the NHS Plan, clear policy guidance was published on 15 February. This provides tools to help health authorities to benchmark their performance against comparable authorities and to assess future requirements for beds and services to meet the needs of local people in all areas, and requires them to develop action plans as part of a wider review of services to be undertaken in the summer. The guidance (HSC 2001/03:LAC (2001)4 "Implementing the NHS Plan: Developing services following the National Beds Inquiry") is in the Library.

Diabetes

33. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the treatment of diabetes. [151982]

Mr. Denham: The Government are developing a National Service Framework for diabetes, for publication later this year. The Framework will set clear standards for diabetes services, to improve health outcomes for people with diabetes.

Waiting Lists (Essex)

34. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the present level of waiting lists in Essex. [151983]

Mr. Denham: Both North Essex health authority and South Essex health authority have been making steady progress in relation to reducing waiting lists. Through the winter period, they have experienced more emergency admissions than expected but continue to reduce waiting lists.

Waiting Times (South Swindon)

35. **Ms Drown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps have been taken to reduce waiting times for patients in South Swindon. [151984]

Mr. Denham: Since 1998 we have given substantial additional funding to Wiltshire health authority to reduce waiting lists as detailed in the table:

Waiting list and times related funding allocated to Wiltshire

£000

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
Waiting lists included in general cash uplift	—	2,837	2,837	4,643
Waiting list performance fund	346	327	327	[2]—
Waiting list beacon	—	30	—	[2]—
Waiting list addition	3,164	—	—	[2]—
Waiting list booked admission programme	—	182	302	[2]—
Waiting list cancer out-patient waits	—	25	131	[2]—
	3,510	3,401	3,597	4,643
Total		15,151		

[1] Estimated pro rata share of £423 million hypothecated fund
[2] Not yet known

At the Swindon and Marlborough NHS Trust this has been used to fund a variety of schemes which by the end of January this year had led to a fall of 1,334 (20.2 per cent.) in the number of patients waiting for in-patient and daycare treatment since 1 April 1996.

Testicular Cancer

36. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent representations he has received on the provision of health care relating to testicular cancer. [151985]

Yvette Cooper: Most recently, I and members of the Health Select Committee were involved with the Imperial Cancer Research Funds campaign to raise awareness of men's cancers—particularly testicular and prostate cancers.

Patients Complaints

37. **Joan Ruddock:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he takes to ensure that patients complaints can be dealt with immediately and remedied without delay. [151986]

Ms Stuart: The current National Health Service complaints procedure places the emphasis on resolving complaints as quickly as possible, and at a local level. However, the procedure has been subject to a two-year evaluation which is now complete. We have made it clear in the NHS Plan that we would act on the evaluation and reform the NHS complaints procedure to make it more independent and responsive to the needs of patients. This will include setting up patient Advocacy Liaison Services and Independent Advisory Services as part of a new system for better patient and public involvement.

Bed Blocking

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he proposes to end bed blocking in acute hospitals. [151972]

Mr. Hutton: We are providing new intermediate care services, which will enable patients who are ready to be discharged to move on from hospital. Additionally, further resources of £103 million have been made available this winter to enable the National Health Service and social services to expand capacity and reduce delayed discharges. This will enable the current downward trend in delayed discharges to continue.

Private Sector Health Care

Mr. Kilfoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what meetings he has held since June 2000 with private sector health care providers; and which other Government Ministers attended. [145304]

Ms Stuart: I hold regular meetings and visits with a variety of health care providers, including occasionally with private sector or independent health care providers.

The table shows ministerial meetings with the private and voluntary health care sector between June 2000 and 19 February 2001.

Minister	*Date*	*Event*
Secretary of State	31 October 2000	Launch of the Concordat between the NHS and the private and voluntary health care sector with the Independent Healthcare Association
Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham)	13 September 2000	Meeting with Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Dr. Korlipara, Chairman of Bolton District Medical Services, to discuss smart card technology

Minister	Date	Event
	16 November 2000	Attended a presentation by Shaw Homes Ltd. about public and private partnerships in Ledbury
Minister of State, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton)	25 October 2000	Meeting with BUPA Westminster Healthcare Ltd., Idun Healthcare Ltd., Southern Cross Healthcare Ltd. and 4 Seasons Healthcare Ltd.
	26 October 2000	Meeting with British Foundation of Care Home Proprietors, The Care Forum, Federation of Small Businesses, National Care Homes Association and Registered Nursing Home Association
	30 January 2001	Meeting with Rescare
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health	20 June 2000	Meeting with Norwich Union
	13 July 2000	Meeting with the Consumers Association
		Meeting with General Healthcare Group/BMI Healthcare
	5 September 2000	Meeting with Macmillan Cancer Relief
	4 October 2000	Meeting with Russell, Jones and Walker to discuss clinical negligence
	9 November 2000	Meeting with British Pregnancy Advisory Service
	24 January 2001	Meeting with BUPA

Child Protection

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps were taken to act upon and disseminate recommendations from case reviews under the Children Act 1989 carried out between 1990 and 1999; [147137]

(2) how many case reviews under Part 8 of the Children Act 1989 following the death of a child from abuse or neglect were held between 1990 and 1999. [147136]

Mr. Hutton: Information is not collected on the numbers of case reviews that have been carried out in accordance with Chapter 8 of "Working Together to Safeguard Children" (1999). However, the lessons learned from reviews carried out under the terms of the predecessor guidance "Working Together Under the Children Act 1989", served to inform the contents of the revised guidance.

We currently collect the numbers of case reviews notified to us from the social care Regions. From this collection, we estimate that the total number of case reviews each year is in the range of 150–180 and has remained at this level for some time.

Figures describing Part 8 notifications to the Department of Health in the period 1990 to 1995 were published in "Lost Innocents: a follow-up study of fatal child abuse". The study quoted non-accident child death over that period as follows:

Year	Number
1990–91	55
1991–92	45
1992–93	59
1993–94	54
1994–95	54

In addition, we are now acting to deliver on the commitment, that was specified in the new guidance, to commission and publish national overview reports, at least every two years, which will draw out key findings from case reviews and their implications for policy and practice.

Staff Training

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what training is given to NHS staff in *(a)* the cleanliness of hospitals and *(b)* preventing infections; and if he will make a statement. [149764]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 9 February 2001]:* Last year, to help ensure that all National Health Service domestic and service staff receive appropriate training, we issued "Standards for environmental cleanliness in hospitals" jointly with the Infection Control Nurses' Association and the Association of Domestic Management. This is an effective audit tool that sets out how environmental cleanliness standards are maintained. It contains detailed criteria relating to the education and training of staff involved in the cleaning process, which ensure that they possess the competencies to meet agreed hygiene standards.

All staff, including those employed by support services will receive training in prevention and control of infection. There is also a programme of on-going education for existing staff, which includes updating on policies, feedback of audit results, and identification of action needed to correct any deficiencies.

MMR Vaccine

Miss Kirkbride: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Government advertising campaign to promote MMR take up will begin; and what form it will take. [151148]

Yvette Cooper: The Department has drawn up a plan in consultation with Health Promotion England (HPE), who manage the immunisation campaign on the Department's behalf, to provide information to the public about Measles Mumps Rubella vaccine. The aim will be to ensure that parents and health professionals have access to scientifically accurate information about the vaccine.

The information campaign will include leaflets and factsheets, training materials for health professionals, an information video, a TV advert, health professional seminars, an information pack and materials for the web,

through NHSDirect.nhs.uk and immunisation.org.uk. The materials will be made available over the next few months.

Match Funding

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which departmental programmes allow for the use of section 106 contributions from planning agreements as match funding; and if he will make a statement. [152495]

Mr. Denham: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given by the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Ms Hughes), on 9 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 361–62W.

Hearing Aids

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* digital and *(b)* analogue hearing aids have been fitted under the NHS in the pilot areas for the modernisation of hearing services project since its inception. [152419]

Mr. Hutton: The modernising hearing aid services project has been fitting hearing aids since the first sites came on stream in September 2000. So far, the following number of hearing aids have been fitted:

Digital: 1,191 digital aids fitted up to Thursday 1 March 2001

Analogue: 2,452 analogue hearing aids supplied through the NHS Logistics Authority up to Thursday 1 March 2001.

This number does not take account of purchases made outside of the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency contracts.

The numbers fitted will increase as the number of sites increase and as sites become more experienced. The intention is to fit between 24,000 and 29,000 digital aids during the lifetime of the project, which is due to finish at the end of March 2002.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health from what date Coventry NHS trust will be included in the modernising NHS hearing aid services project. [153296]

Mr. Hutton: The Department will study the results of the modernising National Health Service hearing aid services pilot project when it reports. The project is planned to continue until 2002.

In line with the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) technology appraisal guidelines, health officials in Coventry are awaiting completion of the research projects. In the meantime, hospitals which fall outside the project, with the appropriate staff, training, equipment and experience, are already able to access the NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency contract for digital hearing aids.

Various manufacturers have been invited to give talks on hearing aid digital technology in Coventry and, in addition, a practical training day for staff has been arranged for May 2001.

Defibrillators

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what representations he has received from the Resuscitation Council UK on the decision to adopt a four-hour course for the Defibrillators in Public Places programme; [153058]

(2) if he will list the members of the Defibrillator Advisory Committee; [153054]

(3) what consultation took place between his Department and the European Resuscitation Council before the decision to adopt a four-hour course for the Defibrillators in Public Places programme; and what representations his Department received from the Council. [153057]

Yvette Cooper: The issue of training for people designated to use defibrillators installed under the Defibrillators in Public Places initiative has been given thorough and careful consideration by the Defibrillator Advisory Committee, which has supported the adoption of a four-hour training course covering basic life support and the use of automated external defibrillator devices.

The Defibrillator Advisory Committee is an expert external reference group which includes cardiology and resuscitation experts (including from the Resuscitation Council United Kingdom), representatives from voluntary aid societies, ambulance services, the police, and patients' interest groups.

The Resuscitation Council UK endorses guidelines for the practice of resuscitation recommended by the European Resuscitation Council (ERC). It has not, however, adopted the ERC's suggestion of a course based on a total of eight hours' tuition, which does not form part of the ERC's formal guidelines. The ERC's guidelines themselves are published in the full understanding that they may require modification to reflect circumstances that exist in individual countries.

The full membership of the Defibrillator Advisory Committee is as follows:

Mr. John Nelson (Chair)—Tees, East and North Yorkshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust

Mrs. Eve Knight—British Cardiac Patients Association

Mr. Chris Hulley—Assistant Chief Constable, British Transport Police

Professor Douglas Chamberlain—Chairman, Joint Royal Colleges and Ambulance Liaison Committee

Mr. Martin Shalley—Consultant in Accident and Emergency Medicine, Birmingham Heartlands Hospital

Dr. Mick Colquhoun—Secretary, Resuscitation Council (UK)

Professor Sir Charles George—Medical Director, British Heart Foundation

Baroness Audrey Emerton—Chief Commander, St. John Ambulance

Dr. Michael Webb—St. John Ambulance

Dr. Gordon Paterson—Chief Medical Adviser, British Red Cross Society

Mrs. Lesley Whitesmith—Resuscitation Training Officer

Dr. Tom Evans—Consultant Cardiologist, Royal Free Hospital

Mr. Gron Roberts—Essex Ambulance Service NHS Trust

Mr. Richard Mawson—Chief Executive, Hampshire Ambulance Service NHS Trust

Dr. Roger Boyle—National Heart Director, Department of Health

Mr. Tom Quinn—Health Services Directorate, Department of Health

Ms Siân Davies—National Defibrillator Project Manager, British Heart Foundation (for Department of Health)

Blood Collection

Mr. Edward Davey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much each hospital in *(a)* London, *(b)* Surrey, *(c)* Kent and *(d)* Sussex paid in 1999–2000 to private taxi firms to collect blood from blood banks; what estimate has been made of the savings to these hospitals from using the free service provided; and what guidelines he plans to issue to hospitals within the emergency rider volunteers' catchment area to encourage them to take advantage of their services. [152850]

Mr. Denham: The information requested around the cost incurred to hospitals by taxi firms to collect blood from blood banks in London, Surrey, Kent and Sussex is not held centrally. The Department does not collect information of the savings to hospitals from using free services to collect blood from blood banks.

From 1 April 1999 the supply of blood and blood components has been covered by a National Service Agreement between National Health Service trusts and the National Blood Service (NBS). This agreement stipulates the cost of routine scheduled deliveries to trusts absorbed into the prices charged for the provision of blood and blood components. The trusts and the local blood centres agree the routine delivery schedules to a trust. The NBS uses its own vehicles, couriers or taxis to provide the ad hoc deliveries. The decision is based on cost and availability of mode of transport as the supply may be urgent. Regardless of the actual transport cost the trust is only charged £11.50.

We have no plans to issue guidelines to hospitals within the emergency volunteers' catchment area to encourage hospitals to take advantage of their services. The NBS has a responsibility to ensure that the safety of the blood supply is not compromised. Therefore the transportation of blood, blood products and tissues is carefully controlled using the NBS transport fleet together with the specifically arranged contracts with third party suppliers. This ensures that the appropriate standard of vehicles and equipment is used, together with the appropriate training of staff, environmental controls and employment of route scheduling. The safety and security of the blood supply is paramount; therefore the use of volunteers to undertake this activity has not been actively pursued by the NBS.

Bognor Regis Health Centre

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health who is the legal and beneficial owner of the Bognor Regis health centre. [152958]

Ms Stuart: The ownership of the Bognor Regis health centre rests with Sussex Weald and Downs National Health Service Trust.

Health Benefits Administration

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the annual cost is of *(a)* administering the collection of health charges, including anti-fraud measures and *(b)* administering the health benefit scheme. [153065]

Ms Stuart: The cost of administering the collection of health charges in England, including anti-fraud measures, forms part of the running costs of the National Health Service and is not identified separately.

The direct cost of administering the NHS low income scheme in England is expected to be around £3.97 million for 2000–01.

NHS Computer Systems

Mr. Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS hospital trusts have achieved level 3 EPR. [153049]

Mr. Denham: *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The position at the end of December 2000 was that four acute trusts had EPR level 3 systems in place, with the figure forecast to rise to 11 by the end of the current financial year.

Recombinant Factor 8

Mr. Shepherd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the Government intend to make Recombinant Factor 8 available to all haemophiliacs in England. [153182]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* We are continuing to give careful consideration to this issue.

Cancer Treatment (Newcastle)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the decision was taken to replace the existing Northern Centre for Cancer Treatment at Newcastle general hospital; what recent changes in numbers of linear accelerators have been made; and how many successive business cases for replacements have been submitted since 1997. [153195]

Mr. Denham: The 1993 Newcastle Strategic Review strategy document did not include provision for the relocation of the Northern Centre for Cancer Treatment (NCCT) from the Newcastle general hospital site. Arising from public consultation it became apparent that, as acute services were relocated off the Newcastle general hospital site, the NCCT would become increasingly isolated from access to surgery, medicine, anaesthetics, critical care and other clinical services. Plans were therefore drawn up as part of the Freeman hospital site development control plan. Consequently, the subsequent strategic outline case (SOC) (approved in April 1998) included the reprovision of the NCCT on the Freeman hospital site.

The SOC recognised the constraints on radiotherapy capacity in the existing NCCT (six linear accelerators in 1998) and proposed that the new NCCT should open with seven linear accelerators, moving swiftly to eight and with bunker capacity for nine.

Since the publication of the Royal College of Radiologists' Report on Radiotherapy and of the National Health Service Cancer Plan in autumn 2000, the outline business case (OBC) has been amended to note the potential requirement to construct up to 12 linear accelerator bunkers should further capacity be required in the future. If required, this extension would have funding implications over and above that detailed in the existing OBC.

In 2000 funding was agreed via the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) to replace two linear accelerators at NCCT. The trust also funded the upgrading of a third linear accelerator. In addition, a seventh bunker has been constructed, giving some additional capacity and

flexibility to maintain six operational linear accelerators during installation and upgrading works. The first NOF funded machine was commissioned in December 2000 and the second machine will be operational in December 2001.

Freeman and RVI Hospitals

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the major investment in new hospital facilities at the Freeman and RVI hospitals Newcastle was first accepted in his Department's programme; when it was decided to use PFI finance; how many business cases have subsequently been submitted; and how many health authorities had to be signed up to the business case on each occasion. [153194]

Mr. Denham: The Newcastle Strategic Review (NSR), as a strategy, was approved by Ministers in December 1993. In the mid-1990s the centralisation of obstetrics and gynaecology services (which had previously been fragmented) onto the Royal Victoria Infirmary (RVI) site took place. In addition there was a £11 million public sector investment to centralise ophthalmology services also onto the RVI site. In 1995 the first of the "fast track" public capital allocations were made (which finally totalled £8.4 million) to facilitate further movement of acute services off the Newcastle general hospital site. Confirmation of the support to larger scale capital investment at RVI and Freeman to complete the implementation of the NSR was provided by the approval of the second wave strategic outline case (SOC) in April 1998, revisions to which were approved in September 1999.

The second wave SOC envisaged most of the capital investment being provided under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). A similar position applied in the subsequent revised SOC proposals. This was in line with practice for almost all major hospital schemes referred to the Capital Prioritisation Advisory Group.

Complete consultation drafts (dated February 2000) of the Outline Business Cases (OBC) for the PFI construction of new facilities on the Freeman and RVI hospital sites were submitted to the Northern and Yorkshire Regional Office in spring 2000. Following the final confirmation of purchaser support these were subsequently revised and the final version of the OBC were submitted to the regional office in February 2001 and are now under assessment.

Complete consultation drafts of the business case for the £15.3 million publicly funded enabling schemes for the NSR were submitted to the Regional Office in March 2000 and June 2000. The definitive version was submitted in October 2000 following support and approved in November 2000.

A full business case for the PFI replacement of the existing Energy Centre at the RVI was approved in December 2000. This scheme had not been a part of the NSR SOC.

For both the main NSR scheme and its enabling works scheme five health authorities were signed up (Newcastle and North Tyneside, Northumberland, Gateshead and South Tyneside, Sunderland and County Durham) and a further two (Tees and North Cumbria) were consulted.

Radio/Microwave Masts and Waves

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent research he has commissioned into the health effects of radio masts and waves and microwave masts and waves. [153193]

Yvette Cooper: A study on the incidence of leukaemia near all 20 high power TV/FM radio transmitters in Great Britain was published in 1996 by the Small Area Health Statistics Unit (SAHSU). This study found that there was no observed excess risk of leukaemia within 2 kilometres of all the transmitter sites looked at as a group. The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment (COMARE) evaluated the results of the SAHSU study. In their statement COMARE reiterated their previous advice that there is no firm evidence of a carcinogenic hazard from exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMF) from TV and radio masts emissions.

Last year a report on mobile phones and health was published by the Independent Group on Mobile Phones, chaired by Sir William Stewart. The Stewart report provided a rigorous and comprehensive assessment of existing research considered the possible effects on health of mobile phones and base stations (masts). The report concluded that the balance of evidence indicates that there is no general risk to health of people living near base stations on the basis that exposures are expected to be small fractions of guidelines. Among its conclusions the Stewart group commented that the upsurge of mobile phone technology should be matched by good quality research. We have responded by setting up a new programme jointly funded by industry. The first call for proposals was issued on 9 February.

The Department is also continuing to provide financial support for the World Health Organisation International Electromagnetic Fields (EMF) Project which is comprehensively reviewing EMF effects, including those of radio waves.

Correspondence

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 323W, on correspondence, what the reasons were for the delay in replying to the letter from the hon. Member for Northavon. [153723]

Mr. Denham: The delay in replying to the hon. Member's letter resulted from the original correspondence being lost within the Department. A further copy was provided by fax on 20 November, to which a reply was sent. I know that the Permanent Secretary/Chief Executive of the National Health Service has written to the hon. Member to apologise for the unacceptable delay involved in this case. New operational procedures have also been introduced in the Department to ensure that this sort of delay should not happen again.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 14 March 2001

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

China

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from the Government of China about the 10th report, Session 1999–2000, of the Foreign Affairs Committee. [152855]

Mr. Battle: Immediately after publication of the FAC report, Chinese officials in London and Peking told us that they were unhappy with aspects of its contents. The Chinese Government have issued a number of public statements criticising the report.

Military Attachés

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received about the statements made on 27 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 700, relating to remarks attributed to French and Italian military attachés in Washington. [153136]

Mr. Vaz: The Italian ambassador and the French military attaché have both written to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Mr. Fabricant) to deny the remarks attributed to the Italian and French military attachés in Washington on 27 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 700.

Election Observers

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many foreign elections have been observed in the past five years by publicly funded British observers. [153459]

Mr. Battle: I regret that the information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. Nonetheless, between spring 1999 and spring 2000 the UK supported election observation in 19 countries, either by providing international observers or by funding domestic observers.

HMS Tireless

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he intends to hold with regional Government representatives in Andalucia regarding HMS Tireless. [153160]

Mr. Vaz: We have had regular contact regarding HMS Tireless with the local and regional Andalucian authorities through our Embassy in Madrid. There has also been an exchange of correspondence at ministerial level. We have always made clear that we acknowledge the concerns of the people in the region. We will continue to do all we can to allay these concerns and to provide assurances regarding the safety of HMS Tireless.

Indonesia

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent contact he has had with the Government of Indonesia concerning inter-communal killings. [153539]

Mr. Battle: We are deeply concerned by reports of inter-communal violence in Kalimantan and regret the extensive loss of life resulting from these clashes. We have urged the communities involved to halt the violence. We called on the Indonesian authorities to re-establish law and order, and to assist the communities in finding a peaceful and lasting solution. I issued a statement to this effect on 27 February.

Brunei

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Government of Brunei concerning the recent arrest of seven Christians. [153725]

Mr. Battle: A total of seven were initially detained. Four people have now been released, but three remain in detention. Our High Commissioner in Brunei is in close contact with local church leaders and has discussed the matter with senior officials in the Bruneian Government; and we are co-ordinating our actions with EU counterparts. Our High Commissioner in Brunei will continue, both through contacts with the Bruneian authorities and in consultation with EU partners and other Governments represented in Brunei, to press for those detained to be treated in line with Brunei's obligations as a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Kurdish Organisations

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent contacts he has had with *(a)* the PKK and *(b)* other Kurdish organisations in Turkey and elsewhere. [153594]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not had any contacts with the PKK or any recent contacts with other Kurdish organisations in Turkey or elsewhere.

Macedonia

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the situation in Macedonia with respect to recent inter-communal violence. [153593]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* I last spoke to the Macedonian Foreign Minister on 2 March, when I expressed our deep concern over the occupation of the Macedonian village near the Kosovo border by a group of Albanian extremists. I also commended the restraint shown by the Macedonian Government. On 12 March the Prime Minister wrote to President Trajkovski to express support for the Macedonian Government. I welcome the robust action taken by NATO and KFOR, not only in tightening control over the Kosovo side of the border but also in strengthening co-ordination with the Macedonian Government.

Gibraltar

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consultations he has had with the Home Office about fulfilling the commitment to extend the European Parliament franchise to Gibraltar; and if he will make a statement. [153458]

Mr. Vaz *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* We are in regular contact with Home Office Ministers and officials on this issue. As I said in my evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee on 7 March, HMG unequivocally accept their obligation to secure the European parliamentary franchise for Gibraltar. We are carefully considering all possible options for achieving this objective before the 2004 EP elections.

Colombia

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what meetings UK representatives have held with human rights organisations in Colombia since May 1997; and how many embassy staff in Colombia are dedicated to human rights work. [153692]

Mr. Battle: UK representatives have a regular and on-going dialogue with human rights organisations in Colombia. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and I met a range of human rights organisations, NGOs, church and trade union leaders during our visit to Colombia in September 2000, including representatives from Christian Aid, CODHES, Mandato Ciudadano por la Paz, Indepaz, Redepaz, No Mas, and also Padre Francisco de Roux and Monsignor Pedro Rubiano. Recently on 8 March in London, I hosted a round table on Colombia with UK NGOs, Padre de Roux and the Presidential Counsellor for Security and Alternative Development. My right hon. Friend met a number of other leading human rights organisations during her visit to Colombia in March this year, including Women Waging Peace, CINEP and CCJ. We value all these contacts and will continue this substantial dialogue.

Human rights are central to the work of the embassy in Bogota. A considerable proportion of the time of several embassy staff is devoted to human rights work.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what financial support has been given by the UK to Plan Colombia to date; and what further expenditure is planned. [153693]

Mr. Battle: I refer to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend on 14 December 2000, *Official Report*, columns 227–28W. There is no UK Government financial involvement in Plan Colombia either bilaterally or through the EU. Assistance through the EU of 105 million euro will support human rights, long-term economic and social development, and an end to violence. No expenditure is planned by the UK Government to support Plan Colombia.

UN Commission on Human Rights

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the British representatives at the UN Commission on Human Rights held in Geneva for each session since May 1997; what reports have been issued by the Commission; and if he will place them in the Library. [153691]

Mr. Battle: The UK delegation to the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) has, since the 54th session in 1998, been headed by Mrs. Audrey Glover CMG. The delegation has also included representatives from the UK missions to the UN in Geneva and New York, as well as from the Human Rights Policy Department and the Global Issues Research Group of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. All reports issued by the Commission, and all resolutions adopted, are available in full on the following website: www.unhchr.ch. I understand that the House of Commons Library receives UN documents, including the annual report of the CHR.

DEFENCE

Single Living Accommodation

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to improve single living accommodation for Service personnel. [154041]

Mr. Hoon: Much of the living accommodation provided for Service personnel and their families is of good quality. But it is not consistently so. We have in hand a major upgrade programme for Service families' accommodation in Great Britain, with the aim of bringing core stock to modern standards by late 2005. The quality of the accommodation provided for single Service personnel also leaves much to be desired. This Government are determined that all those who serve their country are provided with good accommodation. So a significant proportion of the new money provided to the Defence budget in Spending Review 2000 will be devoted to a major and sustained upgrade programme for single living accommodation. Together, existing and new projects, including PFI, will see investment in this area reaching around £200 million per year. We intend to apply the principles of "Smart Construction" to this programme, achieving greater efficiency and economies of scale through prime contracting and close collaboration with the building industry.

Defence Procurement Agency

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what targets he sets the Defence Procurement Agency in respect of delivering a percentage capability within a particular time scale. [153453]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* The current Key Targets for the Defence Procurement Agency (DPA) are as follows:

	2000–01	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*
Predicted achievement of projects' core requirements (percentage)	91	97	97	97
Average cumulative slippage of In Service Dates not to exceed (months)	23.8	13.8	13.5	11.8
Average cumulative cost variation not to exceed (percentage)	4.9	3.6	3.5	0
Customer satisfaction rating (percentage)	65	70	75	78
Reduce operating costs in relation to 1997–98 Procurement Executive costs by (percentage)	19	22	26	26

The DPA's targets are published annually in its Corporate Plan and reported against in its Annual Report.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people are employed by the Defence Procurement Agency. [153447]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* As at 9 March 2001 the number of staff employed in the Defence Procurement Agency stands at 4,601.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what have been the total running costs of the Defence Procurement Agency and its predecessor since 1971. [153448]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* Central records for running costs do not exist. However, the operating costs of the Defence Procurement Agency (and before that the Procurement Executive), including the nuclear and fissile material programme, have been as follows since 1995–96:

Year	*£ million (cash outturn)*
1995–96	776
1996–97	763
1997–98	711
1998–99	699
1999–2000	656

These figures, and those since 1971, have been published in successive annual Appropriation Accounts for the Ministry of Defence.

Balkans

Mrs. Fitzsimons: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on future UK force levels in the Balkans. [154042]

Mr. Spellar: Following a review by NATO of the Statement of Requirement for aircraft in the Balkans theatre we have agreed new burden-sharing arrangements with the US Air Force. This agreement means that for three months in 12, we will meet the requirement for four strike aircraft, and the US for the remainder of the year. We have now completed our first three-month commitment, allowing us to withdraw four RAF Harriers and some 150 support personnel from Gioia del Colle from 1 April. The RAF will next deploy four aircraft again in early 2002.

Devonport Dockyard

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to store used nuclear reactor containers at the Devonport dockyard. [152859]

Dr. Moonie: As the Minister for the Armed Forces made clear to the hon. Member during the Westminster Hall Adjournment debate on Radioactive Discharges (River Tamar) on 17 January 2001, *Official Report*, columns 121–24WH, we currently have no plans to store used nuclear reactor compartments from decommissioned nuclear submarines at Devonport Dockyard. Later this year we shall be inviting industry to put forward their land storage proposals and, although these are likely to include the storage of intact reactor compartments, other options could be proposed. We expect potential storage sites to emerge from this further work. Decisions on the land store method and site will not be taken for some two to three years, and then not until after full consultation with the UK's independent regulators and the public.

Saville Inquiry

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many public interest immunity certificates have been requested by his Department; how many have been granted; and what subjects they covered, in relation to the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. [153225]

Mr. Spellar: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has signed four certificates claiming public interest immunity in respect of intelligence material which is relevant to the Bloody Sunday Inquiry. The Tribunal has approved two of the claims; rulings on the other two are awaited.

Procurement

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what have been the estimated savings to date as a result of the smart procurement initiative. [153451]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* Over the three successive annual planning rounds since the inception of the smart procurement initiative, we have identified costing reductions attributable to smart procurement which total £2 billion over the ten-year period 1998 to 2008. We expect to improve on this in the current and future planning rounds.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what measures he has put in place to ensure that contractor past performance is given sufficient weighting in the MOD's procurement decisions. [153452]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* In assessing the eligibility of suppliers to fulfil its requirements, the MOD takes account, where appropriate, of a number of factors, including company capacity, capability and past performance. Companies may be required to complete a pre-qualification to provide information on, among other things, delivery and performance history for similar projects. The Department recognises the importance of learning from, and building on, past experience, and to that end it is looking to implement a further series of measures designed to better capture past performance, including a supplier self-assessment scheme, joint industry/Ministry of Defence reviews aimed at improving future performance and closer vendor management initiatives.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the total over-spend on defence procurement projects since 1971. [153449]

Dr. Moonie *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* Figures for cost performance of the largest projects have been published in the Major Projects Report since 1993 and copies are available in the Library of the House. Complete historic data for all projects are not held centrally.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what discussions he has had with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food concerning the use of

trucks for the slaughter and disposal of stock affected by the current foot and mouth outbreak; and if he will make a statement. [153503]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* Officials from the Ministry of Defence are in close touch with their opposite numbers from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, discussing the impact of the foot and mouth outbreak and possible requests for military support. All requests for support are treated urgently and sympathetically. Trucks for the slaughter and disposal of stock affected by the outbreak require sealed containers which do not form part of the military inventory.

Maverick

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the Maverick anti-armour missiles procured from Raytheon Corporation are in active service; and if he will make a statement. [152904]

Dr. Moonie: Maverick entered service with the Royal Air Force on 15 February 2001.

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the Senior Civil Service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [R] [152798]

Dr. Moonie: For staff covered by the main departmental pay system, the basic headline settlement added 2.5 per cent. to the paybill. A further 0.2 per cent. represented restructuring costs, including 0.1 per cent. for bonus payments in line with the civil service reform agenda. Together with funds released by staff turnover, staff in post received performance related increases averaging 4.7 per cent.

NORTHERN IRELAND

RUC (Redundancies)

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many RUC officers have accepted voluntary redundancy under the recently introduced terms; how many have left to date on voluntary redundancy terms; how many officers whose applications for voluntary redundancy have been accepted have still to leave; and over what period they will be leaving. [152383]

Mr. Ingram: The number of officers who have left the Royal Ulster Constabulary under voluntary severance terms up to 3 March 2001 was 367. A further 116 officers will be leaving during the period 4–31 March.

The closing date for acceptance to the second phase of the scheme is 31 March 2001.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Child Support Agency

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many complaints were made against decisions of the Child Support Agency in 2000. [152681]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mr. Doug Smith. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Doug Smith to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 13 March 2001:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about the Child Support Agency.

You asked how many complaints were made against decisions of the Child Support Agency in 2000. Unfortunately, information of this type is not collected. However, Agency statistics show the three main causes of complaint are poor communication, error, and delay.

The Agency received 21015 complaints in 2000. In that year complaints reduced by 28% against an increased caseload of 1.4%. The attached annex shows the amounts and breakdown of the types of complaints. Table 1 shows the amount of complaints received and table 2 shows the different types of complaint for the twelve-month period from April 1999 to March 2000.

The Agency is taking steps to standardise the way that it deals with complaints. A series of recommendations to ensure complaints are dealt with correctly both before and after the implementation of Child Support Reform have been made and are now being taken forward in all Agency Business Units.

I hope this is helpful.

Table 1: Number of customer complaints received 1999–2000

Month	*Number*
April	1,990
May	1,768
June	1,879
July	1,831
August	1,690
September	1,959
October	1,747
November	1,746
December	1,358
January	1,271
February	1,844
March	1,932

Table 2: Categorisation of customer complaints 1999–2000

Percentage

	Policy	*Incorrect action*	*Delay/failure to take appropriate action*	*Complaints about staff*	*Disclosure of information*	*Good cause*	*Communication*	*Human Rights Act*
In month								
April	16.8	17.7	41.5	5.5	1.1	0.1	17.3	n/a
May	16.8	17.3	45.7	4.9	0.9	0.1	15.1	n/a
June	14.2	14.5	46.4	4.9	0.9	4.1	15.1	n/a
July	13.0	17.9	46.9	5.0	0.9	0.2	16.0	n/a
August	13.1	16.2	47.5	6.0	1.0	0.1	16.2	n/a

Table 2: Categorisation of customer complaints 1999–2000

Percentage

	Policy	*Incorrect action*	*Delay/failure to take appropriate action*	*Complaints about staff*	*Disclosure of information*	*Good cause*	*Communication*	*Human Rights Act*
September	18.8	15.9	42.0	4.9	2.3	0.6	15.6	n/a
October	15.3	16.5	45.1	5.0	0.7	0.2	17.2	n/a
November	13.5	18.8	43.8	6.1	1.1	0.3	16.4	n/a
December	13.9	21.3	42.1	6.6	1.1	0.2	14.8	n/a
January	14.1	17.1	45.8	5.4	1.0	0.4	16.2	n/a
February	12.5	17.9	43.6	6.8	1.4	0.2	17.6	n/a
March	15.3	17.8	42.5	6.2	1.7	0.2	16.4	n/a
Year to date								
April	16.8	17.7	41.5	5.5	1.1	0.1	17.3	n/a
May	16.5	17.5	43.4	5.2	1.0	0.1	16.3	n/a
June	15.6	16.4	44.5	5.1	1.0	1.6	15.8	n/a
July	15.0	16.8	45.1	5.1	1.0	1.2	15.9	n/a
August	14.7	16.7	45.4	5.2	1.0	1.1	15.9	n/a
September	15.4	16.5	44.8	5.2	1.2	1.0	15.9	n/a
October	15.4	16.5	44.9	5.1	1.1	0.9	16.1	n/a
November	15.2	16.8	44.7	5.2	1.1	0.8	16.1	n/a
December	15.1	17.2	44.5	5.4	1.1	0.8	16.0	n/a
January	15.0	17.2	44.6	5.4	1.1	0.7	16.0	n/a
February	14.8	17.2	44.5	5.5	1.1	0.7	16.2	n/a
March	14.8	17.3	44.4	5.5	1.2	0.6	16.2	n/a

Pensions

Mr. Martin Bell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the impact on the weekly pensions of men aged 60 to 64 who, had they been women, would have qualified to receive the state pension, of allocating to them the funds for the proposed increase to existing pensioners. [153500]

Mr. Rooker: A man cannot draw State Retirement Pension before he reaches State pension age. Therefore no estimate has been made.

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement on the practice of pension clawback by companies operating occupational pension schemes. [153671]

Mr. Rooker: Occupational pension provision is voluntary, and it is for employers to decide the nature of the scheme and the benefits provided. The decision as to whether a scheme should continue to operate on an integrated basis, or if not, how and when integration should be abolished, is a matter for employers.

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the Senior Civil Service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [152790]

Mr. Rooker: The headline pay settlement was 2.6 per cent. on the pay bill and, together with the additional funds from staff turnover, staff in post received increases averaging 4.5 per cent.

National Insurance Numbers

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what action will be taken to identify and remove inaccurate, duplicate and fraudulent national insurance numbers once the Data Cleansing Project comes to an end. [152437]

Mr. Rooker: The Data Cleansing Project removed 182,000 National Insurance numbers (NINOs) during the last financial year—more than during the whole of the last Parliament.

The Data Cleansing Project will move from departmental project status to departmental core business status on 31 March. Therefore the process of analysing our database to identify and remove inaccurate, duplicate and fraudulent NINOs will continue at current levels as part of our core business.

In addition, from 31 March onwards there will be a rollout of an enhanced process for allocating NINOs. The new process will involve far more stringent tests before a NINO is allocated thus preventing fraud and error entering the system in the first place.

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many national insurance numbers on the Departmental Central Index relate to people *(a)* now deceased, *(b)* who live abroad and receive no benefits, *(c)* who live abroad and receive benefits and *(d)* aged under 16 years. [152438]

Mr. Rooker: There are approximately 13.5 million records on DCI holding a date of death. These are needed in case spouses make claims on their deceased partner's contributions.

Figures have never been kept on the number of records for people who live abroad and receive no benefits. These records are held in the event that people subsequently return and make a claim to benefit.

Benefit is currently paid to approximately 2 million customers including their dependants resident overseas.

There are approximately 12.5 million numbers held on DCI for children under 16. These become proper National Insurance Numbers when the child reaches 16.

Invalid Care Allowance

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the cost of exempting Invalid Care Allowance from the overlapping benefits rules *(a)* entirely and *(b)* with respect to retirement pension. [152330]

Mr. Bayley: It is estimated that for the year 2002–03 the cost of abolishing the overlapping benefits rules for ICA recipients *(a)* entirely would be £450 million and *(b)* for those over state pension age only, £400 million.

The rules on overlapping benefits have been a feature of social security benefit payments since 1948 and prevent more than one benefit intended to meet the same need being paid at the same time.

Notes:

1. The figures quoted represent 2002–3 benefit rates and caseloads and have been rounded to the nearest fifty million.

2. The source used is the Family Resources Survey 1999–00, ICA quarterly extract December 2000 and ICA caseload forecasts.

3. Given the limitations of modelling entitlement to invalid care allowance from survey data the estimate should be treated with caution.

4. It is assumed that take-up among the entitled group will be one hundred percent.

5. An adjustment has been made for IRB effects.

Pension Deductions

Mr. Horam: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners had money deducted from their state retirement pension while in hospital during the last calendar year for which figures are available; and what the cost to the Exchequer would have been of not making such deductions. [153226]

Mr. Rooker: As at 31 March 2000, some 31,900 retirement pensioners were in hospital and subject to a downrating of their retirement pension. The costs of abolishing such downrating is approximately £60 million per year.

Poverty (Lancashire)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many *(a)* people and *(b)* children were living in poverty in Lancashire in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1999, (iv) 2000 and (v) 2001. [153167]

Mr. Bayley: Poverty and social exclusion are complex multi-dimensional issues, affecting many aspects of people's lives—including income, health, housing, the quality of their environment and opportunities to learn. There is no single measure that can capture the complex problems that need to be overcome.

However, a number of these aspects have seen significant improvement in Lancashire since 1997. For example, the number of unemployed people in Lancashire has fallen by around 10,000, from nearly 27,000 in January 1997 to around 16,000 in January 2001. Between 1997 and 2000 the number of children in families in receipt of out of work benefits has fallen from nearly 50,000 to around 46,000. The proportion of 11-year-olds achieving level 4 or above at Key Stage 2 has risen in English from 68 per cent. in 1998 to 76 per cent. in 2000 and in mathematics from 63 per cent. in 1998 to 74 per cent. in 2000.

The annual report, "Opportunity for all", available in the Library, sets out and monitors the Government's strategy for tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Note:

Unemployment figures based on claimant count information.

Sure Start Maternity Grant

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many mothers in Wansbeck have received the Sure Start maternity grant since its introduction. [153143]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested as the number of recipients of Sure Start maternity grants (SSMGs) is not held by sex or parliamentary constituency. SSMGs may be claimed either by the mother or by her partner, one of whom must have been awarded a qualifying benefit.

In the period since the introduction of SSMGs on 27 March 2000 to the end of February 2001, 1,368 people have received a SSMG in the Benefits Agency's Northumbria area.

Private Landlords

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the proportion of private landlords who will not accept tenants who are in receipt of Housing Benefit; and how these figures have altered since May 1997. [153390]

Angela Eagle: None. No data are held to make the comparison requested.

Working Age Agency

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proposals he has to extend the use of work-focused interviews within the Working Age Agency. [153900]

Mr. Darling: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I are establishing, later this year, the Working Age Agency. This will bring together labour market and benefit services for people of working age and enable us to provide a more integrated approach for our customers.

As the first stage in the launch of the Working Age Agency, we will be introducing around 50 Pathfinder offices. A provisional list of their locations is set out in the table. People of working age making a claim for benefit in these offices will be required to participate in a work-focused interview as an integral part of the benefit claims process and will be offered specialist support to help them into work. I will shortly be laying regulations under the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 for this purpose.

WAA Pathfinder sites (provisional)

City/town	*Number*
Greenock	[1]1
Port Glasgow	[1]1
Livingston	1
City of Aberdeen	3
Bridgend	2
Maesteg	1
Pyle	1
Porthcawl	1
South West Birmingham	3
Telford	2
Madeley	1
Wellington	1
Wallasey	1
Hoylake	1
Blackburn	2
Darwen	1
Manchester Openshaw	2
Halifax	[2]2
Huddersfield	[2]2
Dewsbury	[2]2
Todmorden	[2]1
City Derby	4
Gateshead	2
Felling	1
Blaydon	1
Birtley	1
Exmouth	1
Honiton	1
Tiverton	1
Sidmouth	1
Chelmsford	[2]2
Southend	[1]1
Rayeigh	[1]1
Willesden	1
Wembley	1
Kilburn	1
Harlesden	1
Winchester	1
Streatham	1

[1] ONE Basic Model Pilot
[2] ONE Call Centre Pilot

Child Poverty

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many children have been lifted out of poverty since May 1997; and if he will provide the basis for Ministers' calculation concerning the number of children who will be lifted out of poverty by the end of the present Parliament. [152432]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

As a result of personal tax and benefit reforms announced in this Parliament, over 1.2 million children will be lifted out of poverty. This is an estimate, using the Treasury's tax benefit simulation model, of the impact of measures on the number of children living in households with income below 60 per cent. of the median.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Pre-school Provision (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* registered nursery and *(b)* playgroup places there were (i) in 1996 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available for (A) London and (B) each London Borough. [152196]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* The available information requested is shown in the tables. This includes information on day nurseries and playgroups for March 1996 and March 2000 and needs to be seen in the context of a national rise in playgroup places. In addition, for your information I have provided a table on the provision of education in maintained nursery and primary schools in England in January 2000.

The responsibility for day care provision transferred from the Department of Health to the Department for Education and Employment in March 1998.

Number of providers of day nurseries, playgroups and pre-schools and number of places

	Day nurseries		*Playgroups and pre-schools*	
	Provide	*Places*	*Provide*	*Places*
March 1996				
London	961	27,793	1,616	39,137
Inner London	519	13,912	428	9,740
City of London	3	71	2	57
Camden	59	1,558	35	623
Hackney	60	1,853	42	956
Hammersmith and Fulham	35	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Haringey	39	1,023	37	967
Islington	60	1,828	35	845
Kensington and Chelsea	19	754	16	316
Lambeth	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Lewisham	61	1,484	39	811
Newham	25	750	31	549
Southwark	64	1,730	51	1,203
Tower Hamlets	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—
Wandsworth	55	1,761	103	2,599
Westminster	39	1,100	37	814
Outer London	442	13,881	1,188	29,397
Barking and Dagenham	9	337	33	884
Barnet	6	1,041	69	1,907
Bexley	10	341	64	1,897
Brent	66	1,929	36	942
Bromley	[1]—	[1]—	130	4,495
Croydon	34	996	99	2890
Ealing	38	1,318	44	1,050
Enfield	26	749	88	2,761
Greenwich	26	806	45	1,016
Harrow	5	155	71	[1]—
Havering	13	460	91	2,333
Hillingdon	36	1,285	71	[1]—
Hounslow	30	829	46	1,116
Kingston-upon-Thames	24	621	46	1,044
Merton	19	567	33	860
Redbridge	32	[1]—	65	2,200
Richmond-upon-Thames	23	812	70	1,796
Sutton	19	782	51	1,230
Waltham Forest	26	853	36	976

	Day nurseries		*Playgroups and pre-schools*	
	Provide	*Places*	*Provide*	*Places*
March 1997				
London	899	27,650	1,600	41,534
Inner London	501	15,052	429	9,899
City of London	3	78	2	57
Camden	46	1,396	37	669
Hackney	62	1,950	39	889
Hammersmith and Fulham	38	1,192	[1]—	[1]—
Haringey	34	775	37	972
Islington	62	1,868	35	892
Kensington and Chelsea	35	926	17	304
Lambeth	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—	[1]—

	Day nurseries		Playgroups and pre-schools	
	Provide	Places	Provide	Places
Lewisham	55	1,436	40	881
Newham	24	798	29	628
Southwark	48	1,650	51	1,111
Tower Hamlets	'—	'—	'—	'—
Wandsworth	57	1,894	103	2,599
Westminster	37	1,089	39	897
Outer London	398	12,598	1,171	31,635
Barking and Dagenham	10	355	32	856
Barnet	15	566	66	1,988
Bexley	12	448	62	1,763
Brent	62	1,786	38	1,022
Bromley	'—	'—	133	4,556
Croydon	36	1,088	95	2,733
Ealing	40	1,309	42	991
Enfield	32	850	89	1,935
Greenwich	27	895	47	1,052
Harrow	5	155	67	1,728
Havering	16	572	90	2,313
Hillingdon	5	151	68	1,579
Hounslow	32	876	46	1,110
Kingston-upon-Thames	27	715	46	1,021
Merton	20	585	31	805
Redbridge	4	106	61	2,186
Richmond-upon-Thames	28	1,016	67	1,680
Sutton	22	845	53	1,277
Waltham Forest	5	280	38	1,040

	Day nurseries		Playgroups and pre-schools	
	Provide	Places	Provide	Places
March 1998				
London	856	24,271	1,011	22,185
Inner London	540	13,145	273	5,826
City of London	3	90	2	57
Camden	54	1,495	32	596
Hackney	130	4,161	'—	'—
Hammersmith and Fulham	35	1,121	32	'—
Haringey	'—	'—	'—	'—
Islington	62	1939	32	873
Kensington and Chelsea	22	744	13	217
Lambeth	'—	'—	'—	'—
Lewisham	'—	'—	'—	'—
Newham	24	750	29	656
Southwark	50	'—	'—	'—
Tower Hamlets	35	646	27	435
Wandsworth	86	1,859	62	2,055
Westminster	38	340	44	937
Outer London	316	11,126	738	16,359
Barking and Dagenham	'—	'—	30	754
Barnet	'—	'—	'—	'—
Bexley	13	'—	61	'—
Brent	'—	'—	'—	'—
Bromley	'—	887	'—	'—
Croydon	'—	'—	'—	'—
Ealing	42	1,401	43	1,012
Enfield	18	515	87	2,033
Greenwich	28	911	41	939
Harrow	7	246	66	1,775
Havering	12	1,296	106	2,529
Hillingdon	41	1,568	64	1,450
Hounslow	32	963	45	1,086
Kingston-upon-Thames	40	1,401	43	1,012
Merton	'—	'—	'—	'—
Redbridge	'—	'—	'—	'—
Richmond-upon-Thames	29	1,077	67	1,693
Sutton	22	861	49	1,190
Waltham Forest	32	'—	36	886

	Day nurseries		Playgroups and pre-schools	
	Provide	Places	Provide	Places
March 1999				
London	1,138	37,825	1,558	38,858
Inner London	600	18,845	480	10,054
City of London	3	81	3	44
Camden	52	1,407	40	698
Hackney	53	1,700	35	791
Hammersmith and Fulham	31	1,019	33	733
Haringey	30	837	32	624
Islington	48	1,624	40	862
Kensington and Chelsea	46	1,544	31	622
Lambeth	49	1,573	37	801
Lewisham	57	1,620	54	962
Newham	19	708	30	628
Southwark	50	1,567	48	1,024
Tower Hamlets	24	813	20	579
Wandsworth	76	2,493	63	1,424
Westminster	62	1,859	14	262
Outer London	538	18,980	1,078	28,804
Barking and Dagenham	12	431	30	739
Barnet	38	1,657	52	1,296
Bexley	13	537	57	1,549
Brent	58	1,849	33	802
Bromley	32	1,015	127	4,504
Croydon	39	1,159	85	2,492
Ealing	41	1,428	39	916
Enfield	18	536	86	2,089
Greenwich	25	763	39	905
Harrow	7	250	67	1,691
Havering	16	551	81	1,863
Hillingdon	44	1,797	61	1,441
Hounslow	28	844	42	965
Kingston-upon-Thames	20	699	48	1,086
Merton	28	842	30	774
Redbridge	29	1,004	56	2,007
Richmond-upon-Thames	29	1,112	65	1,669
Sutton	22	853	46	1,110
Waltham Forest	39	1,653	34	906

	Day nurseries		Playgroups and pre-schools	
	Provide	Places	Provide	Places
March 2000				
London	1,253	42,855	1,457	34,818
Inner London	650	20,409	430	8,834
City of London	3	81	2	44
Camden	58	1,744	24	423
Hackney	57	1,874	31	661
Hammersmith and Fulham	35	1,080	13	213
Haringey	36	1,127	46	985
Islington	55	1,512	33	724
Kensington and Chelsea	42	1,405	33	668
Lambeth	60	2,013	34	745
Lewisham	60	1,680	56	997
Newham	33	1,133	26	575
Southwark	68	1,885	43	915
Tower Hamlets	31	952	21	415
Wandsworth	83	2,926	52	1,205
Westminster	29	997	16	264
Outer London	603	22,446	1,027	25,984
Barking and Dagenham	13	436	27	697
Barnet	43	1,719	48	1,207
Bexley	13	521	54	1,439
Brent	71	2,195	19	569
Bromley	36	1,046	122	3,544
Croydon	43	1,430	77	2,301
Ealing	65	2,283	43	985
Enfield	28	953	83	1,248
Greenwich	25	1,098	49	1,027
Harrow	11	373	62	1,622
Havering	16	446	79	1,910

	Day nurseries		Playgroups and pre-schools	
	Provide	Places	Provide	Places
Hillingdon	40	2,982	57	1,327
Hounslow	29	876	40	869
Kingston-upon-Thames	19	657	48	1,096
Merton	29	949	30	773
Redbridge	31	1,048	49	1,794
Richmond-upon-Thames	28	1,125	64	1,678
Sutton	23	869	44	1,054
Waltham Forest	40	1,440	32	844

[1] Not provided by the Authority

Note:

National and regional totals, including estimates for missing data, can be found in the Statistical Volume "Statistics of Education—Children's Day Care Facilities" and the Statistics Bulletin on Children's Day Care Facilities, Issue No.08/00.

All pupils under five in nursery and primary schools, January 2000

		Percentage of population	
	Number of pupils	Nursery schools and nursery classes	Nursery and primary schools
London	122,800	37	62
Inner London[1]	50,900	40	65
Camden	2,270	28	49
Hackney	3,860	35	59
Hammersmith and Fulham	2,330	42	55
Haringey	4,800	44	73
Islington	3,180	38	67
Kensington and Chelsea	1,480	25	42
Lambeth	4,360	34	55
Lewisham	4,610	40	67
Newham	7,520	57	88
Southwark	5,290	44	74
Tower Hamlets	5,250	50	82
Wandsworth	3,920	32	54
Westminster	2,020	32	48
Outer London	71,800	35	61
Barking and Dagenham	3,610	45	78
Barnet	4,960	31	58
Bexley	3,980	38	72
Brent	4,480	34	61
Bromley	2,720	5	36
Croydon	5,570	30	61
Ealing	6,080	45	73
Enfield	4,310	25	56
Greenwich	4,370	56	72
Harrow	2,680	20	48
Havering	2,650	16	51
Hillingdon	4,320	50	64
Hounslow	3,960	40	70
Kingston-upon-Thames	2,290	38	66
Merton	3,530	55	71
Redbridge	4,430	40	73
Richmond-upon-Thames	1,970	18	42
Sutton	1,940	41	43
Waltham Forest	4,010	46	60

[1] Includes City of London

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the Senior Civil Service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [152797]

Mr. Wills: The headline pay settlement was 2.5 per cent. on the pay bill. Staff in post received performance related increases averaging 4.1 per cent.

Youth Parliament

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will meet members of the UK Youth Parliament to discuss with them proposals in the Parliament's manifesto relating to education and employment. [152963]

Mr. Wicks: I welcome the establishment of the UK Youth Parliament and congratulate the hon. Member on his role in promoting it. I attended the first sitting of the Parliament on 23 February and would welcome the opportunity to meet members again. I understand that the UKYP will be publishing its manifesto in April and I look forward to working with the Minister of State, Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) on the initial Government response.

School Computers (Wansbeck)

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools in Wansbeck are connected to the internet; and how many were connected in 1997. [153145]

Mr. Wills: The Department does not collect details about the numbers of internet connections at schools in individual constituencies. Substantial progress is being made towards the target of every school having access to the internet. Data from the Department's Survey of ICT in Schools 1996 are given, as the survey was performed bi-annually until 1998. The comparable survey in 2000 shows that the percentage of schools in England connected to the internet has increased as shown in the following table.

		Percentage
Sector	March 1996	March 2000
Primary	5	86
Secondary	47	98
Special	8	92

Ofsted Inspections (Tyneside)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools in *(a)* South Tyneside and *(b)* South Shields have undergone Ofsted inspections since May 1997; and how many of those have been subject to critical reports. [153298]

Ms Estelle Morris: HM Chief Inspector has advised that 72 schools in South Tyneside, including the South Shields area, were inspected by Ofsted between May 1997 and December 2000. Six schools were found to have serious weaknesses, one of which subsequently went into special measures following a re-inspection. Two other schools were judged to require special measures and one was found to be underachieving.

I have asked HM Chief Inspector Mike Tomlinson to write to my right hon. Friend enclosing a full list of the schools inspected and to place a copy of his letter in the Library. The inspection reports can be accessed via Ofsted's website at www.ofsted.gov.uk.

Departmental Policies (South Shields)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the South Shields constituency, the effects on South Shields of his Department's polices and actions since 2 May 1997. [153092]

Mr. Wills *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the South Shields constituency and on South Tyneside LEA have been placed in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Don Valley)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Don Valley constituency, the effects on Doncaster of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153528]

Mr. Wills: Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Don Valley constituency and Doncaster LEA have been placed in the Library.

Departmental Policies (Jarrow)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will set out, with statistical information, relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Jarrow of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [153559]

Mr. Wills: Details of the effects of a range of the Department's policies on the Jarrow constituency and South Tyneside LEA have been placed in the Library.

Full Employment

Mr. Michael Jabez Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the Government's plans are for achieving full employment. [153896]

Mr. Blunkett: Today we are launching the Green Paper "Towards full employment in a modern society" jointly with the Treasury and the Department of Social Security. It sets out our plan for achieving sustained full employment over the next decade in every part of the country.

We will continue our crusade to eradicate long-term unemployment. The strong and stable economy provides a firm foundation for enabling job opportunities for all. Through the welfare to work agenda we have shown that the key to helping unemployed people back to work is making sure that they have the skills to be able to take up these opportunities. This approach has helped over 270,000 long-term unemployed young people back into work, and has helped see unemployment fall to its lowest level since the 1970s.

We will focus on helping people into work, but also to stay in work and gain the skills they need to progress in work. By raising the skills, employability and aspirations of those who need the most help, we are also providing insurance against a return to unemployment. People equipped with the skills employers need will find it much easier to get straight back into work.

To help ensure that the economy can maintain its stability, we will broaden the scope of our welfare to work programmes to cover those who are economically inactive as well as the long-term unemployed. The Working Age Agency will transform the way in which we deliver support in finding work to all people of working age.

We are setting ambitious targets to deliver this agenda. Our vision is of a high skills, high productivity and high employment economy which makes the most of everybody's skills and experiences. This strategy to deliver full employment will improve the lives of millions of people, and will deliver individual and national success.

Working Age Agency

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to extend the use of work-focused interviews within the Working Age Agency. [153892]

Mr. Blunkett: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security and I are establishing, later this year, the Working Age Agency. This will bring together labour market and benefit services for people of working age and enable us to provide a more integrated approach for our customers.

As the first stage in the launch of the Working Age Agency, we will be introducing around 50 Pathfinder offices. A provisional list of their locations is set out in the following table. People of working age making a claim for benefit in these offices will be required to participate in a work-focused interview as an integral part of the benefit claims process and will be offered specialist support to help them into work. My right hon. Friend will shortly be laying regulations under the Welfare Reform and Pensions Act 1999 for this purpose.

WAA Pathfinder sites[1]

City/town	*Number of pathfinders*
Greenock	[2]1
Port Glasgow	[2]1
Livingston	1
City of Aberdeen	3
Bridgend	2
Maesteg	1
Pyle	1
Porthcawl	1
South West Birmingham	3
Telford	2
Madeley	1
Wellington	1
Wallasey	1
Hoylake	1
Blackburn	2
Darwen	1
Manchester Openshaw	2
Halifax	[2]2
Huddersfield	[2]2
Dewsbury	[2]2
Todmorden	[2]1
City Derby	4
Gateshead	2
Felling	1
Blaydon	1
Birtley	1
Exmouth	1
Honiton	1
Tiverton	1

WAA Pathfinder sites[1]

City/town	*Number of pathfinders*
Sidmouth	1
Chelmsford	[2]2
Southend	[2]1
Rayeigh	[2]1
Willesden	1
Wembley	1
Kilburn	1
Harlesden	1
Winchester	1
Streatham	1

[1] Provisional
[2] ONE Basic Model Pilot
[3] ONE Call Centre Pilot

HOME DEPARTMENT

Afghan Airliner Hijacking

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many of the people aboard the Afghan airliner hijacked to Stansted in February 2000 are still in the United Kingdom; what is the status of each of their asylum claims; and if he will make a statement. [153689]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* Of the 170 passengers who arrived on the aircraft, 81 returned to Afghanistan.

Fifty-one passengers claimed asylum (plus 26 dependants). Because of the exceptional circumstances of the hijack and the wider issues surrounding it, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary personally decided each of the asylum claims.

Of the cases which have been considered to date, four (plus 13 dependants) have been granted asylum. A total of 34 (plus five dependants) have been refused asylum, not 35 as was stated in my answer to the hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr. Lidington) on 5 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 439W. Thirty of the subsequent appeals to the independent appellate authority have been dismissed, confirming my right hon. Friend's original decision.

The appellants whose appeals were dismissed are entitled to remain in the United Kingdom pending the outcome of their appeals to the tribunal.

Twenty-four applications are yet to be considered. Twelve of the applicants are the alleged hijackers, whose trials began in January this year, and 12 are their family members. No decision will be taken on their cases until the outcome of the trial is known.

Passports

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many days on average it takes to *(a)* process a new passport application by post and *(b)* renew a passport by post. [153297]

Mrs. Roche: The average turnaround time for straightforward and correctly completed passport applications is currently five days. This applies to both new and renewal applications.

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the Senior Civil Service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [152794]

Mr. Straw: In the non-agency Home Office the headline pay settlement was 2.5 per cent. on the pay bill. Together with the additional funds from staff turnover, staff in post received performance-related increases averaging 4.75 per cent.

Proscribed Organisations

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the organisations *(a)* he and *(b)* his officials have met concerning the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2001 since its publication. [153695]

Mr. Straw: On 28 February, when I announced that I had laid the draft order in Parliament, I met representatives of the Muslim and Palestinian communities to discuss its contents. On that day the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), also met representatives of the Sikh, Tamil and Kurdish communities for the same purpose.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the representations he received before drawing up the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) Order 2001. [153510]

Mr. Straw: A number of representations were received, including from certain foreign Governments, groups and individuals, before the draft order was laid. I have, however, taken the decisions that I have because I am satisfied that, taking account of all the information available to me, the organisations listed in the draft order meet the criteria in the Terrorism Act of being "concerned in terrorism".

Overseas Adoption

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many children were allowed into the United Kingdom from overseas countries for adoption by United Kingdom residents in the last 12 months; and if he will list the countries from which these children came. [152815]

Mrs. Roche: Information on the number of children admitted to the United Kingdom from overseas countries for adoption is not currently available. The information that is available covers the number of adopted children given indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom. This number excludes those children given limited leave to remain and who are subsequently adopted through the United Kingdom courts, becoming British citizens on the date that the final adoption order is made.

In 2000, a total of around 60 adopted children were given indefinite leave to remain. The nationalities of the children were:

Argentina
Bangladesh
Chile

China
Cameroon
Ghana
Guatemala
Hong Kong
India
Iran
Jamaica
Lebanon
Libya
St. Lucia
Nigeria
Pakistan
Romania
Singapore
Sierra Leone
South Africa
Trinidad and Tobago
Ukraine
United States of America
Vietnam
Zambia
Zimbabwe.

There were fewer than ten cases for each nationality.

Asylum Seekers

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on holding asylum seekers in Prison Service establishments. [152875]

Mrs. Roche: The Government are committed to a programme to increase the removal rate of immigration offenders and failed asylum applicants. Regrettably, it is necessary to detain some people in order to facilitate their removal at the end of the process. To this end, we are increasing the number of dedicated detention centre spaces. However, these new facilities will not become available until later in the year. In the interim, as a short-term measure, it was agreed that surplus Prison Service remand facilities could be utilised in accommodating immigration detainees. Under these arrangements, which are not exclusive to asylum seekers, only men aged 21 or over will be so accommodated.

These measures supplement existing arrangements already in place with the Prison Service in the provision of dedicated facilities at Her Majesty's Prisons Rochester, Lindholme and Haslar.

Early Release Scheme

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many prisoners who have been released under the Government's early release scheme reside in Lancashire; [153213]

(2) how many prisoners who reside in Wales were released under the early release scheme; and how many of them have re-offended. [153214]

Mr. Boateng: The figures required to answer these questions are not centrally available, and would incur disproportionate costs to retrieve.

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will estimate the number of illegal immigrants resident in Wales in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000 and *(e)* 2001. [153217]

Mrs. Roche: There is no official estimate of the number of illegal immigrants resident in Wales.

HEALTH

Food Safety (Pithing)

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on Government policy on pithing in slaughter houses. [144396]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 8 January 2001]:* Our general position is strongly to support action at European Union level to combat BSE. The pithing ban was introduced by Commission Decision 2000/418 of 29 June 2000, which introduced new EU-wide rules on specified risk material (SRM). We welcomed that decision overall, as a significant step forward in protecting consumers.

The Food Standards Agency has recently completed public consultation on a proposal to introduce a ban on pithing with effect from 1 January 2001, as required by the EU decision. Concerns that such a ban would particularly affect small and medium-sized abattoirs were raised in a number of responses to the consultation. Representations were also made that more time was needed to allow abattoirs to make the necessary changes to enable them to operate safely without pithing. In the light of these responses, the Government are currently considering very carefully when a pithing ban should be introduced.

UK Produce

Mr. Burnett: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the progress he has made to enable produce reared and processed only within the UK prominently to be advertised as such. [R] [149690]

Yvette Cooper *[holding answer 9 February 2001]:* There is no reason why produce that has been reared and processed only within the United Kingdom should not be prominently advertised as such, although such claims made in respect of fresh or frozen beef and veal are subject to the current European Community rules on beef labelling.

Doncaster Health Authority

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the value was of *(a)* the Government's financial support for Doncaster Health Authority and *(b)* additional investment in equipment, NHS modernisation, the health action zone, reform of primary care and winter planning in each year since 1996–97. [149066]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is in the table, which details the central allocations made to Doncaster health authority for each of the financial years from 1996–97 to 2000–01 (to 31 December 2000) and also the capital allocations to the two Doncaster NHS Trusts for utilisation on buildings and equipment. As part of the central allocations, money was included for Primary Care Reform, Health Action Zones, Winter Planning and NHS Modernisation. These are shown separately in the second table.

£000

Description	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*[a]
Total final health authority allocation (recurrent and non-recurrent)[1]	156,755	163,072	[b]200,531	238,835	255,332
of which:					
Primary Care reform[2]	0	53	836	285	558
HAZ[c, 3]	0	0	820	4,101	4,013
Other NHS Modernisation[4]	0	0	0	1,800	1,314
Winter Planning[5]	0	908	1,351	0	361
Additional capital investment (general capital allocations)[6]	6,189	4,139	4,481	4,277	4,879
Additional capital investment (capital Modernisation Fund)[7]	0	0	0	281	564

[a] To December 2000
[b] From 1998–99, allocations were based on unified allocations. Prior to this, non-cash limited prescribing and cash-limited General Medical Services were excluded.
[c] Includes funding for all South Yorkshire coalfields health action zones, covering Barnsley, Doncaster and Rotherman except for the following amounts which were directly allocated to Rotherham and Barnsley health authorities.

Sources:
[1] Total allocations derived from "Outturn—Reconciliation of Resources"
[2] Included within the total allocation are amounts for Primary Care Reform
[3] Included within the total allocation are amounts for Health Action Zones
[4] Included within the total allocation are amounts for Other NHS Modernisation
[5] Included within the total allocation are amounts for Winter Planning
[6] Equipment allocations (general) for EFL statements for both Doncaster NHS Trusts
[7] Equipment allocations (capital Modernisation Fund) from EFL statements for both Doncaster NHS Trusts

	1999–2000	*2000–01*
HAZ Deprivation	1,064	2,126
Smoking Cessation	349	349
Innovation Fund	25	0
	1,438	2,475

Prader-Willi Syndrome

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to amend the Registered Homes Act 1984 to allow under 18-year-olds with Prader-Willi Syndrome to enter such homes; and if he will make a statement. [149685]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 9 February 2001]:* We have no such plans. The Registered Homes Act 1984 will be repealed in its entirety when the regulatory provisions in the Care Standards Act come into effect. There is nothing in either the registered Homes Act of the Care Standards Act which would prevent children suffering from this particular condition from entering care homes.

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152656]

Ms Stuart: Since 1 May 1997 £473,201 has been spent by the Department of Health on departmental and agency logos and associated branding. Further information is in the table.

Departmental and agency logos	*Cost (£)*	*Notes*
Department of Health	112,000	Including Social Services Inspectorate and National Health Service Executive (included stationery and publications design)
Medicines Control Agency	0	
Medical Devices Agency	0	
NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency	0	
NHS Estates	0	
NHS Pensions Agency	0	
Associated branding		
Our Healthier Nation	19,684	
NHS	247,366	This logo was created before 1997. Since then the Department has spent £247,366 on developing the NHS Identity Guidelines to support the implementation of this logo across the NHS (when items are being replaced). This implementation creates savings for the NHS by taking away the need for all NHS organisations to have different logos and enabling bulk purchasing due to one standard style.

Departmental and agency logos	Cost (£)	Notes
Teenage Pregnancy Unit	250	
British Healthcare	9,580	
Quality Protects	4,310	
Capitec	2,900	Part of NHS Estates
NHS International	1,900	Part of NHS Estates
NHS Estates Engineering and Science Services	800	
NHS Direct	11,232	The original NHS Direct logo was developed as part of a campaign and not costed separately. It was later adopted more widely as the single logo for the national service and guidelines on its use were prepared. It was updated in 1999. The cost given relates to the guidelines and the 1999 revision.
ProCure21	1,080	Part of NHS Estates
Food Standards Agency	61,040	The FSA is a non-ministerial Government Department. It is accountable to Parliament through Health Ministers. It is thus not an agency of the Department. This figure covers expenditure prior to the establishment of the FSA on 1 April 2000 by its precursor, the MAFF/DH Joint Food Safety and Standards Group.
Pathology Centres	1,059	Part of Medical Devices Agency

The Department sometimes uses logos as part of advertising campaigns. These are part of the overall creative development and are not charged separately.

Youth Parliament

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to meet members of the UK youth parliament to discuss the health aspects of the parliament's manifesto. [152966]

Ms Stuart: I have not received an invitation to meet the United Kingdom's youth parliament, but would be interested in reading their manifesto.

Elderly Patients (GP Visits)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will assess the desirability of enforcing common guidelines across all general practices relating to how often general practitioners should visit their elderly patients each year. [153385]

Mr. Denham: The NHS Plan principles of ensuring that the National Health Service provides a comprehensive range of high-quality services—services based on clinical needs—will be enshrined in the National Service Framework (NSF) for older people.

The NSF, which will be published shortly, will for the first time set national standards and define service models for the health and social care of older people. The NSF will apply to general practitioners and to other providers of care to older people. There will also be programmes in place to support its implementation and progress will be measured against national milestones and performance indicators.

Radiologists and Oncologists

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* radiologists and *(b)* oncologists are contracted to the NHS in England. [153154]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is in the table.

Hospital medical consultants working in the oncology and radiology specialities—England

At 30 September 2000	Number[1]
Clinical oncology	310
Medical oncology	130
Radiology group[2]	1,620
of which:	
Clinical radiology	1,580
Nuclear medicine	30

Notes:

[1] Figures rounded to nearest ten

[2] Total may not equal sum of component parts due to rounding

Source:

Department of Health medical and dental workforce census

Care Homes

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* privately run and *(b)* local authority run care homes there were in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1999, (iv) 2000 and (v) 2001 in north-west Lancashire. [153219]

Mr. Hutton: The tables show the number of private nursing homes, hospitals and clinics for the health authority of north-west Lancashire and residential care homes in the former local authority area of Lancashire (as details of these homes are not available for north-west Lancashire). Information is presented for the years 1997 to 2000 but is not yet available for 2001.

Table 1: Number of private nursing homes, hospitals and clinics in north-west Lancashire[1], 1997 to 2000

Number

As at 31 March	Total	General nursing homes	Mental nursing homes	Hospitals and clinics
1997	81	62	16	3
1998	82	77	1	4
1999	76	59	12	5
2000	76	62	9	5

[1] Information presented for the health authority area

Source:

RH(N) Form A 1998–2000, KO36 form 1997

Table 2: Number of residential care homes in Lancashire[1] 1997 to 2000

Number

As at 31 March	*Total number of homes*	*Local authority staffed homes*	*Independent homes[2]*	*Dual registered homes[3]*
1997	1,118	106	889	123
1998	1,152	103	896	153
1999	1,182	93	926	163
2000	1,137	91	884	162

[1] Details of residential care homes are presented for the local authority area of Lancashire. From 1998, owing to local government re-organisation, figures are presented for the unitary areas of Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool and the re-organised county of Lancashire.

[2] Consists of voluntary, private and small homes.

[3] Homes that are registered to provide both residential and nursing care.

Source:
RA Form A

New Medical Schools

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to make an announcement about the establishment of new medical schools. [153135]

Mr. Denham: Responsibility for the allocation of places to higher education institutions in England lies with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). HEFCE is planning an announcement later this spring.

Camden and Islington Health Action Zone

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much his Department has spent on the Camden and Islington Health Action Zone since its inception; and what spending is planned for 2001–02. [153697]

Mr. Denham: Since its inception in April 1999 Camden and Islington Health Action Zone (HAZ) has received £3.36 million in direct funding from the Department. In 2001–02 the HAZ will receive at least a further £1.41 million, with decisions on smoking cessation and drugs prevention moneys yet to be made.

In addition, Camden and Islington Health Authority has received £2.7 million targeted funding for HAs in HAZ areas. In 2001–02 this funding is subsumed within the Health Inequalities Adjustment, of which Camden and Islington HA's share is £3.1 million.

Health Staff Pay

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list in respect of *(a)* general practitioners, *(b)* hospital consultants, *(c)* nurses and *(d)* each of the professions allied to medicine (i) average earnings on 1 April 1997, (ii) average earnings on 1 April 2001, (iii) the percentage annual pay increase for each of the last five years and (iv) the percentage pay increase between 1 April 1997 and 1 April 2001. [153201]

Mr. Denham: The information requested is provided in the tables. Information on average earnings is not yet available for hospital consultants, nurses and each of the professions allied to medicine for 2000 and 2001.

General practitioners

(i) Average earnings on 1 April 1997—£45,822.

(ii) Average earnings on 1 April 2001—£56,510.

The percentage annual pay increase for each of the last five years

Year	*IANI as of 1 April (£)*	*Percentage increase*	*IANI averaged across year when staged pay award (£)*	*Percentage increase*
1996–97	44,340	—	44,483	—
1997–98	45,822	3.3	46,031	3.5
1998–99	47,540	3.8	48,037	4.4
1999–2000	52,600	10.6	—	—
2000–01	54,220	[1]3.3	—	—
2001–02	56,510	4.2	—	—

[1] Pay increases is 3.3 per cent. but IANI only increased by 3.1 per cent. because of changes in the definition of activities that are included within IANI.

Notes:

1. Average earnings are defined as Intended Average Net Income (IANI) as recommended by Doctors and Dentists Review Body. This includes part-times and is not on a whole time equivalent basis.

2. Percentage pay increase between 1 April 1997 and 1 April 2001—23 per cent.

Estimated average total earnings of staff paid on national payscales by staff group—NHS trusts in England

	Average total earnings			
	1997	*1998*	*1999*	*Percentage increase 1997–99*
Qualified Nurses (grades C-/+)				
Average earnings (£)	18,800	19,600	21,400	—
Percentage annual increase	—	4.3	9.2	13.8
Hospital Consultants				
Consultants all				
Average earnings (£)	60,400	65,600	69,700	—
Percentage annual increase	—	8.6	6.3	15.4
Professions Allied to Medicine				
Art, Drama and Music Therapists				
Average earnings (£)	19,600	21,000	22,400	—
Percentage annual increase	—	7.1	6.7	14.3
Chiropodist				
Average earnings (£)	18,200	18,800	21,700	—
Percentage annual increase	—	3.3	15.4	19.2
Dietitian				
Average earnings (£)	19,900	20,700	22,300	—
Percentage annual increase	—	4.0	7.7	12.1
Helper				
Average earnings (£)	9,900	10,000	10,800	—
Percentage annual increase	—	1.0	8.0	9.1
Orthoptists				
Average earnings (£)	20,600	21,300	23,200	—
Percentage annual increase	—	3.4	8.9	12.6
Occupational Therapist				
Average earnings (£)	19,400	20,000	21,200	—
Percentage annual increase	—	3.1	6.0	9.3
Physiotherapist				
Average earnings (£)	20,000	20,700	22,200	—
Percentage annual increase	—	3.5	7.2	11.0
Radiographers				
Average earnings (£)	21,500	20,400	24,000	—
Percentage annual increase	—	–5.1	17.6	11.6

Estimated average total earnings of staff paid on national payscales by staff group—NHS trusts in England

	Average total earnings			
	1997	1998	1999	Percentage increase 1997–99
Technical Instructors				
Average earnings (£)	12,700	12,900	13,800	—
Percentage annual increase	—	1.6	7.0	8.7

Notes:

1. Earnings figures are based on payments in August, multiplied by 12 to get annual equivalent amounts. The basic salary and earnings of part-time are adjusted to full-time equivalents.
2. Average total earnings for 2000 are based on 1999 figures, uprated using information relating to pay rates and payscale restructuring from the advance letters, and assuming the same ratio of basic salary to total earnings.
3. Average total earnings for 2001 are based on 2000 estimated earnings, uprated using information relating to pay rates any payscale restructuring and any new additional allowances, from the advance letters.
4. Average total earnings includes basic pay, overtime and any additional allowances and enhancements.
5. Results rounded to the nearest £100.
6. Intensity supplements not included as they were introduced in April 2000.
7. Consultant discretionary points take account only of five points, not eight as introduced in April 2000.
8. For the purpose of this answer information on the Professions Allied to Medicine relates to groups of staff who have their pay determined by the Review body for Nursing staff, Midwives, Health Visitors and Professions Allied to Medicine (NPRB).

Source:

Department of Health's August 1997, 1998 and 1999 NHS Earnings Surveys.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

BNFL, Ulnes Walton

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what quantities and types of radioactive waste have been disposed of at the BNFL site at Ulnes Walton in Lancashire; and what radioactive limit is set for the site by the Environment Agency. [147743]

Mr. Meacher: Disposal of BNFL radioactive waste to the Ulnes Walton landfill site, which is operated by Lancashire Waste Services Ltd. at Leyland, Lancashire, is regulated by the Environment Agency under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993.

An authorisation was issued for the use of empty clay pits to dispose of radioactive waste. Disposals started in 1964 and continued until 1983. Within the lifetime of the authorisation a total of around 42,600 tonnes of bulk waste material containing around 30,817 kg of uranium was disposed of. Of the total material disposed of, around 95 per cent. was disposed of between 1964–73.

Clay lined pits were chosen to provide a natural barrier to movement of contaminants from the site. All waste disposals have been covered by a clay cap at least 1 metre thick which will be overlaid with 1 metre of soil as part of the overall site restoration by the operators.

The types of waste authorised for disposal were process residues, building rubble, incinerator ash, contaminated graphite, general factory-type waste and plant contaminated with natural uranium with a limit of not more than 0.2 per cent. or 0.5 per cent. of natural uranium (or equivalent). The activity limits were set for the different types of waste. The wastes were also limited by weight if the material was not substantially insoluble in water.

No disposals of radioactive waste have been made by BNFL to Ulnes Walton landfill site since 1983. An environmental monitoring programme has been conducted around the site by BNFL since 1972 and continues to date. The Environment Agency also undertakes independent check monitoring of the environment around the landfill. The results of these programmes indicate that the presence of radioactivity around the landfill is within the range found to occur naturally in the environment as a whole.

Genetically Modified Crops (Cornwall)

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what trials of genetically modified crops have been authorised for sites in Cornwall; on whose advice they were permitted and when; what results were obtained; and what conclusions his Department has reached on those results. [151793]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The public register of releases, held by my Department, shows that there have been no releases of genetically modified (GM) crops in Cornwall for the purposes of research since the register was established in 1993.

Before this, releases of GM crops were controlled by the Genetic Manipulation Regulations 1989. Persons wishing to release any genetically modified organism (GMO) were required to notify their intent to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Officials from HSE and the then Department of Environment (DoE) scrutinised these notifications for compliance with the regulations and to ensure that the release would not pose a risk to the environment. Until June 1990 they were advised by the Planned Release Sub-committee of the Health and Safety Commission's Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification and the DOE's Interim Advisory Committee on Introductions. In June 1990 these two committees were replaced by the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment.

Pre-February 1993 records show that in 1990 researchers from the Imperial College School of Applied Biology were authorised to study the invasiveness and persistence of GM crops in 12 natural habitats. There were four sites in Cornwall at Great Grogley Dawns, Davidstone Woods, Penkestle Downs and Great Wood Tregays. Each was sown with four different GM crops (oilseed rape, maize, potato and sugar beet) and equivalent conventional crops. The outcome of this work was reported in the science journal *Nature* in 1993 (Ecology of transgenic oilseed rape in natural habitats, 363, 620–623). It showed that the GM seeds tested did not perform better or persist for longer than conventional varieties over a three-year period.

More recently, the researchers reported that, after ten years of monitoring the sites, in no case were the GM plants found to be more invasive or more persistent

than their conventional counterparts (*Nature*, 2001, "Transgenic crops in natural habitats", 409, 682–683). None of the crops GM or conventional varieties increased in number at any of the sites. All populations (both GM and non-GM) of maize, sugar beet and oilseed rape were extinct at all sites within four years of sowing. Potatoes survived at one site for 10 years but these were all conventional (non-GM).

The regulators and ACRE have used the results of these studies to inform the consideration of applications to release GM plants containing the same or similar GM traits. The studies give information about the risks to the environment that they would become weeds of agriculture or invasive of natural habitats or that the introduced genes would be transferred by pollen to wild relatives whose hybrid offspring would then become more weedy or invasive.

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what residue seeds are in the natural seed bed in the sites in Cornwall selected in 1989 for genetically modified crop trials; and if he will make a statement. [151794]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* Researchers from Imperial College London carried out trials of genetically modified (GM) and conventional crop plants in 1990 at four sites in Cornwall that had been selected in 1989. The researchers have been monitoring the sites since 1990 and have recently reported the fate of the seeds and resultant plants in the journal Nature (Nature, 2001, Transgenic crops in natural habitats, 409, 682–683). They report that the populations of both GM and non-GM plants declined after the first year. For maize all lines were extinct at the start of the second year. All beet were extinct by the end of the third year and all oil seed rape were extinct within four years. No trace of GM plants was found when the sites were checked after 10 years in 2000.

Regional Assemblies

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his policy on regional assemblies in England. [152999]

Ms Beverley Hughes: We remain committed to move to directly elected regional government, where there is support as demonstrated in referendums. In the meantime, governance in the regions is evolving through the work of the chambers, regional development agencies, Government Offices and others.

Council Tax (Lancashire)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the average band D council tax levels in Lancashire in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000 and *(e)* 2001. [153165]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The average band D council tax levels for Lancashire for 1997–98, 1998–99, 1999–2000 and 2000–01 are shown in the table. Billing authorities are required to set their council taxes for 2001–02 by 11 March and notify the Department within seven days. We plan to publish the information shortly.

Year	*Average Band D council tax bill for billing authorities in Lancashire* (£)[1]	Increase (%)	*Average Band D own council tax for Lancashire county council* (£)	Increase (%)
1997–98	759	6.1	588	5.4
1998–99	848	11.6	673	14.5
1999–2000	914	7.9	731	8.5
2000–01	963	5.3	768	5.2

[1] Average council tax bill for a Band D dwelling (occupied by two adults) in shire districts within the area of Lancashire county council.

Rural Affairs

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many staff, broken down by grade, have been assigned to the Rural Advocate; [153249]

(2) how many staff at each grade will be employed in the Countryside Agency's Rural Proofing Unit. [153248]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The Countryside Agency has informed me that the total number of agency staff working in the Rural Proofing Unit is 10. This is made up of 2 Grade 7s (1 part time), 3 staff at S level, 3 at H level, 1 at E level and 1 at A level.

However, a wide range of other staff in the Countryside Agency will be supporting the Central Unit in its rural proofing work.

Rural Amenities

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of rural parishes have a GP surgery. [153131]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The most recent comprehensive survey of rural services was undertaken by the Rural Development Commission in 1997. It showed that 17 per cent. of rural parishes had a GP practice within the parish. The Countryside Agency is undertaking a further survey of the level of service provision in rural areas. It will look at more sophisticated ways of measuring access to key services in rural areas. I understand that the survey will be published in the summer of this year.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of rural parishes have *(a)* no bank and *(b)* no shop. [153133]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The most recent comprehensive survey of rural services was undertaken by the Rural Development Commission in 1997. It showed that 91 per cent. of rural parishes were without a bank/building society and 42 per cent. of rural parishes were without a permanent shop (of any kind).

The Countryside Agency is undertaking a further survey of the level of service provision in rural areas. It will look at more sophisticated ways of measuring access to key services in rural areas. I understand that the survey will be published in the summer of this year.

Departmental Policies (Jarrow)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out,

with statistical information, relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Jarrow of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [153561]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The principal kinds of funding that this Department has provided to South Tyneside metropolitan borough council in 1997 to 2002 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Jarrow. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*[1]2001–02*
Revenue Support Grant	67.806	71.803	77.809	76.875	81.201
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	34.132	35.529	38.344	43.029	41.716
Housing Investment Programme	3.203	3.652	3.693	10.809	[2]3.284
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	17.224	15.952	15.527	15.741	n/k
Capital Receipts Initiative	0.896	3.128	3.065	n/a	n/a
Loan Charges Defective Housing	0.062	0.062	0.062	0.062	0.062
SRB funding	[3]1.857	[3]6.382	[3]8.448	[3]7.941	[3]6.983
Neighbourhood Renewal funding	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	2.692
ERDF funding	0.386	0.522	0.828	0.671	n/k
Transport Supplementary Grant	0.409	0.254	0.536	0	0
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	0.409	0.254	0	0	0
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	0.880	0.880	1.400	1.876	3.171
Rural Bus Challenge Grant	0	[4]1.255	[4]0.361	[4]0.560	n/k
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant	0	[4]0.054	[4]0.059	[4]0.082	n/k
Capital Challenge	0.788	1.222	0.990	0	0
(Supplementary Credit and Basic Credit Approvals)	[5]0.399	[5]1.118	[5]0.0001	0	0

[1] Where known.
[2] This figure does not include the Major Repairs Allowances allocated to the authority which amounts to £11.071 million.
[3] 1997–98 SRB figure includes Round 3 funding for "South Shields Challenge"; 1998–99 SRB figure includes Round 4 funding for "People, Employment and Pride"; 1999–2000 SRB figure includes Round 5 funding for "Extending the South Shields Challenge"; 2000–01 SRB figure includes Round 6 funding for "Jobs and Community".
[4] Figures quoted are the full amounts give to the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Executive of whom the authority is a partner.
[5] Tyne and Wear Fire Brigade also received Capital Challenge funding. This was spent on the training centre at Barmston Mere, Washington, although the whole of Tyne and Wear benefited from the investment.

East Coast Main Line Franchise

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Strategic Rail Authority first asked him to confirm its recommendation of its preferred bidder for the East Coast Main Line franchise; and when he will announce his decision. [153255]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The Franchising Director made his initial recommendation on the East Coast Main Line franchise on 8 December 2000, which we have been considering. The Strategic Rail Authority announced a pause in the replacement process for this franchise on 14 February, which it subsequently lifted on 2 March. A decision will be announced in due course.

Woodlands

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to increase regulation of permitted development rights to provide additional protection to ancient woodland. [153680]

Ms Beverley Hughes: This issue was raised in a recent working group report for the English Forestry Forum. The Government are currently considering their response to the recommendations contained in that report.

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the Senior Civil Service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [152801]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The headline pay settlement was 3.5 per cent. on the pay bill and, together with the additional funds from staff turnover, staff in post received increases averaging 4.9 per cent.

Air Quality (Tyneside)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the days on which the air quality on Tyneside was classified as severely polluted in the last five years. [153080]

Mr. Hill: The national automatic monitoring station in Newcastle on Tyneside has been in operation since 1992. The dates when levels of air pollution were recorded as high or very high at the Newcastle City Centre monitoring station over the last five years are as listed.

1996

10 March
11 March
15 March
16 March
21 March
22 March
23 March
24 March
20 August
7 December

1997

None

1998

13 May

1999

None

2000

None.

All these pollution episodes were attributable to levels of particles in the air, except for those on 20 August 1996 and 13 May 1998, when levels of sulphur dioxide were high.

Housing

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the planned capital investment in council and registered social landlord new building in the 2000–01 financial year. [153698]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: Planned capital investment in new development of housing stock by registered social landlords (RSLs) in 2000–01 funded through the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme amounts to approximately £619 million. This is expected to lever in a further £656 million of private finance. Provision of new building by local authorities planned through the Housing Revenue Account amounts to £55 million and through Local Authority Social Housing Grant to £174.9 million in 2000–01.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many dwellings were completed in each London borough *(a)* in each year since 1997 and *(b)* in 2001 to date, broken down into (i) private residential, (ii) private rented, (iii) registered social landlords and (iv) local authorities. [153696]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The available figures have been deposited in the Library.

Regeneration Projects (Islington)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the regeneration projects in Islington supported by his Department since May 1997. [153511]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The following regeneration schemes have been allocated funding from the Department in the London borough of Islington since May 1997:

	£
Capital Challenge (Marquess Estate)	
1997–98	1,500,000
1998–99	4,500,000
1999–2000	3,500,000
Single Regeneration Budget: Kings Cross Partnership	
1997–98	2,995,000
1998–99	7,961,000
1999–2000	8,279,000
2000–01	8,447,000
2001–02	5,944,000

	£
Single Regeneration Budget: Finsbury Park Partnership[1]	
1999–2000	300,000
2000–01	2,546,000
2000–02	4,902,000
Single Regeneration Budget: Futures Gateway[2]	
1998–99	31,581
1999–2000	109,751
2000–01	71,400
New Deal for Communities: New Finsbury New Deal[3]	
2000–01	681,785

[1] This scheme is a partnership between the London boroughs of Islington, Hackney and Haringey. Apart from £3,800,000, earmarked over the lifetime of the scheme for housing improvements on the Tollington estate, it is not possible to identify specific spend within Islington.

[2] This scheme is a partnership between the London boroughs of Islington and Hackney. It is not possible to identify specific spend within Islington.

[3] This funding was provided for Phase 2 of the scheme to enable the Partnership to develop a delivery Plan for Phase 3, and to fund some early win projects.

A379

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will meet representatives of Devon county council, the South Hams district council, the Slapton, Stokenham, Stoke Fleming and Strete parish councils and the hon. Member for Totnes to discuss the continued closure of the A379 between Strete Gate and Torcross, Devon and its effect on local business and tourism. [153739]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I fully appreciate that local people want to see as swift a resolution as possible to this situation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham, (Mr. Hill), recently concluded that meeting South Hams district council would not assist the process of finding the most rapid solution possible to this issue. However the Government Office for the South West Region has been asked to liaise with all the bodies concerned to ensure that the urgency of the situation is appreciated and that all work to resolve the problem is undertaken as quickly as possible.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will instruct Devon county council not to pursue a statutory environmental impact assessment before providing a temporary reinstatement of the A379 between Strete Gate and Torcross, South Devon. [153741]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Decisions on whether an environmental impact assessment is required for projects requiring planning permission are in the first place a matter for the local planning authority. Devon county council is the local planning authority, and in this role it has issued a "screening opinion" that an EIA is required. No appeal has been made to the Secretary of State.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the steps he is taking to arrange for the reinstatement of the A379 between Strete Gate and Torcross, Devon. [153740]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I fully appreciate the concern which the hon. Member and the people of South Hams feel, and the impact which the closure of this road is having.

Devon county council, English Nature and MAFF are working together to reach a consensus on the way forward. I am advised that jointly Devon county council and South Hams district council are arranging meetings on the 19 and 23 March for all local interested parties to be given the up to date situation in their endeavours to resolve this matter.

The Government Office for the South West Region has been asked to liaise with all the bodies concerned to ensure that the urgency of the situation is appreciated and that all work to resolve the problem is undertaken as quickly as possible.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the cost of conducting a statutory environmental impact assessment before reinstating permanently the A379 between Strete Gate and Torcross, Devon. [153742]

Ms Beverley Hughes: It is not for the Secretary of State to carry out an environmental impact assessment in this situation and therefore the Secretary of State has not made an assessment of the cost.

Gypsy Sites Refurbishment Grant Programme

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will issue the results of round 1 of the gypsy Sites Refurbishment Grant programme. [154040]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department has today written to all local authorities that submitted bids for Gypsy Sites Refurbishment Grant. 75 bids were received for this first round of the £17 million three-year grant programme. A total of 38 projects have been approved for grant funding in 2001–2002. A list of successful and unsuccessful bids has been placed in the Library of the House.

All bids were evaluated against key criteria including: quality of the project plan; outcome of consultation with residents; cost of the project; site condition analysis; previous investment history; site sustainability and certainty of the local contribution element.

Authorities whose bids have been successful are being given evaluation feedback. We consider this is important in its own right. It will also afford authorities the opportunity to improve their bids and resubmit them for consideration in rounds 2 and 3.

We believe that the existing network of local authority owned gypsy sites represents a valuable resource for gypsies. The three year grant programme is in recognition of the importance the Government attach to local authorities keeping their sites in good condition and available for use by gypsies. It is also in line with our aim of providing everyone with the opportunity of a decent home.

The injection of funding, and that which will follow in rounds two and three, will help local authorities extend the useful life of sites; bring them into full use and improve the quality of life for residents. Helping to keep gypsy sites available for use is also an important part of Government policy to minimise the disruption that can arise from unauthorised encampments.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Caplin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress is being made in concluding public service agreements. [154127]

Ms Armstrong: We have today concluded a second group of local public service agreements. The agreements are with the following authorities: Birmingham metropolitan borough council, Cambridgeshire county council, Derbyshire county council, London Borough of Lewisham, London Borough of Richmond-upon-Thames, Sheffield city council and Sunderland city council. I am arranging for copies of these agreements to be placed in the Library.

Negotiations are continuing with the six remaining authorities taking part in the pilot scheme of local public service agreements. We expect to conclude these agreements soon.

Regional Affairs Committee

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons the Regional Affairs Committee has not met in this Parliament; and what plans he has for it to meet. [151159]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* Now that the membership of the Committee has been determined, the Government are taking steps to arrange an early meeting of the Committee. This will be discussed through the usual channels.

PRIME MINISTER

UK Youth Parliament

Q12. **Mr. Rowe:** To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to meet members of the UK youth parliament. [152251]

The Prime Minister: I have no plans to do so, although I understand my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has offered to do so. If I have the time I will do so myself.

Overseas Visits (Special Advisers)

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Prime Minister how many written approvals he has issued of overseas visits by special advisers accompanying a Minister since May 1997. [151561]

The Prime Minister: No central log of such approvals is held. However, the cost of special advisers accompanying Ministers on overseas visits is included in the figures published annually on Ministers' visits overseas. Figures for 1999–2000 were published on 28 July 2000, *Official Report*, column 969W. This showed that expenditure on Ministerial overseas visits in 1999–2000 was £4.6 million compared with £7.9 million in the last year of the previous Administration.

Departmental Websites (General Election)

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Prime Minister what procedures have been put in place to prevent departmental websites from disseminating material that could be of advantage to the governing party during a general election; and if he will publish them. [152042]

The Prime Minister: Election guidance is routinely issued to all civil servants once an election has been called. The guidance issued prior to the last election covered Government information activity in all its forms. It recognised the need to ensure that, although Departments could properly continue to provide factual explanation of current Government policy, statements and decisions during a campaign, they had to be particularly careful not to become involved in a partisan way in election issues, and to protect departmental systems from serving or appearing to serve a party political purpose. These principles remain unchanged, and guidance for any future general election will build on them to reflect the increasing use of the internet by Government. The guidance will be published when an election is called.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Meat Imports

Mrs. Ann Winterton: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the total tonnage of beef imported from the Republic of South Africa in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000. [151917]

Ms Quin: The total tonnage of beef imported from the Republic of South Africa between 1998 and 2000, as recorded by the Overseas Trade Statistics, is given in the table.

	UK imports from South Africa	*Percentage of total beef imports*
1998	339	0.17
1999	291	0.13
2000	218	0.09

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much meat has been imported from countries which have recorded BSE in the last year for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [152299]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The table shows imports of meat in 1999 and January to November 2000 from those countries which recorded BSE in 2000.

Imports of meat[1] 1999–2000 from countries which have recorded BSE

tonnes

	1999	*2000[2]*
Belgium		
All meat	42,350	43,718
of which beef	1,583	1,809
Denmark		
All meat	218,395	222,121
of which beef	2,728	2,837
France		
All meat	155,621	130,063
of which beef	8,304	5,078
Germany		
All meat	43,637	51,790
of which beef	3,246	4,241
Irish Republic		
All meat	192,369	182,903
of which beef	97,338	98,592
Netherlands		
All meat	333,176	367,962
of which beef	13,533	11,168
Portugal		
All meat	224	301
of which beef	[3]1	—
Spain		
All meat	14,121	14,144
of which beef	1,208	1,679
Switzerland[4]		
All meat	24	728

[1] Meat and meat preparations (including poultry, meat and game)
[2] January to November
[3] Less than
[4] 2000 (January-December)
Note:
Data for EU countries are provisional and subject to amendment
Source:
Overseas Trade Statistics

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food who pays the cost of inspection of imported meats from *(a)* EU and *(b)* other countries; and if he will make a statement. [152805]

Ms Quin: Meat produced within the European Union may circulate freely within the single market, and is subject to random checks by the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) or by the relevant local authority (LA) at the point of destination within the United Kingdom. Depending on the perceived health risk, checks may be random or 100 per cent. Following the recent identification of specified risk material in imports of meat from Germany and the current foot and mouth disease problems in the UK, the MHS has been instructed to step up levels of inspection to ensure that increased volumes of imports can be checked for the necessary health marks and correct documentation. If the point of destination is a meat cutting plant or a licensed cold store, the costs of inspection are charged to the operator of that premises. If the point of destination is a meat products or preparations premises, the costs of inspection are paid either by the Food Standards Agency (for MHS inspection at plants co-located with slaughterhouses or cutting plants) or by the LA (for inspection in plants separate from slaughterhouses or cutting plants).

All meat imported from third countries into the UK must enter at designated UK Border Inspection Posts (BIP) where it is subject to veterinary inspections. The inspection services at the BIP are the responsibility of the

local authority. UK and EC legislation requires that costs incurred by the local authority while carrying out checks are recovered from the importer.

Bovine TB

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will invoke precautionary measures in respect of bovine TB to reduce the most commonly recognised causal factors. [150871]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The Government have a wide-ranging strategy in place to control cattle TB and find science-based solutions to the problem. This includes work on cattle testing, husbandry factors, TB vaccines and the role played by wildlife. Ministers are keeping under review the need to take additional measures pending results from the research in progress.

Pig Swill

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what penalties apply for the collection from ships and aircraft of swill derived from outside the UK. [152382]

Ms Quin: Controls on catering waste from aircraft and ships landed in the UK require that it be collected and sent for disposal in secure transport under the authorisation and approval of local Divisional Veterinary Officers. The material may not be used for swill feeding to pigs. Failure to observe these conditions may result in prosecution.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the number of pigs fed with swill. [152832]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* We estimate that, last year, around 82,000 pigs in Great Britain were fed on swill, around 1.4 per cent. of the total GB pig population.

Milk

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact of rules regarding milk producer monopoly situations in *(a)* the UK and *(b)* the rest of the EU; and if he will make a statement. [152284]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The Government's view is that milk production is subject to the same competition rules on monopolies as other sectors of the economy. The hon. Member will be aware of the Monopolies and Mergers Commission's report on the supply in GB of raw cow's milk, which was published in July 1999. It concluded that Milk Marque was abusing its monopoly in the supply of milk.

No official assessment has been made by the Government of the situation in the rest of the EU.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what advice he is giving in relation to the foot and mouth epidemic (1) to agronomists about walking fields in order for them to recommend agricultural pesticide and fertiliser programmes; [152688]

(2) to agricultural contractors about the conduct of field operations. [152689]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* Visits to farms and across farmland could bring contact with livestock susceptible to foot and mouth disease. Advice and precautions to be exercised by people working in the countryside has been posted on MAFF's website www.maff.gov.uk.

Central to this advice is that people should follow strict cleansing procedures which would include leaving vehicles outside the farm, disinfecting boots and wearing boots or clothing supplied by the farm. People working in the countryside should ensure that all mud, slurry and manure is washed off before they leave the premises.

It is essential that all visits to farms and possible contacts with animals are recorded. The records should include the date and time of the visit. Should disease occur on a farm then these records will be used to trace movements and possible spread of the disease.

Sugar Regime

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on recent developments in the sugar sector concerning reform of the regime and the Everything but Arms initiative. [151399]

Ms Quin: There have been no recent discussions on sugar reform pending the Opinion of the European Parliament and a decision on the Everything but Arms proposal. Now that the General Affairs Council has reached a decision on EBA, I would expect negotiations on sugar reform to resume shortly.

Under the General Affairs Council's decision on EBA there will be transitional arrangements for sensitive products, which in the case of sugar mean an increasing duty-free quota from this year, with general reductions in duty phased in from 2006.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Retailing

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the organisations and companies that have been sent, for consultation, a draft of the code of practice for retailers' behaviour in relationship with their suppliers, following the Competition Commission's report on the supply of groceries from multiple stores. [153541]

Dr. Howells: The following organisations and companies have been sent a draft of the code of practice for consultation:

Food and Drink Federation, AIM (International Brands Group), Dairy Industry Federation, British Independent Fruit Growers Association, British Printing Industry Federation, Brewers & Licensed Retailers Association, Periodical Publishers Association, Federation of Wholesale Distributors, GPMU, National Farmers Union, British Brands Group, Scottish Executive, Scottish Farmers Union, Farmers' Union of Wales, Tenant Farmers Association, Packaging and Industrial Films Association, Northern Ireland Bakery Council, Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association, Scottish Food and Drink Association,

British Oat and Barley Miller's Association, Scottish Dairy Association, British Hardware & Housewares Manufacturers Association, British Giftware Association, Biscuit, Cake, Chocolate & Confectionery Alliance, British Frozen Food Federation, Pizza, Pasta & Italian Food Association, British Soft Drinks Association, Chilled Food Association, Cold Storage and Distribution Federation, Health Food Manufacturers' Association, National Association of British and Irish Millers, National Association of Master Bakers, National Dried Fruit Trade Association/British Food Importers and Distributors, Pre-Packed Flour Association, Snack, Nut and Crisp Manufacturers Association, UK Association of Frozen Food Producers, The Gin and Vodka Association of Great Britain, National Association of Cider Makers, The Association of Licensed and Multiple Retailers, The Society of Independent Brewers, Wine and Spirit Association, United Kingdom Vineyards Association, Fresh Produce Consortium, Asparagus Growers' Association, Blackcurrant Growers' Association, Brassica Growers' Association, British Food Importers and Distributors' Association, British Iceberg Growers' Association, British Onion Producers' Association, British Onion Growers' Association, British Apples and Pears Ltd., Federation of Agricultural Co-operatives Ltd., Tomato Growers' Association, British Potato Council, The British Trout Association, The Salmon and Trout Association, The Shellfish Association of Great Britain, British Starch Industry Association, British Rice Millers' Association, Grain and Feed Trade Association, Maize Growers' Association, Maltsters Association of Great Britain, National Association of British & Irish Millers, The Rice Association, United Kingdom Agricultural Supply Trade Association Ltd., UK Maize Millers' Association, Seed Crushers and Oil Processors' Association/National Edible Oils Distributors, Federation of Oils, Seeds and Fats Association, British Edible Pulse Association, British Egg Industry Council, British Poultry Meat Federation, British Free Range Egg Producers' Association, United Kingdom Egg Producers Association Ltd., The Council for Responsible Nutrition, The Proprietary Association of Great Britain, British Meat Manufacturers Association, British Meat Federation, International Meat Trade Association, Meat and Livestock Commission, National Pig Association, UK Association of Frozen Food Producers, National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, Federation of British Wholesale Fish Merchants' Association, National Federation of Inland Wholesale Fish Merchants, Federation of Milk Groups, Specialist Cheesemakers Association, Quality Meat Scotland, Scottish Quality Trout, Scottish Association of Meat Wholesalers, Scottish Agriculture Organisation Society, Scottish Quality Salmon, Scottish Association of Master Bakers, The Scotch Whisky Association, Seafood Scotland, Asda, Somerfield, Tesco, Sainsbury and Safeway.

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish a draft of the code of practice for retailer behaviour in relation to their suppliers, as recommended by the Competition Commission's report on the supply of groceries from multiple stores; and if he will place a copy in the Library. [153540]

Dr. Howells: The Office of Fair Trading is currently consulting with the representatives of suppliers on the Code of Practice. A copy of the draft code was sent to these representatives on 14 February. A copy of the draft Code of Practice is available in the Library of the House.

PFI Projects

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much money has been paid by his Department to *(a)* accountancy and *(b)* legal firms in each year since 1 May 1997 in relation to PFI projects. [153262]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* Over the period in question the Department has paid a total of £1.113 million for accountancy assistance and £1.731 million for legal advice in respect of its PFI projects. The annual amounts are listed in the table.

£000

Year	*Accountancy*	*Legal fees*
1997–98	388	645
1998–99	588	1,070
1999–2000	33	16
2000–01	104	0

Astra

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if file documents 120, 121, 106, 140 and 141 of the inspectors' files in relation to the Astra case are company documents; and if he will place copies in the Library. [152767]

Dr. Howells: I refer to the replies I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr. Cohen) on 22 March 2000, *Official Report*, column 611W, and 13 April 2000, *Official Report*, column 273–74W.

Air Conditioning

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what estimate he has made of the amount invested in air conditioning equipment using hydrocarbons. [153622]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Unfortunately, insufficient data are available to provide a reliable estimate.

Arms Brokers

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the introduction of extra territorial powers to control British arms brokers operating overseas. [153516]

Dr. Howells: The 1998 White Paper on Strategic Export Controls (Cm 3989) proposed that new primary legislation should give the Government powers to impose controls on the involvement of persons in the UK or UK persons abroad in trafficking and brokering in arms and other controlled goods. The White Paper proposed the introduction of controls under this power on trafficking and brokering activities by persons in the UK or UK persons abroad which involve the supply of arms to countries subject to UN, EU, OSCE or UK national embargo, and the supply of long-range missiles and of

equipment whose export has already been banned because of evidence of its use in torture. In addition, the Government have decided, as part of its review of the White Paper proposals, to introduce a general system of licensing for arms trafficking and brokering, the details of which will be set out when the draft Export Control Bill is published.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the IT projects his Department plans to undertake in the next year; and if he will state in each case the *(a)* expected date of commencement and completion and *(b)* cost. [151480]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The DTI plans to undertake the following significant IT projects in the next year. A number of smaller projects are likely to be undertaken, which are expected to proceed broadly to time and budget.

Project	*Commencement*	*Expected date of Completion*	*Cost £ million*
Export Licensing Via the Internet System (ELVIS) Phase 2	April 2001	March 2002	2.0
Manufacturing Advisory Service (website and Database)[1]	June 2001	December 2001	1.25
British Trade International e-business strategy programme[2]	April 2001	March 2004	19.8
UK Oil portal	April 2001	2004	2.0
Companies House core systems replacement programme[3]	April 2001	March 2004	15.0
Radiocommunications Agency Accounting System (ALPACA) Stage 9	November 2001	March 2003	0.6
Radiocommunications Agency Strategic Management Information System Stage 3	May 2001	March 2002	0.5
Radiocommunications Agency Electronic Licensing Project Stage 2	May 2001	March 2002	0.9

[1] This cost is spread over three years for development and support.
[2] This programme is grouped into five work streams incorporating: new e-services for business; customer management system; systems to support inward investment; activities to encourage an e-business culture within BTI; and enhancements to the IT infrastructure. There will be a three year rollout strategy of sub-projects.
[3] This programme is currently at pre-formal estimate stage; final cost and duration have not yet been fixed.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the IT projects currently undertaken in his Department; and if he will state the *(a)* expected completion date and *(b)* cost of each project. [151511]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* The following significant IT projects are currently being undertaken within the DTI. There are a number of smaller projects in progress all of which are expected to proceed broadly to time and budget.

Project	*Expected completion date*	*Cost (£ million)*
Small Business Service Gateway[1]	April 2001	11.2
Open Individual Export Licensing System (OIELS)	July 2001	0.6
Export Licensing Via the Internet System (ELVIS)[2] Phase 1	April 2001	0.2
British Trade International's Trade Partners UK internet gateway website (tradepartners.gov.uk) and intranet project[3]	Launched May 2000	1.3
Prosecution Case Management system[4]	March 2002	2.3
Patent Office Integrated Bibliographic and Image System for Trade Marks	March 2001	2.0
DTI electronic records management system (MATRIX)	December 2003	73.0
Integration of Fixed Links Licensing into Radiocommunications Agency Unified Licensing System	April 2001	0.5
Radiocommunications Agency Electronic Licensing Programme[5]	June 2001	0.5

[1] The SBS Gateway will go live in April 2001 but other elements are likely to be added thereafter.
[2] This is the first phase in a larger project.
[3] The Trade Partners UK Gateway website service was originally launched in May 2000 and is subject to ongoing development and enhancements.
[4] This project has started quite recently. Decisions on final lifetime cost (over an anticipated 10-year life) and duration will depend on the results of analysis which is still under way.
[5] Initial phase, including Electronic News gathering permissions and web-enabling of some licence products.

Rayo Rocket System

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what controls Her Majesty's Government have over the *(a)* sale and *(b)* re-export of components or sub-systems exported from Britain to Chile, and assembled in Chile into the Rayo rocket system; [152487]

(2) what discussions there have been between his Department and *(a)* British Aerospace/Royal Ordnance, and *(b)* the Chilean authorities, about (i) the export of the Rayo rocket system to Chile and (ii) its subsequent re-export; [152488]

(3) if the export since July 1997 of components on sub-systems for the Rayo rocket system, from British Aerospace/Royal Ordnance to the British/Chilean company FAMAE Ordnance Ltd., requires *(a)* export licences and *(b)* end-user certificates; and what such export licences or end-user certificates have been issued; [152486]

(4) when an export licence was granted for the pre-production model of the Rayo rocket system exported by British Aerospace/Royal Ordnance to Chile in July or August 1997. [152485]

Dr. Howells: The export of the Rayo rocket system, including components and sub-systems thereof, is controlled under entry ML4 in Part III of Schedule 1 to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, commonly known as the Military List. This means that an export licence would normally be required before any such components are exported. Since 28 July 1997 all applications for a licence to export arms from the UK have been considered under the UK national arms export licensing criteria, now the consolidated EU and UK national arms export licensing criteria. Criterion seven includes the assessment of export licence applications against the risk of diversion within the buyer country or re-export under undesirable conditions.

Details of licences issued for Chile since 2 May 1997 have been outlined in the Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls. Between 1 January 2000 and 28 February 2001, eight Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and no Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) have been issued covering the export of goods with the relevant rating to Chile. As regards how many of these covered components on sub-systems for the Rayo rocket system and were issued to Royal Ordnance/British Aerospace inquiries are being made under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. As confidential information is involved, the party concerned is being asked if they object to its disclosure. I will write to the hon. Member in the light of its response, and will place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

All applications for Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) for the permanent export of goods subject to strategic export control must be supported by appropriate end-user documentation. Where the intended consignee is a Government body, and the application is not for a licence to export chemicals listed in Schedule 2 or 3 to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) to a state which has not ratified the CWC, a copy of the official Government purchase order or a copy of the relevant part of the Government contract covering the order is normally sufficient. An end-user undertaking is not usually required for Standard Individual Export Licence (SIEL) applications for the temporary export of goods subject to strategic export control.

An Open Individual Export Licence (OIEL) is specific to an individual exporter and covers multiple shipments of specified goods to specified destinations and/or, in some cases, specified consignees. The exporter must obtain from each consignee an appropriate written undertaking for each export before the export takes place, or not later than one month after the date of export. Where the exporter intends to make more than one export to the same consignee in any period of one year, an annual written undertaking may be obtained in fulfilment of this requirement.

As with SIELs, where goods are being consigned direct to a Government body, we will normally accept a copy of the Government purchase contract order, or the relevant extracts from the contract.

An Open General Export Licence (OGEL) allows the export from the UK of goods specified in the goods coverage of the OGEL to specified destinations. In such circumstances, end-user undertakings are not required. Copies of OGELs are routinely placed in the Library of the House.

Other than routine discussions involving the Department for Trade and Industry's Export Control Organisation during the licensing process, the DTI has no records of any discussions with either British Aerospace/Royal Ordnance or the Chilean authorities about the export or re-export of Rayo rocket systems.

Compact Discs

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations she has received on the retail price of compact discs. [152098]

Dr. Howells: Following DTI's first International Price Survey officials have been monitoring developments in the CD market. Officials have had discussions with record companies, retailers, consumer organisations and the Office of Fair Trading.

A competition inquiry into the supply of compact discs was launched by the Office of Fair Trading on 9 February. The inquiry will consider whether the way in which the record companies have responded to imports of cheaper CDs from elsewhere in the EU amounts to a breach of the Competition Act 1998. The inquiry is expected to take six months.

Departmental Policies (Don Valley)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Don Valley constituency, the effects on Doncaster of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153525]

Mr. Caborn: The Department has provided the following support for businesses in Doncaster since May 1997. Information at constituency level is not available in all cases.

Regional Selective Assistance (RSA)

RSA is a capital investment grant linked to the creation or safeguarding of jobs in designated areas of need. 57 RSA grant offers totalling £4.0 million have been made to businesses in the Doncaster district, to support projects with a total capital expenditure of £5.4 million, and to create and safeguard a total of 991 jobs. Within these figures 12 offers related to the Don Valley constituency where grant of £0.3 million was offered against capital spend of £2.8 million and the creation/safeguarding of 87 jobs.

Enterprise Grants

The Enterprise Grants scheme is a simplified scheme that was introduced in April 2000 to help small firms undertake fixed capital investment projects. Five offers totalling £106,500 have been made to firms in the Doncaster district, of which two were in the Don Valley constituency.

Smart

Smart awards are designed to help small firms with the introduction of new products and processes. Ten Smart awards totalling £576,444 have been made to firms in the Doncaster district, of which five were in the Don Valley constituency.

Business Link

Doncaster Chamber of Commerce and Business Link have provided services to small businesses in the Doncaster area (including the Don Valley constituency) since 1997. These include general and specialised advice

to help businesses grow, export development counselling, ICT advice, and a full range of specialist information. From April 2001 these services will be provided by the Small Business Service operating through a new South Yorkshire Business Link with local concessions, including one in Doncaster. This new service will be more customer focused ensuring that services are driven by local need.

Departmental Policies (Jarrow)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will set out, with statistical information, relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Jarrow of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [153564]

Mr. Caborn: It is not possible to quantify the direct effect of all the Department's policies and actions. However we do hold statistical information on the programmes administered by the Department and the expected effects of that funding in the Jarrow constituency are set out in the table.

	Nature of funding		
	Regional Selective Assistance	*Enterprise Grants*	*SMART*
1997–98			
Number of companies	11	0	0
Amount offered	355,000	0	0
Jobs created	102	0	0
Jobs safeguarded	0	0	0
1998–99			
Number of companies	8	0	2
Amount offered	379,000	0	84,150
Jobs created	77	0	0
Jobs safeguarded	10	0	0
1999–2000			
Number of companies	12	1	1
Amount offered	687,850	15,000	45,000
Jobs created	107	6	2
Jobs safeguarded	46	0	4
2000–01			
Number of companies	1	5	0
Amount offered	200,000	92,640	0
Jobs created	176	74	0
Jobs safeguarded	0	10	0

Post Office

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the overseas companies in which the Post Office has investment, with the date of each investment and the amount. [R] [153181]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The Post Office has advised that it has made investments in overseas companies as listed in the table.

Company	*Post Office shareholding per cent.*	*Total investment £ million*	*Date investment completed*
Citymail Group (Sweden)	11.2	4	Summer 1998
German Parcel (Germany)	100	308	January 1999
Der Kurier (Germany)	100	9	April 1999
Williames Group of Companies (Ireland)	100	10	December 1999
Citipost (Europe, North America, Pacific Rim)	100	28	January 2000
Crie Group (France)	100	15	February 2000
Pakke-Trans A/S (Denmark)	100	20	March 2000
General Parcel Austria & Slovenia	100	14	March 2000
Nederlandse Pakket Dienst (The Netherlands)	100	72	April 2000
Extand SA (France)	100	97	May 2000
Citymail Sweden	67	22	June 2000
Domberger Pakket Dienst (Germany)	100	45	June 2000
Direzione Gruppo Executive SpA (Italy)	49	29	December 2000

CABINET OFFICE

Public Service Opening Hours

Ms Ryan: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what plans she has to extend public service opening hours in line with modernising Government commitments. [154039]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I am pleased to announce that I am launching a booklet entitled "Open all Hours, service hours at times to suit" on Thursday 15 March. The report showcases a number of first-rate examples of public services that have extended their opening hours so as to be more accessible to the consumer.

I have placed copies of the booklet in the Libraries of both Houses.

Special Advisers

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will make a statement on the increase in the number of special advisers in Government Departments since 1997. [153405]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government's response to the sixth report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, published in July 2000, sets out the position on the appointment of special advisers.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the senior civil service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [152799]

Mr. Chris Smith: In my Department the average performance-related increase in salaries for staff below the senior civil service was 4.5 per cent. in the 2000–01 pay round. Negotiations are continuing in the Royal Parks Agency on their settlement.

Pensioners (Free TV Licences)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many pensioner households in the north-east region of England are in receipt of a free television licence. [153081]

Janet Anderson: TV Licensing, which administers this concession for the BBC as licensing authority, is not able to provide geographical breakdowns of the number of free licences issued. Estimates based on the 1991 census indicate that there were approximately 158,000 people aged 75 or over living in the North East Government Office region, although television licences cover households rather than individuals.

Compulsory Purchase (Rochford)

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he received the application by Rochford district council to permit it to purchase compulsorily the premises at 35, 37 and 39 West road in Rochford; when he will reply; and what time limit applies to the consideration of such applications. [153506]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* An application to the Secretary of State to confirm a compulsory purchase order in respect of these premises was received on 16 June 2000 and, following an objection by the owner, a (postponed) public inquiry was held on 9 and 18 January 2001. The Inspector's report was received on 15 February 2001 and is being considered. There is no time limit for making a decision, but we shall handle the matter as expeditiously as possible.

Royal Parks Police

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if the Royal Parks police will introduce a grievance procedure similar to that of the Metropolitan police service; [153468]

(2) if he will make a statement on the number of initiatives on equal opportunities, community and race relations awareness and training in the Royal Parks police in the last three years; [153469]

(3) how many officers and staff there are in the Royal Parks police, broken down by sex and ethnicity; [153466]

(4) how many outstanding employment tribunal claims from officers and staff of the Royal Parks police there are, indicating which will be heard more than a year after submission of the claims; [153467]

(5) when and for what reason there was a change in the Chief Officer of the Royal Parks police; and if he will make a statement; [153465]

(6) what briefing he has received from the Royal Parks police on the employment situation of Pepe Kaur; and if he will make a statement. [153470]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Responsibility for the subject of these questions has been delegated to the Royal Parks Agency under its Chief Executive, William Weston. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from William Weston to Mr. Peter Bottomley, dated 14 March 2001:

I have been asked by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to reply to your six Parliamentary Questions about the Royal Parks Constabulary (RPC) because this is an operational matter for which the Agency is responsible.

A review of the RPC by former Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Anthony Speed recommended that the senior management of the Force should be restructured and its Chief Officer should be a Superintendent. The then Chief Officer who was a Commander, was made redundant in February. An Acting Chief Officer has been appointed.

All probationer officers have equal opportunities training as part of their probationer training. Established RPC officers are required to attend mandatory training in equal opportunities. A course was run in 1997/98 for all officers, which ensured compliance with National Police Training. Officers also attend a two-day legislation refresher course every year, which takes account of community race relations and equal opportunities issues. Over the past three years this has included training on the race relations implications of Stop and Search and guidance on the definition of a racist incident. This year's legislation refresher course (January-April 2001) includes community race relations awareness. A community and race relations/diversity programme is currently being developed for delivery in 2001/2. Gay liaison training has been given to appointed gay liaison officers.

There is one outstanding employment tribunal claim from a police officer. The claim was made to the Employment Tribunal on 15 September 2000. The hearing is scheduled for 24 September 2001.

There are 157 officers in the Constabulary. 109 are male and of those, 6 are from ethnic minorities. Of the 48 female officers, 3 are from ethnic minorities.

I informed Ministers that Pepe Kaur, a probationer WPC, had brought a claim to the Employment Tribunal alleging racial discrimination against the Agency and that she has been absent on sick leave since last July.

The Royal Parks Agency is currently updating its grievance procedure and has sought advice from the Metropolitan Police Service on aspects relating to the Constabulary.

Culture Online

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will publish the Culture Online Vision report. [154138]

Mr. Chris Smith: I am tomorrow publishing the vision for Culture Online, the first stage in the development of the business case for this major new initiative.

The vision sets out how Culture Online could deliver the knowledge and resources of our museums and galleries, libraries and archives, theatres and orchestras, into classrooms and living rooms across the country.

The next stage in the development of Culture Online will be the production of a full business case, which will be used as the basis for a bid to the Capital Modernisation Fund.

Copies of the report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Athletics Championships (Funding)

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what guarantees he has been given by Sport England about the funding of *(a)* Manchester 2002 and *(b)* the proposed new athletics facility at Picketts Lock. [152515]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* Sport England has made awards from the sports lottery fund totalling £131 million towards the capital costs of venues for Manchester 2002 Commonwealth Games.

In relation to the Lee Valley Stadium, we have established the principle with Sport England that, subject to the details being worked out and a viable application coming forward, the £20 million coming back from the Football Association and up to £40 million which will not now be required for the conversion of Wembley for athletics will be available to fund world-class athletics.

TREASURY

Mothers (London)

Ms Harman: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many mothers in London whose youngest child is under one year are in employment. [152204]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 8 March 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from John Pullinger to Ms Harriet Harman, dated 14 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of mothers in employment in London, whose youngest child is under one year (152204). I am replying in his absence.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) shows that in autumn 2000, there were 48 thousand mothers in employment in Greater London whose youngest child was less than one year old.

MRSA

Tony Wright: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to instruct hospitals to record on death certificates when MRSA is a cause of death. [146599]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Tony Wright, dated 14 March 2001:

As National Statistician, I have been asked to reply to your question on plans to instruct hospitals to record on death certificates when MRSA is a cause of death (146599).

Medical practitioners are required to certify the cause of death for patients under their care. Current legislation requires them to 'sign the certificate in the prescribed form stating to the best of his/her knowledge and belief the cause of death'. Guidance issued to doctors asks that they describe the cause of death as fully and accurately as possible.

Statutory Instruments (Financial Implications)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he has taken to ensure that statutory instruments which have a financial implication are subject to consultation with his Department before they are laid before Parliament. [147533]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 26 January 2001]:* Certain statutory instruments must have the approval or consent of the Treasury before being made. In other cases, the Treasury is consulted, as necessary, about any financial implications in accordance with the general principles governing the control of public expenditure as set out in "Government Accounting", the guidance on accounting and financial procedures to be followed by Departments. In all cases, it is for the relevant department to ensure that it has sought any necessary approval by the Treasury.

Illness and Pregnancy (Insurance Premiums)

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the level of insurance premium necessary to provide comprehensive private insurance cover for all the eventualities arising from a pregnancy. [151947]

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what work his Department has undertaken to identify the likely level of insurance premiums necessary to provide comprehensive private insurance cover against chronic illness for families. [151973]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answers 13 March 2001]:* Insurance companies themselves determine the cost of their products, taking into account information such as their individual claims experience as well as any relevant statistics.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the estimated *(a)* resource and *(b)* capital DEL shortfall is for each Department for financial year 2000–01. [153713]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Provisional outturn for public expenditure will be published in the Public Expenditure Outturn White Paper, as usual, in July.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the change since the pre-Budget report (Cm 4917) in *(a)* capital and *(b)* resource spending by each Department resulting from transfers of responsibilities. [153715]

Mr. Andrew Smith: A detailed analysis of changes to spending plans, separately identifying changes due to transfers and classification changes, will be published in Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 2001–02.

Customs and Excise

Mr. Drew: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the definition of clearance fees used by HM Customs and Excise. [152830]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* HM Customs and Excise publishes locally the days and times when their offices are open and the hours when their staff are available to carry out their assigned duties. Where a Customs presence is required outside these times, for example to process a customs declaration on a public holiday, a request is to be made in advance to the local office. Where it is agreed to, it may in certain circumstances, and dependent on the time or place concerned, attract an attendance charge.

The charge reflects the duration of the attendance and the grades of staff needed to carry out the task and is calculated using published rates of charge for attendance. These rates are reviewed annually. Other than the flat rate applicable to private premises, which was amended in 1996, the current rates have remained unchanged since 1993.

Income Tax

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the *Exchequer, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member* for Northavon (Mr. Webb) of 13 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 104W, on tax rates, what his estimate is of the first year yield of a 50 per cent. income tax rate for gross incomes exceeding £100,000 a year; and what estimate he has made of the proportion of full year capital gains tax yields which are received in the financial year the liability accrues. [151314]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 26 February 2001]:* None of the capital gains tax yield for 2001–02 is estimated to be received in the same year because capital gains tax liabilities are normally due for payment in the financial year following the tax year for which the liability arises. The first year yield in 2001–02 of a 50 per cent. income tax rate for gross incomes exceeding £100,000 is £1.6 billion. The estimate is based on the Survey of Personal Incomes and is consistent with the March 2001 Budget.

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the Senior Civil Service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [152788]

Dawn Primarolo: Information on average pay increases for staff outside the Senior Civil Service will be published in the forthcoming Departmental Report for the Chancellor's Departments.

Tax Returns

Mr. Willis: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much revenue the Treasury received in fines levied for failure to complete individual tax returns by 31 January in each financial year from 1997–98. [148984]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 February 2001]:* Taxpayers filing late under the self-assessment system render themselves liable for penalties. Figures for penalty receipts are accounted for by the Inland Revenue in account years ending on the last Friday in October, rather than in financial years. SA penalty receipts for the last three accounts were as follows:

Account	£
1998	18,085,069
1999	29,360,479
2000	32,960,556

Neither the Treasury nor the Inland Revenue levies fines for failure to complete individual tax returns by 31 January.

Married Couples Allowance

Mr. Sarwar: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the married couples allowance. [151617]

Dawn Primarolo: The married couples allowance and related allowances did not effectively support either *children or marriage. They were available to all married* couples, whether or not they had children, and were also available to single parents and to unmarried parents living together. The overlap between these allowances meant that twice the usual amount of relief could be available in the year a married couple separated.

We are therefore replacing the married couples allowance with the Children's Tax Credit, which will give more help to families at the time they need it most: when they have children. Following this year's Budget, it will be worth up to £520 a year from April (over two and a half times the former married couples allowance). In April 2002, to help families with a new baby, there will be a higher rate of Children's Tax Credit in the year of their child's birth worth up to £1,040 a year, over five times the value of the former married couples allowance.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the difference between the carbon dioxide emissions projections set out in paragraph 6.15 of the Red Book and those in Table 1 on page 53 of the Climate Change Programme. [153388]

Mr. Timms: The carbon dioxide emission projections set out in paragraph 6.15 of the 2001 Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report include the effect of the additional measures that are set out on pages 124 to 125 of the Climate Change Programme. These measures are not included in Table 1 on page 53 of the Climate Change Programme, which sets out the UK's baseline emissions.

Credit Unions

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress he is making to establish a central support organisation for credit unions. [153571]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Treasury maintains regular contact with the Association of British Credit Unions Ltd., and the other representative bodies, who are finalising their proposals for a CSO.

Incontinence Products

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the total cost to individuals and their carers of urinary incontinence products on which VAT is levied in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [153549]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs and Excise does not have data on the amount of expenditure on urinary incontinence products on which VAT is levied.

Departmental Policies (Paisley, South)

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Paisley, South constituency, the effects on Paisley, South of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153763]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Paisley, South, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the general election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 971, or 35 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 85 per cent., and long-term unemployment has fallen by 61 per cent.

Macro-economic stability is being complemented at the micro-economic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds had helped 946 young people in Paisley, South constituency gain valuable skills and experience—487 (51 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle income families. In August 2000, 1,700 families in Paisley, South constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 13,100 in Paisley, South, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week, and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 8,900 in Paisley, South.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Georgia

7. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has received from Georgia about the teaching of English language to children of refugees in Georgia; and if she will make a statement. [152215]

Mr. Mullin: I have received no representations on the teaching of English to refugee children in Georgia. There are up to 400,000 people displaced by the war in Abhkhizia. We are supporting their resettlement in Georgia.

Child Poverty

8. **Mr. Pond:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures her Department is taking to help alleviate child poverty; and if she will make a statement. [152216]

Clare Short: The Chancellor of the Exchequer and I are determined to do all we can to mobilise the international system to meet the International Development Targets by 2015 in order that today's poor children do not become the parents of larger numbers of children living in extreme poverty in the next generation. The targets include the aim of lifting one billion people out of extreme poverty, all children in primary schools, and infant and child mortality reduced by two thirds by 2015.

These targets are achievable but require a greater and more united international effort. To this end the Chancellor and I hosted a conference in London on February 26 at which all the international institutions were represented. A copy of the commitments made at the conference is available in the Library of the House.

Kosovo

9. **Dr. Godman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if, when she last met her colleagues from other member states of the European Union, they discussed the provision of aid to non-governmental organisations operating in Kosovo. [152217]

Clare Short: During our emergency assistance to Kosovo we funded a wide range of NGO projects. We are currently focusing on improving administrative systems, the capacity of Kosovars to govern themselves and preparing for elections. We have, provided support through NGOs for voter education, election monitoring, and housing projects.

West Africa

10. **Mr. Bailey:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures her Department is taking to address the humanitarian crisis in west Africa. [152218]

Clare Short: Half of Sierra Leone is under RUF rebel control and all basic services have broken down. One quarter of the population of Sierra Leone is displaced. We are providing £35 million per annum to support Sierra Leone and also supporting the UN peace keeping effort and helping train a new Sierra Leonean army so that the country can return to peace. Fighting has recently spread to border areas as Liberian packed forces are seeking to destabilise neighbouring Guinea. This has led to the displacement of half a million people many of whom had moved to avoid fighting in Sierra Leone. The UN High Commission for refugees is trying to resettle and provide help to the refugees. We have provided £12 million for this work.

African Conflicts

11. **Mr. Gardiner:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what measures her Department is taking to reduce conflict and promote peace in Africa. [152219]

Clare Short: Half the countries and 20 per cent. of the population of sub-Saharan Africa are living under conditions of conflict. This is a cause of massive suffering and a barrier to development on the continent. My Department, the FCO and MOD have arranged a high level seminar at the Queen Elizabeth II conference centre on 26 March to discuss with representatives of Africa and the whole international community how we can better resolve these conflicts in Africa. A paper analysing the course and nature of African conflict has been prepared for the conference and I will place copies in the Library and would welcome comments from Members.

25. **Mr. Browne:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking, in co-operation with other Government Departments, to address violent conflict in Africa. [152233]

Clare Short: Twenty per cent. of the population of sub-Saharan Africa are living under conditions of conflict. Reducing conflict is critical if there is to be sustained development and poverty reduction in Africa. We have established new arrangements in Whitehall to develop joint policies and common approaches for conflict prevention and peacekeeping.

28. **Mr. Tony Lloyd:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what initiatives her Department is taking to address the challenge of conflict prevention and resolution in Africa. [152236]

Clare Short: More than 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa are currently affected by or recovering from violent conflict. Violent conflict is one of the biggest barriers to development in Africa.

We have established new arrangements in Whitehall to develop joint policies and common approaches for conflict prevention and peacekeeping.

UK Youth Parliament

12. **Mr. Rowe:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to engage with the UK youth parliament to further the objectives of her Department. [152220]

Clare Short: Raising young people's awareness and understanding of development issues is the top priority of my Department's development awareness work, and we are working with the formal and development education sectors to achieve this. Currently we are not directly engaged with the UK youth parliament. However we will follow its work with interest and will seek suitable opportunities to share information on international development issues.

Third-world Poverty

14. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proportion of gross national product the UK proposes to spend on her Department's activities in 2001–02 on alleviation of poverty in third-world countries. [152222]

Clare Short: Early indications are that the UK is on track to reach an oda/GNP ratio of 0.29 per cent. for calendar year 2000, up from 0.26 per cent. in 1997. We cannot determine what the figure will be for 2001–02 with any certainty at this stage. The recent spending round settlement increased DFID's development budget to £3.6 billion in the financial year 2003–04 and the Government will ensure that the oda/GNP ratio will rise to 0.33 per cent. by that year.

Cambodia

15. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her plans for assistance to Cambodia. [152223]

Clare Short: We will continue working with the Royal Government of Cambodia and other partners to improve the livelihoods of poor people, especially those living in rural areas. Provided that the policy environment in Cambodia is sufficiently sound, the amount of assistance allocated by DFID under the main bilateral programme will increase substantially over the next three years from the level of £3.7 million planned in the current financial year. Our Country Strategy Paper for Cambodia was published in March 2000 and is available in the Library of the House.

Zimbabwe

16. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the aid programme for Zimbabwe. [152224]

Clare Short: The economic and political situation in Zimbabwe is deeply worrying. The economy is set to shrink by a further 6 per cent. this year and the poor of Zimbabwe in particular are suffering badly—jobs are being lost, prices are increasing and there is a potential for food shortages.

I have kept the UK development programme under close review since 1997. We have since made clear that we support land reform in Zimbabwe but having fulfilled our commitments under the Lancaster House agreement could only fund reform which was transparent and provided land to poor farmers. I have recently authorised a £20 million HIV/AIDS programme because one in four adult Zimbabweans are HIV positive. I am sure the House will agree that we should do what we can to lessen the suffering of the people of Zimbabwe as a result of the behaviour of their Government.

World Trade Organisation

17. **Mr. Colman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her discussions with other Governments on a new WTO round of negotiations. [152225]

Clare Short: I have recently visited India and South Africa, where I spoke with political leaders about the need for a "Development Round" of trade negotiations. I stay in regular contact with Pascal Lamy, the EU's Trade Commissioner. Later this month I am hosting a meeting of EU Development Ministers, at which the Directors General of the World Trade Organisation and United Nations on Trade and Development will speak. DTI Ministers, officials and my officials are also working hard to build a consensus on a new trade round with developing countries.

Tanzania

18. **Mrs. Gilroy:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made with respect to the Country Plan for Tanzania; and if she will make a statement. [152226]

Clare Short: We published our three year Country Strategy Paper for Tanzania in May 1999 after extensive consultations in-country with Government, private sector, civil society and other agencies. Tanzania has since 1999 published the Tanzania Assistance Strategy and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. We welcome these and are reviewing our programme in Tanzania in order to strengthen our support for these initiatives. Our office in Tanzania is engaged in intensive discussions with Government and other partners and I expect to receive a report on progress and recommendations for our future support in June 2001.

Trafficking in Human Beings

19. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has made to the UN on appointing a commissioner on the trafficking of children. [152227]

Clare Short: A UN mandate already exist on the sale of children and the Committee on the Rights of the Child is dedicated to monitoring the implementation of the convention on the Rights of the Child. At the Millennium Summit, the Prime Minister signed the optional protocol to this convention which strengthens the protection it provides against the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. The Government have also signed a new convention against transnational crime, which includes a protocol on trafficking of women and children.

Rev. Martin Smyth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assessment she has made of efforts to stop trafficking in humans in Africa. [152426]

Clare Short: We are determined to do all we can to see an end to trafficking in humans in Africa. Along with our EU partners we have expressed our concerns in international organisations such as the UN Commission for Human Rights and the International Labour Organisation. In the past year in Sudan, the EU Commission has provided financial support to the Committee for the Eradication of the Abduction of Women and Children (CEAWC): CEAWC has already organised the return of some 550 abducted women and children there. Our ambassador in Khartoum has been active in visiting the areas affected and in attending CEAWC workshops to urge greater effort.

AIDS (Sub-Saharan Africa)

20. **Mr. Evans:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what initiatives she has to fight AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. [152228]

Clare Short: HIV/AIDS is the single most important development challenge in sub-Saharan Africa. The epidemic is undermining economic growth and fundamentally threatens social and economic development in many countries in the region. DFID continues to give greatest priority to prevention, but we also place great emphasis on reducing the personal, social and economic impact of illness and death caused by the disease.

As national strategic plans to tackle the epidemic improve, we have begun to place our support within the framework of those plans. For example, we have recently approved significant HIV/AIDS related programmes in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe totalling over £60 million, and a £20 million programme is being designed to support Mozambique. A new programme for South Africa is also planned for this year. We have also committed £7.5 million to a regional initiative on HIV/AIDS with the Southern Africa Development Community.

In addition, the Government are exploring the potential of a number of options for increasing the long term affordability and availability of treatment for HIV/AIDS and related infections which will benefit sub-Saharan Africa, while maintaining a focus on the development of long term sustainable health systems which are needed to deliver them.

Overseas Development (Expenditure)

21. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the level of public and private sector resource transfers from the UK to developing countries in the last financial year, expressed as a percentage of GNP. [152229]

Clare Short: Figures on levels of public and private sector transfers to developing countries as a percentage of GNP are collated in calendar years and the latest data available are for 1999. In that year, public sector transfers represented 0.23 per cent. of GNP. This figure shows a drop from recent years, caused by some one-off anomalies in the timing of commitments and expenditure. I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw) on 3 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 127W, which further details the reasons for this anomalous drop. The level of private sector transfers as a percentage of GNP in 1999 was 0.46 per cent.

Ghana

22. **Mr. Davidson:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's support for poverty reduction in Ghana. [152230]

Clare Short: During my recent trip to Ghana, I had constructive meetings with the new Government, and representatives from civil society and business. There is a sense of optimism, but the economic situation is dire. I strongly encouraged the Government to apply for HIPC status as they are currently paying massive interest on international and domestic debt. The President has since announced that Ghana will apply for HIPC status. We are the largest bilateral donor and our programme of support may reach £58 million next year, focusing on health, education, rural transport and reform of government systems.

Guinea

23. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the humanitarian situation in Guinea. [152231]

Clare Short: There are around 420,000 refugees from Sierra Leone and Liberia in Guinea, most having been there for a number of years. Around 135,000 Sierra

Leonean refugees are located in an area known as the Parrot's Beak, adjoining the southern border. This area also contains a significant number of internally displaced (IDPs) Guineans. Over the last few months, camps, villages and towns there have been attacked frequently by Revolutionary United Front and other rebel groups from Sierra Leone and Liberia. Refugees and IDPs have also been innocent victims of action taken by the Guinean army to repulse the rebels.

At present, the situation in the area is calmer. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is starting to evacuate refugees from the Parrot's Beak, and take them to places of safety further away from the border region. At the same time, UNHCR is continuing to assist with the voluntary repatriation of refugees from Conakry to Sierra Leone, currently running at about 1,000 a week.

Since December 2000, DFID has pledged more than £12 million to help in this work. We are also working with the Government of Sierra Leone to create the conditions needed for more extensive repatriation, first and foremost better security.

Indian Earthquake

24. **Mr. Gapes:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what assistance her Department is giving to reconstruction and assistance following the earthquake in Gujarat. [152232]

Clare Short: My Department has made an overall allocation of £10 million to support the emergency relief effort without reducing our spending in other parts of India. To date over £8 million of this total allocation has been spent. As well as providing immediate support to the Search and Rescue effort and transporting numerous relief items to the region, funds have been channelled through a number of agencies for the provision of essential relief items such as tents, blankets, medical supplies, food, water and sanitation. We have also established an Emergency Field Office which is working closely with the Indian authorities and operational agencies to address outstanding needs. In the longer term we have offered advice to the Indian Government on strengthening disaster preparedness arrangements which will include Gujarat.

The Indian Government are presently developing plans for rehabilitation and reconstruction; it is expected that these will be largely funded by the World bank and the Asian Development bank.

EU Development Programmes

26. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when she last met members of the European Commission to discuss EU development programmes. [152234]

Clare Short: I frequently meet members of the European Commission to discuss EU development programmes. I most recently met Commissioner Nielson (Development) on 8 February and Commissioner Patten (External Relations) on 28 February. I confirmed our support for the extensive reform efforts now under way and stressed the need for effective implementation of the new EC Development Policy. I also held a telephone conversation with Commissioner Lamy (Trade) on 6 March, during which I emphasised the importance of mainstreaming development thinking into trade policy.

Southern Africa

27. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement about her Department's humanitarian work in southern Africa. [152235]

Clare Short: My Department is engaged in humanitarian assistance in the region on a number of fronts. Following the immediate relief operation in response to last year's floods in Mozambique we have remained engaged in rehabilitation as well as in developing new measures, via the UN system, to strengthen UN and Government of Mozambique contingency arrangements for future disasters. Over the past few months DFID, FCO, MOD, RNLI and the UK Fire Service have been working together to prepare contingency plans for different emergency scenarios. In addition we have continued to work closely with the Government of Mozambique's National Directorate of Water to set up early warning flood systems with the UK Met Office. DFID has also granted £250,000 to the International Federation of the Red Cross.

Following the onset of the current floods, we have switched gear to immediate response operations which are deliberately aimed at 'preventative rescue and relief', i.e. extricating people before the worst hits them and there is substantial loss of life and suffering. We are currently:

- funding two Puma helicopters which are busy moving people from the riskiest areas and transporting urgent relief supplies;
- providing three logisticians to WFP to assist in its operational response;
- providing a humanitarian specialist in Beira to reinforce DFID presence on the ground and conduct field assessments.

Beyond this, in Zimbabwe, DFID has agreed to fund an Emergency Preparedness project, (£166,000, one year) to be implemented by Save The Children Fund (UK). It is preparing for the potential humanitarian crisis which may emerge later this year as a result of, among other issues, prolonged food shortages and large displacements of commercial farm workers. The project will gather and disseminate information on the current situation in commercial farms and peri-urban settlements, and work to build effective networks within civil society and between civil society and donors/government.

Mongolia

29. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on Government assistance to Mongolia. [152237]

Clare Short: An appeal for $11.8 million has been launched by the Government of Mongolia through the United Nations in response to the current winter disaster or 'Dzud'. We have offered £1 million for the provision of emergency relief under the framework of the UN appeal to be channelled through humanitarian agencies working in Mongolia. The appeal aims to target vulnerable groups in the most severely affected provinces and seeks to fulfil unmet relief needs. It focuses on

building the disaster management of the Mongolian State Emergency Commission and other relevant national partners to enhance preparedness and future response.

In 2000, we contributed nearly £200,000 to an IFRC appeal aimed at 35,000 of the most vulnerable Mongolian herders.

We also provide a Small Grants Scheme allocation (currently £225,000) to Mongolia. Activities funded through multilateral channels to which we contribute include support to the World bank's sustainable livelihoods programme and to the UN programme supporting national development priorities such as reproductive health care, distance learning and institutional capacity building. DFID also participles in the thematic donor meetings in Mongolia and will continue to work to ensure that the multilateral donor agencies remain poverty-focused in Mongolia.

Pro-poor Growth

30. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what work her Department is undertaking to define pro-poor growth; and if she will make a statement relating to pro-poor growth in Africa. [152238]

Clare Short: In September 2000, we published a paper, "Halving World Poverty by 2015", which proposes a framework for poverty reduction based on economic growth, equity and security; and eight priorities for the international community. This has been well received.

In sub-Saharan Africa it will not be possible to reach the International Development Targets without sustained high rates of growth—7 per cent per annum or more. In recent years, some countries have been doing well, but very many have not.

While economic growth can benefit the poor, for example by increasing the share of incomes earned by the poor, poverty reduction will depend primarily on action taken by African governments. Good policy environments are essential, so that resources can be used to maximum effect—those of government, donors and the private sector.

Pro-poor policies mean that poor people not only receive a proportionately larger share of publicly-funded services, but that they have greater opportunities to earn income, especially in rural areas. It also means that the poor are able to participate in and influence the policy-making process in their favour.

Our aim is to assist African countries in implementing poverty reduction strategies. Together with the international community, we have signed up to the PRSP approach. This enables us all to work together more effectively, with governments of developing countries taking the lead. This is challenging. It requires:

strong technical capabilities and resources to undertake analysis to consider options and integrate issues such as sustainability, gender, and social exclusion.

Inclusive approaches allowing consideration of all perspectives including those of the poor, the Parliament and colleagues in government.

Building of broad-based alliances for poverty reduction.

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the Senior Civil Service, was in her Department for 2000–01. [152793]

Clare Short: The headline pay settlement was 2.5 per cent. on the pay bill and, with the additional funds from staff turnover, staff in post received performance related increases averaging 4.4 per cent.

Labour Standards (Code of Conduct)

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what support the Government are giving to initiatives to raise public awareness in developing countries on codes of conduct on labour standards. [153127]

Clare Short: The Government strongly support the ILO's core labour standards, and are actively seeking to raise awareness of voluntary codes of conduct based on these, for the working of business in developing countries. In particular, the Government set up and fund the Ethical Trading Initiative, which is an independent organisation with a tripartite membership of trade unions, non-governmental organisations and companies which seek to implement and monitor a "base code" of labour standards in the supply chains of corporate members. The ethical trading initiative does this by working closely with local organisations in developing countries and by working to raise awareness of labour standards and the "base code" among employers and employees.

The Government also work closely with other industry organisations such as the Prince of Wales International Business Leaders Forum whose members are committed to corporate social responsibility issues including labour standards, and work in part to raise awareness of these issues in developing countries.

Sierra Leone

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the humanitarian assistance given by her Department to civilians in Sierra Leone, with particular reference to the amputees in the special amputee camp. [152954]

Clare Short: DFID funding to date for humanitarian assistance to civilians in Sierra Leone has been allocated for the following purposes.

	Funding
To enable 15,000 vulnerable farm households in Port Loko, Kambia and Bombili districts to produce food for direct consumption and income generation through the sale of surplus crops.	282,000
To improve health status in SL particularly reproductive health in line with the priorities of the MoH. (Freetown)	392,000
To increase access to, and maintain utilisation of good quality health services which are delivered, managed and increasingly funded by the MoH as the implementing agency transfers control to the MoH. (Bonthe)	644,000
The resumption of a quality primary education for children in Freetown, Bo and Kenema.	379,000
To provide displaced families in Mile 91, Yele and Masimera chiefdoms with essential household items and provide 10,000 displaced children with used clothing.	260,000
To protect the health of up to 20,000 displaced (new and existing) people in camps in Freetown, by ensuring sufficient water and sanitation provision, alongside hygiene promotion.	302,000
To maintain water, sanitation and hygiene promotion facilities in four camps and identify partner organisations to take over operational work within 12 months.	850,000
To provide emergency non-food items through the provision of basic shelter, clothing, bedding and water storage/collection materials in Tonkolili, Port Loko and the Western area.	1,527,000
To contribute towards meeting the minimum basic water, sanitation and shelter needs of 10,500 internally displaced persons located in the National Workshop IDP camp in Kissy, Freetown.	51,000
Primary health care, watsan, and shelter for IDPs (Easten Freetown).	134,000
To reduce morbidity and mortality rates among the rural community by providing a network of primary healthcare facilities throughout the district which provide accessible and affordable healthcare. (Bo)	443,000
Protection and tracing assistance to displaced families, health care and emergency food aid.	500,000
To equip vulnerable, disaffected and marginalised youth with the skills and education needed to sustain meaningful livelihoods in Kenema and Bo.	76,000
Rural development.	449,390
Community peace building.	80,550
Regional including Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia, Ivory Coast	
Separated Children's Programme. Better protection of the rights of separated children in the sub-region.	906,261
Community Leaders Peace Initiative	169,488
Regional Radio Initiative.	230,619
UNOCHA to assist their coordination role in the region.	500,000
WFP	2,000,000

Among those assisting amputees are World Vision, Handicapped International and Medicins Sans Frontières. The amputee camp (which is not exclusively occupied by amputees) currently has 267 amputees.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 15 March 2001

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Civil Servants (Salary Increases)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the average percentage increase in salaries of non-industrial civil servants, excluding members of the Senior Civil Service, was in his Department for 2000–01. [152789]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* The headline pay settlement was 2.5 per cent. on the pay bill and, together with the additional funds from staff turnover, staff in post received performance-related increases averaging 4.4 per cent.

Digital Television

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce a requirement on manufacturers of television sets to include digital receivers in new sets. [153261]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) on 14 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 137W.

Small Business Service

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what support he is giving to enterprise clubs following the establishment of the new Small Business Service, with particular reference to Greater London. [153782]

Ms Hewitt: My Department is committed to supporting enterprise, including clubs and disadvantaged areas across the whole of London and other regions, through a number of initiatives. These include:

500 volunteer business mentors already appointed with a further 500 to be in place by April 2001;

The Phoenix Fund, which will help people from disadvantaged groups and in deprived areas who wish to start up or expand a business, of £30 million for this financial year; London's funding allocation is £4.1 million;

A £12 million Development Fund to support innovative enterprise;

The Small Firms Loans Guarantee Scheme to help small firms with a viable business proposal, but who are unable to obtain conventional bank finance because they lack security or a business track record;

Regional Venture Capital funds providing equity finance for start-up or early-stage businesses with growth potential, but remaining subject to approval by the European Commission that they do not infringe state aid rules;

A UK High Technology Fund for early-stage high technology businesses;

Support for the National Business Angels Network to increase the flow of informal investment finance.

Through its Regional Manager for London, SBS will work closely with the Business Link and London Development Agency to ensure that the region as a whole, including Inner and Greater London, has access to the necessary enterprise funding and that this is used cost-effectively for the capital's various enterprise organisations and their initiatives.

Air Conditioning

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what representations he has received on the draft European standard for air conditioning equipment (EN 378); and if he will make a statement; [153619]

(2) on what date he proposes to withdraw the British Standard in respect of air conditioning equipment; and if he will make a statement on the regulation that will replace it; [153620]

(3) what representations he has received, and from which bodies, supporting the withdrawal of the British Standard for air conditioning equipment; [153621]

(4) what representations he has received on the continued use of hydrocarbons in air conditioning equipment; and if he will make a statement. [153623]

Mr. Alan Johnson: EN 378 is a technical specification for refrigerating systems and heat pumps (which can be used in some air conditioning equipment), dealing with the safety and environmental aspects. The standard allows for hydrocarbons, which are flammable, being used as a refrigerant in certain circumstances instead of the usual hydrofluorocarbons, which are inert.

My Department received just one representation concerning the use of hydrocarbons as a refrigerant being included in this standard. However, responsibility for this standard, and resolving any technical issues concerned including safety ones, falls to the British Standards Institution (BSI), which is independent of Government.

BSI is the United Kingdom member of the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN) which developed the European standard EN 378. It carries out, as part of its normal procedures, public consultations on draft ENs. Once a draft EN is adopted by CEN, the national standards bodies who are its members withdraw any conflicting national standards and publish the European one. In this instance, I understand that EN 378 was adopted by CEN last year and then published by BSI as BS EN 378.

Any technical questions relating to, or issues of interpretation of, the standard should therefore be taken up with BSI.

Import/Export Licences

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will provide details of the import licences granted for the import of *(a)* tear gas, *(b)* plastic baton rounds and *(c)* other riot control munitions into Northern Ireland from the Irish Republic since 1997. [153515]

Mr. Caborn: There have been no individual import licences issued in respect of tear gas sprays and canisters (including CS gas) for import into the United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland) from the Irish Republic since 1997.

Imports of plastic baton rounds do not require an individual import licence. The transfer of these items is subject to the issue of a transfer document by the designated authority in the Irish Republic.

Seven licences have been issued for the importation into the United Kingdom from an EU member state for products that might fit the description "other riot control munitions". None of the licence holders is based in Northern Ireland.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will provide details of the export licences granted for export of military list, paramilitary list and dual use technologies to the Irish Republic in *(a)* 1999 and *(b)* 2000, where the end-use destination was for another country. [153514]

Dr. Howells: In 2000, one Standard Individual Export Licence was issued where the consignee was in the Irish Republic and the end-use destination was in another country. This covered goods controlled under the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 (the Military List) and rated ML6. ML6 covers ground vehicles and components thereof specifically designed or modified for military use. There were no such licences issued in 1999.

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the British Government issued an export licence to Royal Ordinance for the refurbishment of 30 105mm Moroccan guns in Western Sahara; who approved the export licence application for the refurbishment of 105mm Moroccan guns in Western Sahara; if Royal Ordinance (BAE Systems) completed the refurbishment of 105mm Moroccan guns in Western Sahara; what export licences have been approved for weapons or spares in Western Sahara since 1997; what export licence applications have been refused to Morocco since 1997; on what grounds they were refused; on what occasions the United Nations has been consulted about approving export licence applications to Morocco since 1997; and if the terms of the UN Peace Plan take primacy over the EU Code of Conduct for approving export licence applications to Morocco. [150250]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 13 February 2001]:* On 12 July 1999 the DTI issued a standard individual export licence to Royal Ordnance to export equipment to Morocco for the refurbishment of guns. The licence was reported in the 1999 Annual Report on Strategic Export Controls.

All licences to export arms and other goods whose export is controlled for strategic reasons are issued by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry acting through DTI's Export Control Organisation (ECO). All relevant individual licence applications are circulated by the DTI to other Government Departments with an interest as determined by those Departments in line with their policy responsibilities. These include the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development.

While in general the ECO maintains records of licence applications, it does not in general compile records of actual shipments. Moreover, where the licence is for refurbishment, ECO does not monitor whether the refurbishment has been carried out.

The export of weapons and weapons spares are controlled under entries ML1, ML2, ML4, ML5, ML12, ML18, ML19, ML21, ML22, PL5002, PL5006, PL5017, PL5018 and PL5030 in the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994 (the EG(C)O). The entry in the EG(C)O under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating. Details of export licensing decisions between 2 May 1997 and 31 December 1999 have been set out in the Government's Annual Reports on Strategic Export Controls copies of which are in the Library of the House. These Reports list by country of destination the export licences issued and refused in each equipment category and gives details of the military equipment for which licences have been granted. They also set out the value of defence exports to each country.

Between 1 January 2000 and 2 February 2001, six Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and three Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) were issued covering the export to consignees or end-users in Morocco of goods with the relevant ratings. Individual licences may cover a range of goods with various ratings. Where this is so, the licence is included in the total for all of the relevant ratings.

Individual Licences issued between 1 January 2000 and 2 February 2001 covering the export to Morocco of goods on the Military List[1]

Rating	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
ML1	3	0
ML2	4	0
ML4	1	0
ML5	0	2
ML12	0	0
ML18	0	0
ML19	0	0
ML21	0	0
ML22	1	1
PL5002	0	0
PL5006	1	0
PL5017	1	1
PL5018	0	0
PL5030	0	0

[1] Each licence may cover a range of ratings, and where this is so, data on them are included under each of the relevant ratings.

In addition, Morocco is a permitted destination on certain Open General Export Licences for the export of goods on the Military List; copies of all Open General Export Licences are placed in the Library of the House.

Between 2 May 1997 and 31 December 1999 only one application, for the refurbishment of 105mm guns and supply of new guns, was refused to Morocco, on the grounds that issuing the licence would contravene Criterion 4 of the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. After the company appealed, the part of the application for the refurbishment of guns was granted. However the refusal of the part of the licence application in respect of the proposed sale of new guns was upheld.

Between 1 January 2000 and 2 February 2001, no applications for a SIEL and no applications for an OIEL were refused covering the export to consignees or end-users in Morocco of goods with the relevant ratings.

HMG does not seek UN approval when issuing export licences to non-embargoed destinations. There is no UN arms embargo on Morocco. HMG did not therefore seek UN approval in this case. However, where the UN has an interest in a region HMG may—as was done in this case—consult the UN. The information provided by the UN will be taken into account by HMG when deciding whether to issue an export licence.

The terms of the UN Peace Plan do not take primacy over the EU Code of Conduct for approving export licence applications to Morocco. All export licence applications whether for Morocco or elsewhere are considered against the now consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria.

Post Offices

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the number of post offices in the north-west region in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000 and *(e)* 2001. [153156]

Mr. Alan Johnson: I understand from the Post Office that the information is not held in the form requested.

Chemicals Weapons Act

Mrs. Fitzsimons: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the operation of the Chemical Weapons Act 1996. [154272]

Dr. Howells: In accordance with the Act, I have placed a report on its implementation during 2000 in the Library of each House.

Satellite Communications

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what funding he expects to be required to maintain the satellite communication monitoring facility at Baldock. [154184]

Ms Hewitt: The Radio Monitoring Station at Baldock in Hertfordshire which is operated by the Radiocommunications Agency has facilities in place in order to be able to monitor a wide range of frequencies over the range from 9 kilohertz through to 40 gigahertz, including those given over to satellite communications.

The Agency's Corporate Plan for the next five years includes the objective of enhancing existing spectrum monitoring activities through the purchase of further unattended and fixed monitoring systems. Provision in excess of £2,000,000 has been made for these capital projects for each of the next four years.

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to ensure that the United Kingdom will continue to be able to monitor those radio frequencies given over to satellite communications. [154183]

Ms Hewitt: The Radiocommunications Agency has facilities, based at the Radio Monitoring Station at Baldock in Hertfordshire, which enable it to undertake calibrated measurements over the frequency range from 9 kilohertz to 40 gigahertz, including those given over to satellite communications.

In addition, the Agency is working together with its European counterparts in order to provide common access to enhanced fixed facilities managed centrally by the European Radio Office.

Gas Industry

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what his estimate is of the cost to industry of introducing half-hourly gas balancing. [152825]

Mr. Hain: The introduction of a new gas balancing system is a matter for Ofgem.

Ofgem are currently consulting on proposals to change to hourly or half hourly balancing. Copies of the consultation document can be found on the Ofgem website at: www.ofgem.gov.uk.

Ofgem

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many vacancies for staff Ofgem has; and if he will list the salary levels that are being offered for these posts. [152956]

Mr. Hain: Ofgem has 22 staff vacancies at the following salary levels:

Salary level	*Number of vacancies*
£16,000	1
£17,000	3
£19,211	6
£20,000	1
£24,250	5
£35,000	2
£39,000	2
£40,000	1
£90,000–110,000	1

Beckman Case (ECJ)

Sir David Madel: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Beckman case in the European Court of Justice will be heard; and if he will honour the original redundancy entitlements of the Department of Trade and Industry staff concerned. [153592]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 13 March 2001]:* I am expecting the case to be heard by the European Court of Justice later this year. It would be inappropriate for me to comment further while the case is still before the courts.

Sub-post Offices

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) how many sub-post offices with Horizon equipment installed have ceased trading; [R] [153179]

(2) what the average cost is per sub-post office of the installation of Horizon equipment. [R] [153180]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* I have nothing to add to my reply to the hon. Member on 8 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 361W.

Mr. Page: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many sub-post offices closed in *(a)* January and *(b)* February; and how many of those that closed in the first three quarters of 2000–01 have reopened. [R] [153252]

Mr. Alan Johnson *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* In the light of the Performance and Innovation Unit report on modernising the post office network, the Post Office has revised its methods of collating and reporting information on the network to supply to the Postal Services Commission. The Post Office has agreed with the Commission a process and format for reporting such information quarterly. Monthly information is not therefore available. Information is not held on the numbers of post offices which closed in the first three quarters of the current financial year have subsequently reopened.

Triumph Motorcycles Ltd.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with Triumph Motorcycles Ltd. concerning the manufacturing of machines smaller than 750cc; and if he will make a statement. [153780]

Mr. Alan Johnson: Neither Ministerial colleagues nor I have had discussions with Triumph Motorcycles Ltd. on the types or variety of machines they produce, although my officials have contact with the company on a number of issues. Any decision on whether the company adds to its existing range would be a commercial matter for them.

Logos and Branding

Mr. Tyrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much has been spent by his Department on departmental and agency logos and associated branding since 1 May 1997. [152651]

Dr. Howells: The Department has incurred no expenditure on its corporate logo since May 1997. Information on expenditure by directorates within the Department on individual logos is not centrally recorded and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The Department's agencies have spent £122,320 on logos and associated branding.

Electricity Trading Arrangements

Mr. Leslie: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on progress in implementing the New Electricity Trading Arrangements. [154173]

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has today agreed to the recommendation of the Chief Executive of the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets that the New Electricity Trading Arrangements (NETA) should go live on 27 March 2001.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

'Everything but Arms' Initiative

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent discussions she has had with *(a)* the European Commissioner for Development and *(b)* her European Union counterparts on (i) recent amendments to the 'Everything but Arms' initiative and (ii) the implications of these proposals for (A) United Kingdom sugar producers and (B) African, Caribbean and Pacific sugar exporters; and if she will make a statement. [153555]

Clare Short: The Government have had ongoing discussions with EU member states and the European Commission on the 'Everything but Arms' initiative (EBA), culminating in the adoption of the Presidency compromise to the proposal on 26 February. Central to these discussions was consideration of the implications of these proposals for both UK sugar producers and ACP sugar exporters.

In these discussions, I made clear my belief that least developed countries are not in the position to export large amounts of sugar in the short term. Details of the final agreement are such that imports of sugar from LDCs will be limited by quotas until 2006. It is now up to the European Commission to bring forward amendments to its sugar reform proposals to achieve coherence with EBA. But since the main impact of the agreement will be deferred until 2006–09, the short-term implications for UK sugar producers are likely to be modest. The proposals will have a more immediate effect on non-LDC ACP countries who will face increasing displacement of some of their exports. The UK will work with the EU, multilateral and other donors to ensure that their adjustment needs are fully taken into account in assistance programmes.

DEFENCE

War Criminals (Bosnia)

Mr. Tony Lloyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the mandate is of SFOR troops with respect to the arrest and detention of war criminals in Bosnia. [153542]

Mr. Spellar: Under UN Security Council Resolution 1088 of 1996, the NATO-led Stabilisation Force (SFOR) is mandated to detain persons indicted for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) if its forces come into contact with them in the performance of normal activities and the tactical situation permits.

Armoured Vehicles

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the establishment strength is of *(a)* Warrior variants, *(b)* Challenger 1, *(c)* Challenger 2, *(d)* Saxon variants, *(e)* AVF 430 variants, *(f)* Sabre, *(g)* Striker, *(h)* Scimitar, *(i)* Spartan, *(j)* Sultan, *(k)* Samaritan and *(l)* Samson; what percentage of establishment strength in each category are serviceable for immediate availability; and if he will make a statement. [152461]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 7 March 2001]:* I will write to the right hon. and learned Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence from what sources his Department acquired depleted uranium *(a)* materials, *(b)* components and *(c)* ammunition after 1992. [153197]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* The Ministry of Defence has made several acquisitions of equipment containing depleted uranium (DU) since 1992.

Two types of DU-based ammunition are in service with British Forces: the UK manufactured 120 mm anti-armour round and the US manufactured 20 mm RN Phalanx round.

Phalanx ammunition is sold to the UK via the US Department of Defense (DOD). All of DOD's DU comes from three US Department of Energy (DOE) gaseous diffusion plants: Paducah, Kentucky; Oak Ridge, Tennessee; and Portsmouth, Ohio.

Royal Ordnance, who manufacture the 120 mm anti-armour round, buy their DU from Starmet Corporation who in turn buy it from DOE. They have no practical way of determining exactly where the input material came from. They believe, however, that it was mostly from Paducah, Kentucky, but it was all produced at their plants at Concord and Barnwell in the US.

In 1998, Royal Hospital Haslar purchased equipment from ADAC Laboratories in which DU is used as a radiation shield. Hercules C-130J aircraft, which use DU as counter-balance weights in their Flight Control System, have been purchased from Lockheed Martin since 1992. In December 1993, the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) acquired 2.5 tonnes of DU plate from AEA Technology, Harwell.

In April 1999, the Defence Radiology Protection Service, part of DERA, acquired 62 kg of DU from Royal Ordnance Speciality Materials, Wolverhampton for corrosion research. Most recently, in January 2001, three 30 mm A-10 rounds were brought back from Kosovo for research purposes.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if test firing of DU shells at the Dundrennan range is exempt from regulation under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993. [151848]

Mr. Spellar: While the Ministry of Defence is formally exempt from Radioactive Substances Act 1993, we follow the principles and spirit of the regulations. Periodic visits to the Dundrennan range are carried out by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency.

Dr. Jack Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence at which of his Department's test locations in the United Kingdom the firing of depleted uranium projectiles has taken place; how many test firings have been made at each location; what arrangements are in place for the protection and monitoring of people and the environment; and if he will make a statement. [144771]

Mr. Simon Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what guidelines his Department follows when deciding at which depleted uranium munitions may be (a) fired, (b) stored and (c) transported. [144989]

Mr. Spellar *[pursuant to the replies, 15 January 2001, c. 42–43W, and 9 March 2001, c. 357–8W]:* It is our policy that, where UK statutory regulations are not applicable to MOD establishments, we undertake by agreement with the Government Departments concerned that the principles and spirit of the regulations are to be followed and arrangements introduced which will be, so far as is reasonably practicable, at least as good as those required by legislation. However, the Radioactive Substances Act itself does not apply to the Ministry of Defence.

Nuclear Convoys

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the RAF Wittering care and maintenance of TCHDs will cease. [153729]

Mr. Spellar: It is planned that the care and maintenance of Truck Cargo Heavy Duty (TCHD) Mark II vehicles at RAF Wittering will cease by 31 March 2002.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence who is in overall control of TCHD Mark II transports; and which department is in command of TCHD operations. [153728]

Mr. Spellar: On 1 April 1999 the Chief of Defence Logistics assumed overall responsibility for nuclear convoy operations.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Israel

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 1 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 736–37W, on Israel, if he will list the responses received by the European Union from the Government of Israel to the démarches, statements and representations listed. [152608]

Mr. Wilson: In reply to UK and EU representations the Israeli authorities have sought to justify their policies and actions. They have asserted that the continued closures and the practice of extra judicial killing are necessary for the protection of Israeli lives. We understand the importance of combating terrorism, but these sustained collective punishments radicalise the Palestinian population and fuel violence in the Occupied Territories. They cannot, therefore, achieve their stated purpose. We will press the new Israeli Government to end these practices and, as a specific first step, to resume the payment of revenues withheld from the Palestine Authority. We will also press the Palestinian leadership to restore security co-operation and make every effort in good faith to calm the violence.

Commonwealth

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will set out the agenda of his recent discussion with the Commonwealth Secretary-General. [152892]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The Foreign Secretary spoke to the Commonwealth Secretary-General on 21 February. They discussed the latest political and economic situation in Zimbabwe. They also discussed the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) meeting on 19–20 March and agreed that the situation in Zimbabwe should be addressed by Ministers. They agreed on the importance of sending a Commonwealth team to Zimbabwe and it reporting back to CMAG.

Arms Exports

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consideration he gave to the EU code of conduct on arms exports in deciding to issue a licence for the refurbishment of Moroccan heavy artillery in occupied Western Sahara. [153672]

Mr. Wilson: The export licence application for artillery spare parts to Morocco and the subsequent appeal were judged against the EU code of conduct, as are all export licence applications considered by my Department. The Department of Trade and Industry is the Department responsible for co-ordinating the export licence application process and granting licences. As a part of this process the Foreign and Commonwealth Office provides advice to the DTI on individual export licence applications, and any subsequent appeals.

Balkans

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about the supply of components for the repair and maintenance of military DROPS trailers used by the Irish contingent in KFOR. [154447]

Mr. Vaz: We are happy to approve an export licence for the supply of goods needed for the repair and maintenance of military DROPS trailers used by the Irish contingent of KFOR. The goods will assist KFOR in the valuable work they are doing reconstructing a peaceful Kosovo.

The goods appear on the UK's Military List. UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1160 (1998) prohibits the sale or supply of arms and related material to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. However, UNSCR 1244 (1999) provides that the prohibition imposed by UNSCR 1160 shall not apply to arms and related material for the use of the international civil and security presences in Kosovo.

Liberia

Mr. Pound: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what changes there have been in United Nations sanctions in relation to Liberia. [153352]

Mr. Wilson *[pursuant to his reply, 8 March 2001, c. 281–82W]:* I would like to correct two textual errors in my answer of 8 March to my hon. Friend.

The UN Security Council resolution adopted on 7 March imposing mandatory UN sanctions in relation to Liberia was in fact UN Security Council resolution 1343.

The travel ban imposed by that resolution, which enters into force on 7 May, is on senior members of the Liberian Government and military and their spouses and any other individuals providing financial and military support to armed rebel groups in countries neighbouring Liberia, as designated by the UN Sanctions Committee.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Departmental Policies (Hull, North)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the Hull, North constituency, the effects on Hull, North of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [150615]

Ms Beverley Hughes *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The principal kinds of funding that this Department has provided to Kingston upon Hull local authority in the years 1997–98 to 2001–02 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Hull, North constituency. In most cases it is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	[1]*2001–02*
Revenue Support Grant	122.708	129.420	133.106	132.385	140.039
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	60.753	62.875	67.379	75.386	72.533
Housing Investment Programme	[2]5.998	5.448	6.053	[3]16.411	[4]21.993
Capital Receipts Initiative	1.305	4.216	4.086	—	—
SRB funding (award date)	[5]6.0	—	—	[6]31.8	—
New Deal for Communities Funding (award date)	—	—	—	[7]54.0	
Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (award date)	—	—	—	—	[8]16.89
Estate Action	4.252	2.371	3.031	3.0	—
Transport Supplementary Grant	0.864	0.321	0.624	—	—
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	0.865	0.531	0.624	—	—
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	1.981	1.950	2.530	4.136	8.601

[1] Where known

[2] 1997–98 HIP allocation inherited from previous Government's spending plans. Present Government introduced CRI from 1997–98.

[3] Single Housing Pot introduced from 2000–01 resulting in CRI being merged with HIP.

[4] Resource accounting has resulted in a change to the way capital resources are allocated for 2001–02, with the introduction of a new Major Repairs Allowance (MRA) to cover the cost of maintaining local authority housing in a sound condition. Hull's MRA allocation for 2001–02 is £17.622 million and, for comparison purposes, is included in the 2001–02 HIP allocation above.

[5] Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) Round 4: £6 million awarded for a five-year scheme to address issues of parenting skills, educational aspirations and attainment).

[6] SRB Round 6: Hull had two successful bids: £28.3 million for Hull City Vision's programme to promote urban renaissance and address economic and social decline in targeted areas of Hull and East Riding; and £3.5 million for the "Humber Works" programme to establish an Intermediate Labour Market for very long term unemployed and to develop the Voluntary Sector.

[7] Over 10 years

[8] Over 3 years

Housing Revenue Account Subsidy

£

Kingston upon Hull[1]	*M&M Allowance per house*
1997–98	718.91
1998–99	725.23
1999–2000	749.02
2000–01	789.96
2001–02	804.71

[1] Figures are given as allowance per dwelling rather than in global figures because stock reduction in Hull would distort figures and present a false picture.

European Funding

£13.4 million in grant was allocated to the Objective 2 Action Plan for Hull for the period 1997–99. An additional £9 million was allocated to the Deep tourist development and Kingswood industrial site development. Over 100 individual projects were supported within these allocations. Among the benefits will be: new employment opportunities; improved small firm survival and productivity; increased skill levels of employed and unemployed people; increased use of IT among small firms and individuals; and increased contribution of disadvantaged communities to their own economic and social development.

In the period 1997–99, over 25 projects (worth over £1 million in grant) were supported under Objective 3, with the aim of combating long-term unemployment and helping the integration into working life of young people and people exposed to exclusion from the labour market. In the first round of the new Objective 3 programme, projects worth over £7 million in grant have been approved for support.

Major Transport Schemes

Hedon Road Improvement

£53 million is being made available for the Hedon Road improvement scheme to improve travel to and from Hull Docks. This will help the development of the Port of Hull and help create jobs and prosperity across the city. Construction works are expected to start in May 2001.

Departmental Policies (Houghton and Washington, East)

Mr. Kemp: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Houghton and Washington, East of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [152992]

Ms Beverley Hughes: The principal kinds of funding that this Department has provided to the City of Sunderland in 1997 to 2002 are shown in the table. These include grants and borrowing approvals for revenue and capital expenditure.

It is not possible to determine how much of this money has been spent on Houghton and Washington, East. It is for the local authority to decide where within its boundary these resources are applied.

£ million

Nature of funding	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*[1]
Revenue Support Grant	126.001	133.654	139.958	137.515	145.032
Income from National Non-Domestic Rates	64.585	66.985	72.276	81.373	79.005
Housing Investment Programme	6.445	6.819	6.780	18.340	6.926
Housing Revenue Account Subsidy	32.354	29.230	27.913	27.238	n/k
Capital Receipts Initiative	1.669	5.748	5.959	n/a	n/a
SRB Funding	[3]5.614	[3]5.927	[3]8.201	[3]8.763	[3]9.650
New Deal for Communities Funding	n/a	n/a	n/a	[4]0.250	[4]0.050
Neighbourhood Renewal Funding	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	3.582
ERDF Funding	3.142	2.201	0.125	0.100	n/k
Transport Supplementary Grant	0.260	0.351	1.286	0	0
Transport Annual Capital Guideline	0.425	0.351	1.286	0	0
Transport Block Supplementary Credit Approval	1.121	1.075	1.575	4.217	5.592
Rural Bus Challenge Grant	0	[5]1.255	[5]0.362	[5]0.560	n/k
Rural Bus Subsidy Grant	0	[5]0.054	[5]0.059	[5]0.082	n/k
Capital Challenge	1.8	2.377	0.823	0	0
(Supplementary Credit and Basic Credit Approvals)	[6]0.399	[6]1.118	[6]0.0001	0	0

[1] Where known

[2] This figure does not include the Major Repairs Allowance allocated to the authority which amounts to £18.284 million.

[3] Please note, NDC expenditure is in the East End and Hendon and not in the hon. Members constituency.

[4] 1997–98 SRB figures include Round 3 funding for 'Pride in Pennywell'.

1998–99 SRB figures include Round 4 funding for 'Releasing Potential in Hendon and the East End'.

1999–00 SRB figures include Round 5 funding for 'Focus on Ford and Pallion'.

2000/01 SRB figures include Round 6 funding for 'Regenerating Thorney Close'.

[5] Figures quoted are the full amounts given to the Tyne and Wear Passenger Transport Executive of whom the authority is a partner.

[6] Tyne and Wear Fire Brigade also received Capital Challenge Funding. This was spent on the training centre at Barmston Mere, Washington although the whole of Tyne and Wear benefited from the investment.

Bus Services

Mr. Breed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of rural district council areas he estimates do not have a bus service. [153130]

Mr. Hill: Information is not collected in the form that would enable a reliable estimate to be made.

However, the National Travel Survey for 1997–99 showed that in Great Britain as a whole 42 per cent. of households in rural areas were within 13 minutes walk of a bus stop with a service of at least once an hour.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Home Zones

Mr. Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the average cost of establishing a home zone. [153577]

Mr. Hill: The cost of establishing a home zone will vary greatly with the size of the zone and the extent of works involved. Information from the pilot projects now being monitored suggests that, in very preliminary estimates, it would be reasonable to use an indicative range of £500-£2,000 per household. But the costs of individual schemes could be slightly less or substantially more than these figures. These are early days, and we shall keep the estimates under review in the light of increasing experience.

A27

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to the answer of 27 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 630W, on the A27, what the aggregated expenditure was on the two schemes between 1 January 1989 and 31 March 1994. [153443]

Mr. Hill *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Tim Matthews, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Tim Matthews to Mr. Norman Baker, dated 15 March 2001:

I have been asked by the Transport Minister, Keith Hill to reply to your question about the amount spent on work relating to the possible improvements of the A27 Lewes to Polegate and the A27 Polegate bypass between 1 January 1989 and 31 March 1994.

As John Kerman explained in his letter of 27 February, unfortunately financial records maintained prior to the establishment of the Highways Agency in April 1994 do not allow us to readily identify details of spend on individual schemes. We cannot therefore isolate sufficient information to give you an aggregate figure for spend before that date.

Climate Change

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what policy he has to implement the proposals in respect of hydrofluorocarbons in "Climate Change: The UK Programme". [153617]

Mr. Meacher: Industry was given a clear signal on the continued use of hydrofluorocarbons in the UK Climate Change Programme. Policies and measures taken to implement the proposals outlined in the programme include the development of a new voluntary agreement with the refrigeration and air conditioning sector, the introduction of a mandatory scheme to train and certify refrigerant handlers, and encouragement of the use, where appropriate, of alternative substances.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what proposals he has to discourage the use of hydrofluorocarbons in air conditioning equipment; and if he will make a statement. [153616]

Mr. Meacher: Industry was given a clear signal on the continued use of hydrofluorocarbons in the UK Climate Change Programme. Policies and measures taken to implement the proposals outlined in the programme include the development of a new voluntary agreement with the refrigeration and air conditioning sector, the introduction of a mandatory scheme to train and certify refrigerant handlers, and encouragement of the use, where appropriate, of alternative substances.

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the estimated cost is of administering the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme in England in 2000–01; and what the average cost is of administration for each grant paid. [153531]

Mr. Meacher: The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme is managed by Eastern HEES Ltd. in the East of England, and by the Eaga Partnership in the rest of England. The two scheme managers are responsible for marketing the scheme to eligible households; carrying out independent surveys of properties; advising and agreeing with householders the most appropriate measures for their home; recruiting heating and insulation contractors through open competition; and managing payments to contractors for work completed.

The fees paid to the scheme managers consist of a fixed monthly element and a variable amount paid for each household where work has been completed and invoiced. In addition the Department paid start up costs of £2,485,000 in the period between award of contract in March 2000 and the start of the new scheme on 1 June 2000.

Excluding these one-off costs, the total scheme management costs between 1 June 2000 and 31 March 2001 are estimated to be £18,906,000 (excluding VAT). This is based on the 134,555 households for whom work orders have been placed with installers during the year. This equates to an average cost per household of £141.

This estimate does not allow for profit clawback clause included within the contract with the Eaga Partnership, and the not-for-profit basis of Eastern HEES. These two factors will reduce the actual fees paid by the Department this year.

The average cost per household figure reflects the relatively slow start to the scheme during the period June-August 2000. The coming financial year will represent the first full year of operation for the new scheme. The total number of homes improved is expected to increase substantially, thereby reducing the average cost per household.

Walton Group plc

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made on *(a)* obtaining the return of the £4.4 million grant made to the Walton Group plc in respect of Exchange Flags Liverpool and *(b)* matters referred to Merseyside Police in respect of this grant. [153546]

Ms Beverley Hughes: Police investigations are still in progress, and therefore I am unable to make any further statement at this time.

Driving Licences (Pensioners)

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans the

Government have to abolish the payment for driving licence renewals for pensioners aged over 70 years; and if he will make a statement. [153538]

Mr. Hill: There are no plans to abolish the three yearly driving licence renewal fee for the over-70s. Fees are required to cover the costs of issuing licences. Abolishing the fee for renewing licences from age 70 would result in an unacceptable level of cross-subsidisation, which would have to be borne by other drivers through the fees they pay.

The fee was reduced from £8.50 to £6.00 in November last year, returning it to its 1992 level. A consultation document issued in February this year proposes a freeze in the over-70s licence renewal fee.

Environmental Management Policies

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what mechanism the Government plan to put in place to require publicly funded institutions to introduce formal environmental management policies. [153518]

Mr. Meacher: The Government have already put mechanisms in place for requiring Government Departments to establish formal environmental management policies. Details are given in the second annual report of the Green Ministers' Committee, which I chair, with chapter 5 covering the progress that has been made in establishing environmental management systems on the Government estate. A copy is on my Department's website. The Government have not so far put mechanisms in place for requiring local authorities to establish environmental management systems, though we have provided encouragement and are pleased that a number of local authorities have established environmental management systems certified to ISO 14001 and EMAS.

London Underground

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to conclude negotiations on the PPP for the London Underground. [153947]

Mr. Hill: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister announced last month that he had agreed to work together with the Commissioner of Transport for London, Bob Kiley, and with London Underground, on developing mutually acceptable modifications to the Public Private Partnership. Discussions on these modifications are continuing and have made some real progress. If we can reach agreement then the PPP bidders will be asked to submit revised proposals.

The Government have not, and will not, set an artificial timetable for completion of the PPP, as this would weaken our ability to ensure that it delivers the best deal for London.

Railtrack plc

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to acquire *(a)* a stake in and *(b)* additional powers over Railtrack plc. [153943]

Mr. Hill: The Transport Act 2000 has strengthened the regulation and accountability of Railtrack. The Rail Regulator rigorously enforces Railtrack's network licence obligations and has proposed new licence conditions.

Ports of Canada Police

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 276W, if he will assess the role and experience of the Ports of Canada police as a model for the future policing of United Kingdom ports; and if he will make a statement. [153610]

Mr. Hill: Yes. As I told my hon. Friend in my letter of 4 January, I am happy to consider any information that he considers relevant to our review of ports police forces.

A417

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans to improve the A417 near Nettleton Bottom and Crickley Hill, Gloucestershire. [153748]

Mr. Hill: The South West Regional Assembly has endorsed proposals by the Highways Agency to improve the A417 trunk road from Cowley to the Air Balloon roundabout. My Department is considering the proposal along with those from other regions. An announcement will be made in due course as to what schemes will be added to the national trunk road programme.

Private Hire Vehicles (London)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many private hire vehicles operate in the Greater London area; and how many have registered with the Public Carriage Office to date. [153717]

Mr. Hill: The number of vehicles in Greater London currently available to the public for private hirings is estimated at some 40,000 to 60,000; their regulation is a matter for Transport for London.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when operator licensing of private hire vehicles in London will come into effect. [153718]

Mr. Hill: I refer the hon. Member to my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford) on 28 November 2000, *Official Report*, column 554W.

Local Government Act

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to make regulations on alternative arrangements for local authorities under section 32 of the Local Government Act 2000. [154264]

Ms Beverley Hughes: I have today laid before Parliament a draft of the Local Authorities (Alternative Arrangements) (England) Regulations 2001.

It is now for the House to consider this draft. To assist the House, I have placed in the Library and the Vote Office copies of a draft of the guidance on alternative

arrangements which we propose to issue to English local authorities if the draft Regulations are approved by the House and the Other Place.

Home Improvement Agency

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the home improvement agency grant allocations for 2001–02; and what steps he is taking to extend the benefits of agency services into areas where they are not currently available. [154273]

Mr. Raynsford: As announced in Spending Review 2000, an extra £1.8 million is being provided in grant for home improvement agencies from 2001–02, bringing the total grant to £8.5 million a year. Local authorities are being notified of their allocations today.

This money will be provided in each of the next three years, and in 2003–04 it will be ring-fenced within the new Supporting People budget.

As well as providing additional support for authorities with existing agencies, I am pleased to be able to offer grant to 52 authorities for the first time. This will increase the number of agencies supported by my Department from 183 to 235 and will allow substantially more elderly, disabled and vulnerable people across the country to benefit from the services agencies can provide.

The authorities being offered grant for the first time are as follows:

Bath and North East Somerset
Blaby
Bromley
Canterbury
Castle Point
Chelmsford
Chesterfield
Corby
Darlington
Enfield
Fenland
Gloucester
Great Yarmouth
Guildford
Harborough
Harlow
Huntingdonshire
Kerrier
Kettering
Lambeth
Lichfield
New Forest
North East Lincolnshire
Norwich
Nuneaton and Bedworth
Richmondshire
Rochdale
Runnymede
Rutland
Salford
Scarborough
Sedgemoor
Selby
Shrewsbury and Atcham
Slough
South Cambridgeshire
South Derbyshire
South Gloucestershire
South Hams
South Norfolk
South Oxfordshire
Stafford
Tameside
Tandridge
Tendring
Torbay
Trafford
Waverley
Westminster
Weymouth and Portland
Windsor and Maidenhead
Woking.

TREASURY

Tax Policy

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his oral statement of 7 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 295–308, if he will estimate the revenue from a 1p increase in the basic rate of income tax *(a)* in the first year and *(b)* in the three subsequent years. [153716]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to the Tax Ready Reckoner and Tax Reliefs which was published in November 2000, a copy of which is held in the Library of the House.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the revenue yield of abolishing taper relief for the five financial years from 2001–02 and reintroducing indexation and retirement relief. [153714]

Dawn Primarolo: Consistent with the assumptions of the March 2001 Budget forecast, the net revenue yield from reintroducing indexation and abolishing taper is estimated to be £450 million for the first year, or £400 million if retirement relief were reinstated also, most of which would be received in the following year. Further information in the form requested on the yield for subsequent years can be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the revenue yield in *(a)* the first year and *(b)* the subsequent three years from a tax of 50 per cent. on (i) gross and (ii) net incomes exceeding £100,000 a year. [153712]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) on 13 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 104W.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the revenue yield of abolishing taper relief and reintroducing indexation and retirement relief. [154021]

Dawn Primarolo: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave him on 14 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 653W.

Financial Ombudsman Service

Mr. Steen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many complaints have been investigated by the Financial Ombudsman Service concerning *(a)* independent financial advisers and *(b)* tied agents in each of the last three years; and what average level of compensation was awarded in each case. [153736]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The Financial Ombudsman Service are carrying out a detailed analysis of their records in order to provide this information. It will be placed in the Library of the House shortly.

Working Families Tax Credit (Islington)

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many recipients there have been of Working Families Tax Credit in Islington *(a)* since its introduction and *(b)* in the 2000–01 financial year; and what the average amount paid to each recipient was. [153694]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimates of the number of families in Islington in receipt of the Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) at May 2000 and August 2000 are shown in the WFTC Quarterly Enquiries for those months, copies of which are in the Library. These estimates are based on 5 per cent. samples of awards, and are subject to sampling error. The publications explain that care should be taken when making comparisons over time at this level of detail.

The average value of WFTC awards paid to families with such awards in London at August 2000 was £80 per week. There are too few cases in the 5 per cent. sample to yield a reliable separate estimate for Islington.

Capital Gains

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate *(a)* the percentage, *(b)* the average amount of capital gains tax paid by people and *(c)* the level of income in each earned income decile. [146172]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 22 January 2001]:* Following is the information requested for 1997–98, the latest available year:

Capital gains tax: individuals 1997–98

Earned income decile	*Lower limit of earned income level (£)*	*Average amount of CGT for CGT payers (£)*	*Proportion of total CGT (percentage)*
1	–8,585	12,150	10.6
2	1	8,010	6.7
3	3,180	6,120	5.2
4	5,151	5,520	4.7
5	8,677	5,400	4.6
6	13,297	6,340	5.4
7	19,765	7,150	6.1
8	29,883	10,140	8.7
9	47,486	16,640	14.2
10	89,313	39,260	33.6
	All	11,680	100

Notes:
1. Earned income includes employment and self-employment income and pensions.
2. For 1997–98, 140,000 individual taxpayers had total CGT liabilities of £1,637 million.
3. Components may not sum to total due to rounding.

Income Tax

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the annual yield to the Treasury of increasing the top rate of income tax to *(a)* 95p and *(b)* 50p for those earning over (i) £60,000, (ii) £75,000 and (iii) £100,000 per annum in (A) the UK and (B) Scotland, indicating the number of people who will be affected in each case. [152779]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The full-year effects in 2001–02 of making the changes are set out in the table.

Change in 2001–02	*Income tax yield (£ billion)*	*Number of people affected (thousand)*
(aiA) 45% rate for people with taxable incomes over £60,000 in the UK	2.6	650
(aiiA) 45% rate for people with taxable incomes over £75,000 in the UK	2.2	420
(aiiiA) 45% rate for people with taxable incomes over £100,000 in the UK	1.7	240
(aiB) 45% rate for people with taxable incomes over £60,000 in the Scotland	0.12	40
(aiiB) 45% rate for people with taxable incomes over £75,000 in the Scotland	0.10	20
(aiiiB) 45% rate for people with taxable incomes over £100,000 in the Scotland	0.08	10
(biA) 50% rate for people with taxable incomes over £60,000 in the UK	4.8	650
(biiA) 50% rate for people with taxable incomes over £75,000 in the UK	4.0	420
(biiiA) 50% rate for people with taxable incomes over £100,000 in the UK	3.2	240
(biB) 50% rate for people with taxable incomes over £60,000 in the Scotland	0.22	40
(biiB) 50% rate for people with taxable incomes over £75,000 in the Scotland	0.17	20
(biiiB) 50% rate for people with taxable incomes over £100,000 in the Scotland	0.13	10

The estimates are based on the survey of personal incomes and are consistent with the March 2001 Budget.

Employment Statistics

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people were in employment in *(a)* England and *(b)* Wales in each of the past 15 years; and what the percentage change was in each year. [152697]

Miss Melanie Johnson *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Karen Dunnell to Mr. Paul Flynn, dated 15 March 2001:

The National Statistician has been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of people employed in England and Wales in the last 15 years (152697). I am replying in his absence.

The attached table shows information from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) on those in employment in both countries and the percentage change year in each year.

People aged 16 or over are classed as in employment by the LFS if they have done at least one hour of paid work (as an employee or self-employed) in the week prior to their LFS interview or if they have a job that they are temporarily away from. People who do unpaid work in a family business and people on Government-supported training and employment programmes are also included according to the International Labour Organisation guidelines.

All in employment in England and Wales; spring 1986 to spring 2000

Thousand and per cent. (not seasonally adjusted)

	England		*Wales*	
	Number of people in employment	*Percentage change*	*Number of people in employment*	*Percentage change*
Spring				
1986	20,806	—	1,085	—
1987	21,199	1.9	1,080	−0.5
1988	21,974	3.7	1,135	5.1
1989	22,624	3.0	1,212	6.8
1990	22,812	0.8	1,232	1.6
1991	22,327	−2.1	1,202	−2.4
1992	21,713	−2.7	1,192	−0.9
1993	21,523	−0.9	1,155	−3.1
1994	21,664	0.7	1,175	1.8
1995	21,916	1.2	1,193	1.4
1996	22,212	1.3	1,198	0.5
1997	22,628	1.9	1,220	1.8
1998	22,911	1.2	1,208	−1.0
1999	23,224	1.4	1,229	1.7
2000	23,536	1.3	1,246	1.4

Source:
ONS Labour Force Survey

Industrial Disputes (Days Lost)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many working days were lost in the United Kingdom during the last 12 months as a result of industrial disputes. [153756]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Tom Cox, dated 15 March 2001:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your recent question about the number of working days lost in the UK as a result of industrial disputes (153756).

In the twelve months to January 2001, the latest year for which figures are available, the number was 540,000.

Credit Unions

Ms Squire: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on credit unions. [153609]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 25 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 1068.

Cross-border Securities

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to amend the law dealing with resolution of disputes regarding ownership of securities held cross-border. [154421]

Miss Melanie Johnson: We have today laid the Financial Markets and Insolvency (Settlement Finality) (Amendment) Regulations 2001. These Regulations specify that the law which governs the proprietary rights of a person to securities is to be the law of the state where the relevant register, account or centralised deposit system is located. This change will facilitate resolution of disputes concerning ownership of such securities.

Occupational Pension Schemes

Barbara Follett: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to simplify the administration of the tax rules applying to occupational pension schemes; and if he will make a statement. [154423]

Miss Melanie Johnson: An Inland Revenue sponsored team will be reviewing the tax approval arrangements applying to defined benefit pension schemes with the aim of developing a package of practical options for administrative simplification. The team will not be considering options for changing the underlying tax or benefit structures. The team will consist of Inland Revenue officials and secondees from the pensions industry. The review is due to be completed by February 2003.

Departmental Policy (Walthamstow)

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out, including statistical information relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effect on the Walthamstow constituency of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [154178]

Miss Melanie Johnson: Walthamstow, along with the rest of the United Kingdom, is benefiting from the long-term action we have taken to build economic stability and secure high and stable levels of growth and employment. Since the General Election, claimant unemployment in the constituency has fallen by 1,864, or 41 per cent., youth unemployment is down by 83 per cent. and long-term unemployment has fallen by 70 per cent.

Macroeconomic stability is being complemented at the microeconomic level by the Government's policies to ease the transition from welfare into work and to make work pay. To the end of December 2000, the New Deal for 18–24 year olds had helped 1,475 young people in Walthamstow constituency gain valuable skills and experience 585 (40 per cent.) of whom had moved into employment. The Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC), introduced in October 1999, is helping to make work pay for low and middle-income families. In August 2000, 1,300 families in Walthamstow constituency were benefiting from WFTC.

The Government are also committed to policies which enable pensioners to share in the country's rising prosperity. All pensioners, including 11,000 in Walthamstow constituency, will receive an above-inflation increase in the basic state pension from April 2001. Single pensioners will receive an extra £5 a week.

and couples will receive an extra £8 a week. All pensioners aged 75 or over have also been entitled to a free TV licence since November 2000—including around 7,400 in Walthamstow constituency.

Contaminated Land

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made by region of the likely take-up of the accelerated payable tax credit for clearing up contaminated land. [154206]

Dawn Primarolo: No regional estimates are available for the take-up of this tax credit.

Financial Services and Markets Act

Mrs. Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps the Treasury has taken in relation to making regulations setting out the recognition requirements which are to apply to investment exchanges and clearing houses and to making an Order prescribing the markets and qualifying investments to which the new market abuse regime will apply under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000. [154422]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The regulations relating to recognition requirements for investment exchanges and clearing houses and the order relating to prescribed markets and qualifying investments were made by the Treasury and laid before Parliament today.

Vehicle Excise Duty

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer for what reason motorcycle vehicles over 250cc do not qualify for reduced vehicle excise duty; and if he will make a statement. [153781]

Mr. Timms: Motorcycles over 250cc pay 40 per cent. of the standard rate of vehicle excise duty levied on vehicles in the private and light goods vehicle class. Budget 2001 froze the rate at £65 per annum.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Mrs. Sari Conway

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what offer of employment he has made to Mrs. Sari Conway. [151784]

Mrs. Roche: I cannot comment on an individual case.

Islington Police Division

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the establishment level of *(a)* uniformed officers and *(b)* civilian staff was in Islington police division in (i) each year since 1996 and (ii) 2001 to date; and how many were actually in post in each category in each year. [153699]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* The Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis has provided the information in the table. It is not possible for the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) to provide information on the budgeted workforce targets (establishment) for the earlier years because the current Islington division was only created in 1999 out of the former Islington and Holloway divisions. The MPS have been able to provide strength figures for the former Islington and Holloway divisions for the years before 1999.

The Budgeted Workforce Target, or establishment, for the financial year 2001–02 has yet to be set.

Metropolitan police—Islington division

	Police officers[1,2]		*Civilian support staff*[1]	
As at 31 December	*Budgeted workforce target*	*Actual officers in post*	*Budgeted workforce target*	*Actual staff in post*
1996	n/a	569.6 (532.6)	n/a	n/a
1997	n/a	549.4 (495.8)	n/a	148.1
1998	n/a	529.4 (481.8)	n/a	147.7
1999	544 (484)	510.6 (465)	n/a	147.0
2000	554 (489)	542.9 (482.3)	129	138.7
2001	554 (489)	539.9 (485.8)	129	135.2

[1] All figures are full-time equivalents.
[2] The figures in brackets are the number of uniformed police officers. The total figure for each year includes plain-clothes police officers.

Community Beat Officers

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many community beat officers there are in the London Borough of Wandsworth. [152818]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis that there are 31 constables in Wandsworth who are predominately engaged in community beat duties.

UK Youth Parliament

Mr. Rowe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to meet members of the UK Youth Parliament to discuss the proposals in the Parliament's manifesto in which his Department has a policy interest. [152967]

Mr. Boateng: I was pleased to attend the first sitting of the United Kingdom Youth Parliament last month. I will be making an initial response to the United Kingdom Youth Parliament's manifesto on behalf of the Government in my capacity as Minister for Young People. Both my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I would be happy to meet a delegation from the United Kingdom Youth Parliament once the manifesto is published.

Bingo Industry

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce legislation to reduce the administrative burden on the bingo industry. [153765]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government published a consultation document on 6 November 2000 with proposals for deregulating the bingo industry. The document suggested the abolition of the existing requirement for licensed bingo clubs to notify the licensing authority of changes in their charges to players 14 days in advance. It also suggested allowing licensed bingo clubs to have both jackpot and amusements with

prizes gaming machines instead of either one or the other, and increasing the possible number of prizes available in games of multiple bingo.

The consultation period ended on 16 February 2001 and we have been considering the responses that we received. We now intend to lay an Order under the Deregulation and Contracting Out Act 1994 that would give effect to the changes outlined in the consultation document.

Deportation

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department for what reasons Hosni Farhat (584006), a prisoner at Albany Prison, has not been deported. [153779]

Mrs. Roche: My officials will arrange for Mr. Farhat's deportation as soon as practicable.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average annual cost of escorting an asylum applicant in secure conditions to and from hearings in connection with his application and any subsequent appeal was in each of the last three years. [153830]

Mrs. Roche: The information requested could be obtained only at disproportionate cost and, as it would have to be based on a range of variables, it would be prone to significant inaccuracy.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on talks with the Chinese Government on the difficulties of returning failed asylum seekers. [153833]

Mrs. Roche: Home Office officials have regular contact with the Chinese Government in order to obtain travel documents so that those Chinese nationals who have no lawful basis for remaining here and who are without valid national passports can be documented for return to China.

As part of this contact, officials meet the Chinese authorities to explore ways of securing improvements to the travel document issuing process and to co-operate more generally in combating illegal immigration.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers were resident in Wales and were waiting for their applications to be processed in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000 and *(e)* 2001. [153216]

Mrs. Roche: Information on the location of asylum seekers was not available centrally before 2000.

On 3 April 2000, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) began supporting destitute asylum seekers entering the United Kingdom on or after that date. Information recorded by NASS shows that as at the end of February 2001, 30[1] asylum seekers, including dependants, had been allocated NASS accommodation in Wales and 70[1] asylum seekers, including dependants, had been allocated voucher only support and were located in Wales.

These figures may include some asylum seeker families who have received a final negative decision because families of asylum seekers are eligible to remain supported by NASS until removal.

Information is not currently available centrally on the location of asylum seekers who either do not apply for NASS support or who were receiving Department of Social Security or local authority support before NASS began.

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 10.

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are awaiting deportation; and how many were deported in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000 and *(e)* 2001. [153215]

Mrs. Roche: The requested information on deported asylum seekers is shown in the table. It is not possible to say how many asylum seekers voluntarily left the United Kingdom without the knowledge of the Home Office. Therefore, it is not possible to say how many are awaiting deportation.

Asylum seekers removed from the United Kingdom following refusal of leave to enter or enforcement action 1997 to 2001

	1997	*1998*	*1999*[1]	*2000*[1]
Total asylum removals and voluntary departures[2]	7,185	6,985	7,660	8,980
Of whom: removed or left as a result of deportation action under Section 3(5) or 3(6) of the Immigration Act 1971	455	350	140	170

[1] Data are provisional

[2] Includes action against passengers applying at ports

Note:

All figures are rounded to the nearest 5

Immigration and Asylum (Detention)

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of the time it takes an asylum applicant to secure conditions to receive *(a)* an initial decision on an asylum application and *(b)* to complete all appeals if the initial application is refused; [153826]

(2) how many asylum applicants are held in secure conditions. [153825]

Mrs. Roche: Current information on persons detained who have claimed asylum and the time taken for an applicant in detention to receive an initial decision or complete all appeals is not available and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

The most recent information relates to the number of persons detained under the Immigration Act 1971 as at 31 January 2001. At that date a total of 1,334 persons, including those who had claimed asylum, were recorded as detained.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the existing immigration detention estate; and by how many places. [153827]

Mrs. Roche: The Home Secretary announced in May 2000 a policy to deliver new detention places to enable the Immigration Service to achieve its removals targets.

Our plans to increase the Immigration Detention estate from its current capacity are as follows:

	Places
Yarl's Wood Detention Centre (Bedford)	900
Harmondsworth Detention Centre (Heathrow)	440
Dungavel Detention Centre (Scotland)	150
Aldington Detention Centre (Kent)	300

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many sites his officials considered as potential places to build immigration detention centres in the last three years. [153828]

Mrs. Roche: Over the past three years my officials have considered about 120 sites throughout the country as potential candidates to build new immigration detention centres.

The majority of sites did not meet our requirements for a variety of reasons, including location, nature of the site, availability for a quick development and cost.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the average annual cost of holding an asylum applicant in secure conditions was in each of the last three years. [153831]

Mrs. Roche: Secure detention facilities are routinely provided on the Immigration and Nationality Directorate's detention estate, supplemented by places in Prison Service accommodation. Police services also provide some detention on a limited, ad hoc basis. Information specifically on the cost of asylum detainees is not separately available. Assuming full occupancy, the average annual cost of a place for an immigration detainee is shown in the table:

£

Year	*Average Annual Cost*[1]
1998–99	26,819
1999–2000	27,433
2000–01	[2]29,424

[1] These figures are weighted averages of the cost of Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) detention and Prison Service facilities, taking into account an assessment of the usage of detention in the two types of accommodation. The figures cover the running costs of IND detention facilities but exclude expenditure on capital works and major maintenance. The figures for Prison Service detention are based on the average cost per prisoner place. The figures do not include the cost of temporary police accommodation.
[2] The figures for 2000–01 are based on estimates of the full-year IND costs and the target cost per prisoner place for Prison Service detention.

Criminal Record Checks (Volunteers)

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what his estimate is of the cost to public funds of his proposed exemption for volunteers from fees for criminal record checks. [153791]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have announced our intention that standard and enhanced disclosures, which include those working in sensitive positions with the vulnerable, will be issued free of charge to volunteers. We have also made clear that it remains our intention that the Criminal Records Bureau should be self-financing by means of the fees that it charges. Work is continuing on the fee levels, but we expect to make a further announcement shortly.

London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the ability of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority to generate additional income under Best Value legislation. [153722]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority is defined as a Best Value authority under the Local Government Act 1999. Under the duty of Best Value, authorities are required to secure continuous improvement in the way in which they exercise their functions, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

Section 16 of the Local Government Act 1999 allows the Secretary of State to exclude Best Value authorities from the application of existing legislation which prevents them from achieving Best Value or to amend the application of such legislation. It also allows for new powers to be conferred to facilitate the achievement of Best Value.

The Government expect to publish this month a consultation paper on the use of powers in section 16 to provide new and amended powers for partnership working. This will include proposals for Best Value authorities to provide a wider range of goods and services to partners, both in the public and private sectors. Draft orders will be laid before Parliament following the conclusion of the consultation exercise.

Election Observers

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to allow overseas observers to be present in election polling stations. [153464]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government have no plans to allow overseas observers inside election polling stations. Current legislation restricts who is allowed to be present in polling stations to prevent possible intimidation of voters and preserve the secrecy of the ballot. The hon. Member recently wrote to my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary about this matter and I shall shortly be replying to him in detail.

Police Inspectorate

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Police Inspectorate last reported to him on equal opportunities, community and race relations challenges, policy and training of the Royal Parks Police. [153461]

Mr. Charles Clarke: There is no statutory requirement for the Royal Parks Constabulary, which is a non-Home Office police force, to be inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. A review of the Constabulary was undertaken during July and August 2000 by Mr. Anthony Speed, a former Assistant Commissioner of

the Metropolitan Police Service. I understand that the review was conducted in the form of a full inspection in accordance with the latest procedures and protocols practised by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. The report was submitted recently to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Arts in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, who has responsibility for the Royal Parks Constabulary. He will be publishing the report shortly.

National Black Police Association

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will consult the National Black Police Association on challenges facing the Royal Parks Police and other police services in the fields of equal opportunities and community and race relations; and if he will make a statement. [153462]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, whose Department has overall responsibility for the Royal Parks Constabulary, that the force intends to consult the National Black Police Association about an extension of diversity training. The Home Office has consulted the association about community and race relations training for officers in Home Office forces in England and Wales. The association was also consulted during the development of minority ethnic employment targets and an associated action plan for all Home Office forces, published in July 1999 under the title 'Dismantling Barriers'. The association is represented on the steering group overseeing the implementation of 'Dismantling Barriers'.

Lancashire

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* funded and *(b)* actual (A) special constables and (B) salaried constables were in post in the Lancashire Constabulary (i) on 31 March 1997 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available. [153220]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office Research Development and Statistics Directorate collect police personnel statistics, including those of the Special Constabulary.

There are no national target numbers for specials, and Lancashire Constabulary advises that they do not differentiate between funded and actual specials. The Special Constabulary strength figures for Lancashire Special Constabulary for 31 March 1997 and 30 September 2000 (the latest figures available) are as follows:

	March 1997	*September 2000*
Total strength	483	362

I understand from the Chief Constable that it is not possible to provide information on the number of funded constable posts as Lancashire does not budget for workforce totals and the force devolves its budget to its Divisional Commanders, who then determine how to use funds to maximise their effectiveness locally. Police Constable numbers for Lancashire Constabulary for 31 March 1997 and 30 September 2000 (the latest figures available) are as follows:

	March 1997	*September 2000*
Total strength	2,493	2,463

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what reported offences involving violence there were in Lancashire in *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1998, *(c)* 1999, *(d)* 2000 and *(e)* 2001; and how many of those involved (i) village shops and (ii) village post offices. [153221]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Numbers of recorded violent crimes in Lancashire by category are given in the table, the most recent published data being for the year ending September 2000. Recorded crime statistics do not generally include the location of offences, and so details of those involving village shops and village post offices are not available. It should be noted that, owing to the change in counting rules on 1 April 1998, figures for recorded crime before and after that date are not directly comparable. For example, from that date, figures for offences of violence against the person additionally include figures for common assault and assault on a constable, among other offences.

Recorded crime in Lancashire—number of recorded crimes in violent crime categories

Year ending	*Violence against the person*	*Sexual offences*	*Robbery*
March 1998	3,865	966	887
March 1999	10,328	879	982
March 2000	9,803	754	1,058
September 2000	9,832	810	1,065

Police (Greater Manchester)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers were on operational duties in Greater Manchester in each year since 1990. [152888]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* It is not possible to provide data on operational numbers before 1996–97. The information on operational numbers is collected annually by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary.

Year[1]	*Operational police numbers*[2]	*Total police strength*[2]
1996–97	5,553 (80%)	6,922
1997–98	5,720 (82%)	6,949
1998–99	5,673 (83%)	6,810
1999–2000	6,115 (90%)	6,795

[1] As at 31 March

[2] All figures are full-time equivalents

Closed Circuit Television

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list, by constituency, the closed circuit TV schemes that have been *(a)* funded and *(b)* part-funded by the Government in each of the last three years, and the cost of each. [153141]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Details of closed circuit television (CCTV) schemes funded wholly or in part by the Home Office during each of the last three years are listed by parliamentary constituency. A copy has been placed in the Library.

The schemes listed include those approved to date under the Crime Reduction Programme CCTV Initiative and those funded in 1998 under Round 4 of the earlier CCTV Challenge Competition.

During the last three years, 283 CCTV schemes totalling more than £65 million have been awarded Home Office funding, of which 106 schemes were wholly funded by the Home Office, and 277 schemes were part-funded with nearly £19 million committed from other sources.

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the funding available for closed circuit TV schemes in *(a)* Wansbeck and *(b)* the UK. [153148]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Under the second round of the Crime Reduction Programme Closed Circuit Television Initiative (CCTV), more than 800 initial funding applications totalling over £200 million were submitted by crime and disorder reduction partnerships, including two applications from partnerships within the Wansbeck constituency.

All the applications are currently under assessment and we expect to advise partnerships of the outcome very shortly.

Although this is the final round of funding under the CCTV Initiative, there will be further opportunities for CCTV funding under future Government anti-crime programmes.

Departmental Policies (Don Valley)

Caroline Flint: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information relating as directly as possible to Don Valley constituency, the effects on Doncaster of his Department's policies and actions since 2 May 1997. [153522]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office annual reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The next report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. 'Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000' and 'Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000' can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder Partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out are examples relating to the Don Valley constituency or the immediate locality:

Targeted Policing Initiative

A project in conjunction with forces in Derbyshire, Cambridgeshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, south Yorkshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and west Midlands to tackle distraction burglary has been awarded £168,000.

Reducing Burglary Initiative

Approximately £32,000 was awarded to a project in Edlington, Doncaster under round two of the Reducing Burglary Initiative. South Yorkshire Police in partnership with Doncaster Crime and Disorder Partnership are working on interventions that include: appointment of a project co-ordinator, target hardening, high profile media campaign, neighbourhood watch and property marking scheme.

Around £399,000 has been awarded under round three of the initiative to allow south Yorkshire police in partnership with the Doncaster Crime and Disorder Partnership to concentrate on Doncaster's burglary "hotspots". Interventions include: supervision of prolific offenders, Neighbourhood Watch development, improved home security for victims and media and marketing campaigns.

Closed Circuit Television (CCTV)

Under round one of the CCTV Initiative the Safer Sheffield Steering Group submitted two bids covering Sheffield's town centre and the Don Valley area, with a combined value of over £2 million. The two Sheffield Wide Imaging Switching Scheme (SWISS) bids are being considered together. So far £725,000 has been awarded for the system to be piloted in the town centre. When this trial has been evaluated a decision on the remaining funding will be taken.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Don Valley to a greater or lesser extent. For example: 376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established; racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Departmental Policies (Jarrow)

Mr. Hepburn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will set out, with statistical information, relating as directly as possible to the constituency, the effects on Jarrow of his Department's actions since 2 May 1997. [153562]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Home Office is working to build a safe, just and tolerant society in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals, families and communities are properly balanced, and the protection and security of the public are maintained. Detailed information on the impact of Home Office policies across the full range of responsibilities is set out in Home Office annual reports. A copy of the most recent report, Home

Office Annual Report 1999–2000, is available in the Library. The next report will be published shortly. Information on recorded crime and policing is also published. 'Recorded Crime England and Wales, 12 months to September 2000' and 'Police Service Strength England and Wales, 30 September 2000' can be found in the Library. The recorded crime statistics include information on recorded crime by Basic Command Unit and Crime and Disorder Partnerships.

The impact of Home Office policies and actions is not normally examined by constituency and the statistics which the Department collects, such as recorded crime, cannot be matched in the way requested although set out below are examples relating to the Jarrow constituency or the immediate locality:

Targeted Policing Initiative

Under round one of the Targeted Policing Initiative, £40,000 has been awarded to develop an integrated strategy to tackle crime and disorder in rural towns and villages. Northumbria police in partnership with Tynedale District Council, local parish councils and the Northumberland Social Services and probation service will tackle both localised offending and crime resulting from travelling criminals. A local multi-agency safety group will develop intelligence about offenders and identify "hotspots". The project will employ a range of interventions including a mobile police station and use of Closed Circuit Television (CCTV).

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)

Jarrow comes under South Tyneside YOT which is involved in a number of schemes including establishing restorative approaches, working with victims of crime and holding successful restorative conferences. 35 per cent. of reparation orders/requirements have included an element of direct reparation to victims. There is a very successful project in Biddick Hall where 22 young people involved in serious youth disorder did reparation in the same area repairing damage to a primary school, cleaning off graffiti etc. It has been very well received by local community/residents (and by parents of young people). It is too early to say definitively what the effects of these actions are on re-offending and reducing levels of youth crime. In response to some concern about youth disorder, there has recently been a seminar funded and facilitated by Government Office North-East, and the YOT will be taking appropriate action within the context of a proposed youth disorder strategy.

More generally, all of the policies of the Home Office will impact on the residents of Jarrow to a greater or lesser extent. For example: 376 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships have been established; racial harassment and racially motivated crimes have been made criminal offences by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; the asylum backlog has been cut from 103,495 at the end of January 2000 to 66,195 by the end of December 2000; and good progress is being made in reducing the incidence of fire deaths in England and Wales. They have dropped from 605 in 1997 to 534 in 1999.

Information on the Home Office and its policies is also published on its website www.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Police Manpower

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the total number of police per head of population was *(a)* in each police force and *(b)* in total on the last date for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [152373]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is given in the table. The comparison 'population per police officer' provides a more meaningful figure than 'numbers of police per head of population'.

Force	*Police officers as at September 2000*	*Population as at June 1999*	*Population per officer*
Avon and Somerset	2,941	1,501,193	510
Bedfordshire	1,006	562,214	559
Cambridgeshire	1,266	724,897	573
Cheshire	2,000	982,527	491
Cleveland	1,421	555,944	391
Cumbria	1,048	491,814	469
Derbyshire	1,780	974,084	547
Devon and Cornwall	2,873	1,569,666	546
Dorset	1,299	692,543	533
Durham	1,581	606,744	384
Dyfed-Powys	1,045	480,663	460
Essex	2,780	1,617,660	582
Gloucestershire	1,142	561,941	492
Greater Manchester	6,767	2,577,040	381
Gwent	1,271	556,622	438
Hampshire	3,435	1,781,049	519
Hertfordshire	1,961	1,043,028	532
Humberside	1,905	881,586	463
Kent	3,239	1,587,243	490
Lancashire	3,215	1,425,533	443
Leicestershire	2,010	934,687	465
Lincolnshire	1,162	628,612	541
Merseyside	4,081	1,403,625	344
Norfolk	1,387	796,460	574
Northamptonshire	1,166	621,162	533
Northumbria	3,885	1,418,626	365
North Wales	1,393	657,738	472
North Yorkshire	1,293	747,613	578
Nottinghamshire	2,232	1,032,685	463
South Wales	3,029	1,242,004	410
South Yorkshire	3,184	1,302,410	409
Staffordshire	2,157	1,060,606	492
Suffolk	1,115	674,639	605
Surrey	2,113	1,078,067	510
Sussex	2,812	1,514,991	539
Thames Valley	3,748	2,116,233	565
Warwickshire	912	507,909	557
West Mercia	1,906	1,140,577	598
West Midlands	7,350	2,626,505	357
West Yorkshire	4,806	2,115,380	440
Wiltshire	1,099	610,326	555
City of London[1]	720	—	—
Metropolitan police	24,695	7,285,045	295
Total force numbers[2]	122,230	52,689,891	431
Total for England and Wales including secondments	124,614	52,689,891	423

[1] Police per head of population for City and Metropolitan police are combined.

[2] Excluding secondments to central service, NCS, NCIS and inter-force units.

Note:

Police numbers are full time equivalents.

Police Training

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people have entered police training in each of the last two years, broken down by police force area. [153362]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The vast majority of police training (over 80 per cent.) takes place in forces. Details of numbers of officers undergoing training are not held centrally and could not be obtained without disproportionate cost.

Police Officers (Wandsworth)

Mr. Linton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what action the Government have taken to bring the number of police officers in Wandsworth up to its establishment, with special reference to Battersea. [151151]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government want to see police numbers rising. Our spending plans therefore make generous provision, intended to meet major pay, pensions and other pressures on forces as well as providing ring-fenced funding to increase recruitment through the Crime Fighting Fund (CFF).

As part of the police grant settlement for 2001–02, the Metropolitan police authority will receive £1,822.8 million in Government supported funding. This is an increase of 5.3 per cent. over the provision for 2000–01. In addition, funding is available from the CFF to enable the Metropolitan police service to recruit an additional 2,044 officers over and above the number that the force would otherwise have recruited in the three years from April 2000.

Other measures which should boost recruitment in the Met include the £3,327 per annum increase in London Allowance paid to officers in the Met (and City), who were recruited on or after 1 September 1994; the provision of free rail travel within a 70-mile radius of London for the Met's officers; and the National Recruitment Campaign. By 25 February the campaign had resulted in 2,304 Expressions of Interest being passed to the Met, and a further 1,160 calls transferred to the Met's own call centre.

Several outline bids covering the Met police area are also being assessed under the first round of the Government's Starter Homes Initiative which will enable key workers, including police officers, to purchase homes in areas of high-cost housing.

The allocation of resources and the deployment of officers within the Metropolitan police is an operational decision for the Commissioner.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Country Court Hearing Centres

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his oral statement in Westminster Hall of 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 169–70WH, if he will list the county court hearing centres which he plans to close in response to his Departmental Consultation Paper on court modernisation; and when they are to be closed. [153585]

Mr. Lock: At present there are no plans to close particular county court hearing centres as a result of my Departmental Consultation Paper on "Modernising the Civil Courts".

A key theme of "Modernising the Civil Courts" is to make best use of our resources to improve access to justice. As the consultation paper notes, we have a responsibility to ask whether the current court estate offers the best way of providing the services that we have a duty to provide, or whether there are more cost-effective alternatives that maintain, or improve, the level of service required. To that end we are developing a strategy for achieving best value from our estate which will include identifying the most appropriate locations for hearing centres. Part of the exercise will involve looking at opportunities to develop partnerships with other agencies, including the magistrates courts, so that hearings and other services can be provided in areas where there is no permanent county court building.

Legal Services Commission

Mr. Garnier: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department, pursuant to his oral statement, in *Standing Committee A, Official Report*, 6 March 2001; c. 6, how many solicitors' firms had signed up to the Legal Services Commission contract for criminal legal services by 12 March; and how many he expects will have done so by 2 April. [153586]

Mr. Lock: As at 12 March 2001, the Legal Services Commission had received 1,285 signed general criminal contracts from firms of solicitors across England and Wales. It is expected that some 2,800 firms, the vast majority of those that were offered contracts to sign, will elect to take up the contract.

Judicial Appointments

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress he has made in implementing the recommendations of Sir Leonard Peach's independent scrutiny report on the Appointment Processes for Judges and Queen's Counsel in England and Wales. [154448]

Mr. Lock: I am pleased to tell the House that Her Majesty yesterday made Orders in Council defining the functions of her Commissioners for Judicial Appointments and appointing Professor Sir Colin Murray Campbell, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Nottingham, as her First Commissioner for Judicial Appointments. The Commission has commenced its work today. The recruitment of Deputy Commissioners will begin shortly, and the Lord Chancellor hopes the first of them will be appointed in the autumn.

Sir Leonard also recommended that a pilot scheme be produced for an Assessment Centre for judicial appointments. The tendering process will commence shortly to identify consultants who will advise on the design and development of the pilot scheme. Several of Sir Leonard's other recommendations—such as improvements to the forms used in consultations on candidates for judicial appointments, and to the procedures for appointment to Silk—have already been implemented.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Factortame Litigation

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the role of the Treasury Solicitor's Department in the Factortame litigation. [154271]

The Solicitor-General: The Factortame litigation involved a claim for damages against the UK Government as a result of the 1996 ruling of the European Court of Justice that those affected by the removal of vessels from the UK fishing vessel register in 1989 under the Merchant Shipping Act 1998 had been discriminated against on the grounds of nationality, contrary to EC law.

The Government have reached a settlement with all 133 claimants. The total amount claimed was £285 million excluding interest. The cases were all settled for a total sum of damages of £44.99 million, including £20.19 million in interest.

His Honour Judge J. K. Toulmin CMG QC made the following observations in open court:

"I think a special word should go to Jonathan Morris and his team because they have had the carriage of the administration of a large part of the action and they have done so in a way, so far, which has really been extraordinarily impressive, and I wanted to put that on the record now. The Treasury Solicitor, that is Jonathan Morris and his team, are the ones who have understood what the whole picture is and they are the ones who have therefore been in the position where they have had to deal with everybody else, and indeed to assist the Court in a way that is entirely neutral . . . I see nods from other parties represented on the front row, so they understand precisely the sense in which I am making this comment."

Coram Foundation

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Solicitor-General when he and his officials first met officers and staff of the Coram family to discuss the Charity Commission-approved scheme to maximise the contribution of the Coram collection. [153666]

The Solicitor-General: My officials, and those acting on my behalf in the Treasury Solicitor's Department, have not met with officers and staff of the Coram Foundation. However there has been a considerable amount of correspondence with the Foundation and their solicitors. There have also been informal meetings between our respective Counsel.

The Foundation has been asked to set out its proposals in writing, rather than at a meeting, so that there can be no misunderstanding about what is intended.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Solicitor-General when he last took action in relation to the judgment of the Charity Commission and the trustees at the Foundling Hospital. [153552]

The Solicitor-General: I reconsidered that matter in the week beginning 7 March, in the light of the further material which has been submitted by the Foundation this year and with the benefit of joint opinion from Counsel which was obtained on my behalf.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Solicitor-General what assessment he has made of the wishes of Handel and Hogarth in relation to the trustees' scheme for the Coram Collection. [153667]

The Solicitor-General: It has not been the case of the Governors of the Foundation that the Hogarth paintings or the Handeliana are held on special trusts such as would preclude their sale. In these circumstances, it is the duty of the Governors to consider how the assets of the charity can best be used to advance its objects: those objects being, broadly, the care of poor deserted children.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Solicitor-General how he took account of the views of all the trustees of registered charity 312278 before responding to the view of one trustee. [153553]

The Solicitor-General: After being alerted to this matter by Peter Glazebrook, a Governor of the Coram Foundation, in April last year I asked that inquiries should be undertaken. The Treasury Solicitor's Department, acting on my behalf, first contacted the Coram Foundation on 28 July 2000.

I have been anxious throughout to ensure that my consideration of this matter should be as well-informed as possible. I have also been open with the Foundation, for example making available the draft particulars of claim and the recent Counsel's Opinion on the matter.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Solicitor-General what consultations he had with the *(a)* Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *(b)* Home Office and *(c)* Charity Commission before intervening in the Coram scheme. [153668]

The Solicitor-General: The information is as follows:

(a) The Treasury Solicitor's Department wrote, on my behalf, to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on 23 August 2000. A reply was received on 1 November 2000. Since that time DCMS has been kept informed as to developments.

(b) There have been no contacts with the Home Office, which has no responsibility for this matter.

(c) The Treasury Solicitor's Department first contacted the Charity Commission on 5 July 2000. The Commission has since been kept fully informed as to developments.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Clergy Pensions

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if he will make a statement on the criteria that determine the way in which pensions are paid to the Church of England clergy. [153832]

Mr. Stuart Bell: On retirement at or after age 65 with 37 or more years' full-time service, the pension benefits for clergy consist of a pension of two thirds the previous year's National Minimum Stipend plus a tax free lump sum of three times that amount. Pensions may be drawn any time after age 55 subject to appropriate actuarial discounts.

The benefit formula reflects best practice in occupational schemes. It recognises that clergy receive a State pension and, as housing is provided while clergy are working, also recognises that clergy in retirement need to meet the cost of housing. Discretionary help is available through the housing loan and rental schemes administered by the Church of England Pensions Board.

My hon. Friend will already be aware that the Archbishops' Council is currently undertaking a review of the clergy remuneration package, including pensions. If he would like more information and will let me have details I will gladly inquire further on his behalf.

CABINET OFFICE

Non-departmental Public Bodies

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how much was spent out of public funds on non-departmental public bodies, Government-appointed taskforces and other publicly funded bodies in *(a)* May 1997 and *(b)* January 2001; and how many staff were employed. [153906]

Marjorie Mowlam: Information on the expenditure and staffing of non-departmental public bodies is published in the annual Cabinet Office publication "Public Bodies". Copies are available from the Libraries of the House. Information on the expenditure and staffing of task forces is not held centrally. However, as a rule, their expenditure is negligible and they do not employ staff.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Regional Cultural Consortiums

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what has been the cost to public funds of the regional cultural consortiums to date; and what is their forecast expenditure. [153430]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The cost and future allocations for each consortium are as follows:

	£
Expenditure[1]	
1999–2000[2]	1,900
2000–01	[3]27,070
Allocations	
2001–02	50,000
2002–03	125,000
2003–04	62,500

[1] Figures given are averages.
[2] The Regional Cultural Consortiums were established in October 1999.
[3] Expenditure calculated to 12 March 2001.

The consortiums also receive support from my Department's staff based within the Government Offices in the regions. The Regional Development Agencies and the various regional agencies have all been encouraged to help with funding and other means of support.

The consortiums will use these resources to support their strategic role in the regions and promote joint working with other regional partners in order to ensure that cultural and sporting interests make a significant contribution to economic development, regeneration and social inclusion in their region.

Digital Broadcasting (Platform Access)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to ensure that the BBC has access to all digital platforms on an equal basis and to ensure that such access is granted *(a)* on not-for-profit and *(b)* a free basis. [153276]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* None. Our White Paper "A New Future for Communications" made clear our policy that public service channels should be available on all main platforms at no extra cost to the viewer and we are currently considering the responses to our consultation on the White Paper on this issue, including views on the terms of access. BBC licence fee-funded television services are of course already available on the three main digital broadcasting platforms, terrestrial, cable and satellite, though the financial arrangements differ from platform to platform.

Millennium Dome (Sponsorship)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on what date the New Millennium Experience Company received sponsorship money for the faith zone from *(a)* Christian trusts and *(b)* the Laing Family Trust. [153534]

Janet Anderson: The New Millennium Experience Company received support for the faith zone from four charitable trusts on 11 May 1999. The Laing Family Trust's support was received in two payments—the first on 9 February 1999 and the second on 27 October 1999

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the approaches which were made by Ministers to *(a)* companies and *(b)* individuals in respect of sponsorship of the Millennium Dome. [148359]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 2 March 2001]:* I am aware that approaches and negotiations were already under way under the previous Administration. This then of course continued under this Government. While Ministers from time to time had contact with sponsors, we have made it clear that the responsibility for negotiating and securing sponsorship rested with the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC).

Dancing Schools

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, pursuant to the answer of 6 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 202W, on dancing schools, what is his estimate of the number of voluntary dance classes; how much financial assistance is provided for these classes; what his estimate is of the number of Irish dancing schools provided by the voluntary sector; and how much financial assistance is provided for these schools. [153580]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Dance classes are provided through a diverse range of public, privately-funded, and voluntary provision. Because of this diversity, an assessment of the number of voluntary dance classes would prove a significant undertaking. The Voluntary Arts Network advises that there is anecdotal information on provision of voluntary dance classes, but that a comprehensive and thorough assessment is not available based on current information. The Foundation for

Community Dance, the national development agency for community dance, recently undertook a mapping exercise to establish the range of participation in dance provided by the funded sector across England. This excluded local private dance schools, organisations specifically catering for recreational dance forms (including Ceroc) and dance opportunities offered by the commercial sector. However, sources include: local authorities (significant), European funds, the Single Regeneration Budget, the Health Service, Regional Arts Boards, Lottery, trusts and foundations. Private, commercial and voluntary provision is also significant.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the response of his Department and its tourism-sponsored bodies to the foot and mouth disease outbreak. [154224]

Mr. Chris Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr. Ainsworth) on 14 March 2001, *Official Report*, columns 1021–36. My Department has, together with the British Tourist Authority and the English Tourist Council, issued guidance to the public, to prospective visitors from overseas and the tourism industry on the implications of the disease. The British Tourist Authority is rebutting misleading stories overseas which are confusing this outbreak with BSE. The English Tourism Council is consulting with the industry on how tourism businesses can best cope with and recover from the effects of the outbreak and local tourism information offices are giving out information on destinations that remain open, such as our wealth of museums and galleries and historic towns. My Department is keeping the consequential implications for tourism under close review and I shall be visiting Cumbria this weekend to see those implications for myself, following the visit of the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting to Devon on 14 March.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Foot and Mouth

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with his EU counterparts on recent outbreaks of foot and mouth disease in other member states; and if he will make a statement. [151994]

Ms Quin: The Ministry is in constant contact with other member states and the European Commission. Animal disease issues are discussed regularly at the Standing Veterinary Committee in Brussels. My right hon. Friend the Minister will be discussing the situation with EU counterparts at the Agriculture Council on 19 March.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effect of European Community law on the spread of foot and mouth disease. [152663]

Ms Quin: A detailed epidemiological investigation is being conducted into every confirmed outbreak of foot and mouth disease. The results of these investigations will be published. An assessment will be made of the lessons to be learned from the original cause of the outbreak and the factors that are contributing towards the spread of the disease in order to inform future policy.

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he has carried out an assessment of the risk due to BSE infectivity from burning cattle during the present outbreak of foot and mouth disease. [154476]

Mr. Nick Brown: An independent risk assessment from DNV Consulting which I commissioned is today being published on the MAFF Foot and Mouth Disease internet site. Copies have also been placed in the Libraries of the House.

The model used by DNV estimates that a pyre of 100 dairy cattle aged over five years old could result in a total of 7×10^{-4} infective units being ingested by those exposed. This would be spread over a fairly wide population and so the individual risk of exposure would be low. For example, if the infective units were spread over 1,000 people the individual risk would be 7×10^{-7} infective units per person, in other words less than one in a million.

The recommendation of the Environment Agency is that there need not be any immediate change to carcase burning activities. The assessment will, however, be taken into account in guidance to Agency staff on factors to take into account if they are asked to permit sites for carcase burning.

This advice has come at a time when, in view mainly of practical considerations, I have decided to increase the disposal by rendering, in addition to on-farm burning, of carcases from FMD infected farms and dangerous contact premises.

Beef

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much beef was *(a)* produced in and *(b)* consumed by the UK in the last 12 months. [152287]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 5 March 2001]:* The following table provides details of the quantity of beef produced and consumed by the UK in 2000.

UK supply of beef in 2000

	Thousand tonnes[1]
Home fed production	706
Consumption[2]	919

[1] Dressed carcase weight equivalent
[2] Total domestic use; home fed production plus imports less exports net of stock change

Foot and Mouth (Livestock Movement)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what help is available to cattle owners who seek to move animals on welfare grounds. [152771]

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the animal welfare implications for cattle, sheep and pigs that are not displaying symptoms of foot and mouth disease, of movement restrictions between adjacent areas of farm land owned or farmed by the same farmer; and if he will make a statement. [152806]

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure that cows within the exclusion zones can be moved to adequate facilities for calving. [153188]

Mr. Morley *[holding answers 8 and 12 March 2001]:* We are aware of serious and growing animal welfare problems as a consequence of movement restrictions imposed following the foot and mouth outbreak. Two schemes were therefore announced on 9 March in order to address these problems.

The occupational licence permits a farmer to make repeat movements of foot and mouth disease susceptible livestock for a distance of up to 0.5 km on land of which he is the sole occupant. Such licences are available in the controlled area and in the infected area. Movements are not permitted within 3 km of an infected place.

The local movement licence permits movements of up to 5 km as the crow flies (up to a journey of 10 km) but only in the controlled area.

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will withdraw the Schedule D notice served on the Madron Meat Abattoir in Penzance and reinstate the grant of approval from the Meat Hygiene Service; [153173]

(2) if he will reissue a movement licence to Mr. Tim Stockwell of Kingsbridge in respect of the movement of 100 pigs to an abattoir. [153174]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* Restrictions were imposed on Madron Meat Abattoir while the State Veterinary Service investigated a suspected case of foot and mouth disease which occurred within 3 kilometres of the abattoir. The restrictions were removed on 11 March after it was revealed that the animals involved were not affected by foot and mouth.

Responsibility for licensing the movement of animals to slaughter lies with local authorities. Mr. Stockwell should therefore contact Devon County Council regarding the proposed movement of his pigs to slaughter.

Employment Statistics

Mr. Breed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many people were employed directly in agriculture at the latest date for which figures are available. [153129]

Ms Quin: The estimate of the total workforce employed directly in agriculture in the United Kingdom in the year 2000 is 560,000. This is 2.0 per cent. of the total workforce in employment.

Research and Development Budget

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what the budget for research and development into organic and other non-intensive farming methods is in the 2000–01 financial year; what the main *(a)* budget headings and *(b)* contracts let are; and how much has been spent to date; [153162]

(2) what the budget for research and development into organic and other non-intensive farming methods is for the 2001–02 financial year; and what the main budget headings are. [153163]

Ms Quin: The budget for organic farming research in MAFF for the financial year 2000–01 is £2,139,000. This is not broken down into further budget headings. The level of commitment of this budget is £2,157,000, which funds 39 projects. A list of current projects is available in the Libraries of the House.

MAFF is also funding £2,150,000 of research in 2000–01 on non-intensive livestock production. There is no specific budget heading for this research but a list of the 37 current projects has been placed in the Library of the House.

In addition, the organic farming sector also benefits from much of the other research the Ministry undertakes, for example, its planned spend on research into biological control techniques, plant health, animal welfare and wildlife conservation on farms of over £14.3 million in 2000–01 and over £13.8 million in 2001–02.

With regard to the financial year 2001–02, the budget for organic farming research in MAFF is £2,139,000. This is not broken down into further budget headings. The budget for non-intensive livestock production research in MAFF for financial year 2001–02 is £2,421,000.

Swill Feed

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ban the use of swill feed. [152833]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 9 March 2001]:* The issue of swill feed will be thoroughly examined as part of our policy review consequential to the outbreak of foot and mouth disease.

Everything but Arms

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* the European Commissioner for Development and *(b)* his European counterparts on (i) the recent amendments to proposals for the 'Everything But Arms' initiative and (ii) the implications of these proposals for United Kingdom sugar producers; and if he will make a statement. [153554]

Ms Quin: The Government have had ongoing discussions with the European Commission and other member states on the 'Everything But Arms' proposal, culminating in the adoption of the Presidency compromise on 26 February. On sugar this provides for an eight-year transitional period, comprising a duty-free interim quota for raw sugar for refining, starting at 74,185 tonnes in July 2001 and increasing by 15 per cent. each year, coupled with the phase-out of duties on all LDC sugar between 2006 and 2009. In the short term, the implications of the EBA regulation for United Kingdom sugar beet producers are likely to be minimal. We will press the Commission to include the impact of EBA in the studies it expects to undertake in preparation for the next reform of the sugar regime.

Farmers (Private Insurance)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how Government compensation

payments in respect of foot and mouth disease take into account payments under private insurance policies for the same losses. [153732]

Ms Quin *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* The Government compensate farmers for the full market value of animals slaughtered as a disease control measure. They do not take account of any private insurance that the farmer may have taken out to cover wider consequential losses caused by movement restrictions. Section 34(5) of the Animal Health Act 1981 states that if the owner of a slaughtered animal has insurance on that animal, the insurers may deduct the statutory compensation from the amount of money payable under the insurance, before they make any payment.

"Agriculture in the United Kingdom"

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects the latest volume of "Agriculture in the United Kingdom" to be published. [154479]

Ms Quin: "Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2000" was published today and copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Stakeholder Pensions

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what further changes he proposes to make to the stakeholder pensions regulations. [154446]

Mr. Rooker: The Government made a commitment to work with the pensions industry to ensure that stakeholder pensions offer a realistic and effective second pension option. We have today laid amending regulations to make changes of a practical and technical nature. The changes make the stakeholder regulations more effective, and include provisions which take account of the views of the pensions industry, including organisations setting up stakeholder pension schemes. For example, schemes will be able to stagger the issue of annual benefit statements over the year, rather than having to issue them all at once.

Winter Fuel Payment

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the Winter Fuel Payment due to Doris Lilian Riblan of Ferndown will be paid. [153508]

Mr. Rooker: The administration of Winter Fuel Payments is a matter for Alexis Cleveland, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. She will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Alexis Cleveland to Mr. Christopher Chope, dated 13 March 2001:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking when the winter fuel payment due to Doris Lilian Riblan of Ferndown will be paid.

As you will appreciate, individual customer cases are confidential. I will therefore, write to you privately on this matter.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 9 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 404W, on Departmental IT projects, if he will disaggregate by type of expenditure the anticipated costs for each of the modernisation projects. [153920]

Angela Eagle: Further to my answer of 9 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 404W, modernisation projects have been brigaded under these headings in order to facilitate the management of the Department's modernisation programme.

National Insurance Numbers

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on what grounds the deceased retain national insurance numbers. [153785]

Mr. Rooker: The retention of deceased persons' National Insurance Numbers (NINOs) is necessary to process claims for Widow's Benefit and from 9 April 2001 for Bereavement Benefit claims. Additionally records of the deceased must be kept in order to protect the inheritable rights of the surviving spouse to ensure that they are awarded the correct rate of Retirement Pension when they reach State Pension age or the rate of Retirement Pension which the survivor already receives is increased correctly. The retention is therefore necessary to protect the rights of those making National Insurance contributions.

Retaining NINOs also enables checks to be made for benefit recovery against estates and assists the prevention of a further NINO being fraudulently created under the deceased's identity.

Pensioners (Incomes and Benefits)

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what his most recent estimate is of the number of pensioner units with an income of *(a)* £200 to £210, *(b)* £211 to £220 and *(c)* £221 and above who are in receipt of (i) Housing Benefit, (ii) Council Tax Benefit, (iii) Council Tax Benefit and Housing Benefit and (iv) one or more of Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. [153787]

Mr. Rooker: The information is in the table.

Pensioners in Great Britain in receipt of Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit by amount of income over £200—May 1999

Total income	*Housing Benefit*	*Council Tax Benefit*	*Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit*	*Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit*
Over £200	8,000	12,000	10,000	10,000
£200-£210	5,000	6,000	[1]—	[1]—
£210-£220	1,000	2,000	[1]—	[1]—
Over £220	2,000	4,000	[1]—	[1]—

[1] Data are nil or negligible (negligible being numbers less than 500)

Notes:

1. The data refer to benefit units, which may be a single person or a couple.
2. The figures for cases in receipt of Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit have been rounded to the nearest thousand. However due to the estimation procedure to produce the figures for Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit, or Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Benefit, these figures need to be rounded to the nearest 10,000 due to the collection procedures in Scotland.

3. Pensioners have been identified by the claimant or the partner being aged 60 and over.

4. The bands of income have been reached by looking at the total income excluding any Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit but including income assumed from any savings.

Source:

Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Management Information System, Annual 1 per cent. sample, taken in May 1999.

Child Support Agency

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if the CSA has a remit to re-examine its original decision to cover the new partner of child and mother; [153611]

(2) pursuant to his answer of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 535W, on the Child Support Agency, what criteria the CSA uses to decide whether to re-examine a case which leads to a change in the original decision. [153701]

Angela Eagle: The Child Support Agency (CSA) will re-examine the original decision on a case if there has been a change in circumstances, including where there is a new partner of the parent with care.

Whenever the CSA revises or supersedes a decision on a case, both parents are notified of the new decision and how it has been arrived at. Either parent can ask the CSA to look at the decision again within one month of being notified if they think that the decision is wrong. If the CSA accepts that there has been a mistake, it will correct it straight away. In re-examining a decision the CSA will check that the law has been applied correctly to the facts of the case.

Either parent can also appeal against the CSA's decision to an independent tribunal who will consider whether the Agency applied the law correctly.

If neither parent asks for their case to be looked at again, the CSA will not look at the case unless a periodic case check is carried out.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 26 February 2001, *Official Report*, column 535W, on the Child Support Agency, (1) if he will provide a breakdown for each category for each council area in Scotland; [153700]

(2) how many of the complaints in the named categories were lodged in Scotland. [153702]

Angela Eagle: The information requested is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

The total number of letters of complaint received by the Child Support Agency's Scotland and North Eastern Business Unit in 1999–2000 was 3,078. This covers the whole of Scotland, Northumberland, North East England and parts of North Yorkshire.

The total number of letters of complaint received between April 2000 and 28 February 2001 is 2,362. The categories are shown as follows.

Category of complaints	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Delay/Failure to take appropriate action	1,461	1,521
Incorrect action	725	706
Communication	760	705
Policy	506	542
Complaints about staff	190	161
Disclosure of information	65	48
Good cause	16	5
Human Rights Act	0	26
Total	3,723	3,714

[1] Year to date

Note:

The total number of complaints is higher than the number of letters because some letters of complaint covered more than one subject.

Elderly Residents (North-west)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people aged over 65 were resident in *(a)* Ribble Valley, *(b)* Lancashire and *(c)* the North West in 1997; and how many are resident today. [153218]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have been asked to reply.

The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Nigel Evans, dated 14 March 2001:

As National Statistician I have been asked to reply to your question concerning the resident population of Ribble Valley, Lancashire, and the North West in 1997 and today (153218).

Attached is a table showing the information requested for mid-1997 and mid-1999 which is the most recent year for which a population estimate is available.

Estimated resident population mid-1997 and mid-1999[1]

Thousand

	Total population		*Population over 65*	
	1997	*1999*	*1997*	*1999*
North West	6,884.6	6,880.5	1,018.0	1,013.5
Lancashire County	1,134.5	1,137.1	177.1	176.8
Blackburn with Darwen UA	139.4	138.4	17.8	17.5
Blackpool UA	151.2	150.0	27.7	27.1
Ribble Valley	53.0	54.2	8.6	8.8
Former County of Lancashire[2]	1,425.1	1,425.5	222.6	221.4

[1] Data refer to boundaries as defined in 1999 after local government reorganisation.

[2] The former county of Lancashire is the area covered by the current Lancashire county and the unitary authorities of Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool.

Source:

Office for National Statistics, Crown Copyright 2000

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many Benefit Fraud Inspectorate reports have been published to date; and if he will list the six reports which give greatest concern to his Department. [153786]

Mr. Rooker: To date, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) has published 86 reports on local authorities and two reports on DSS agencies. BFI inspections are tailored to the particular practices and needs of each authority. The resulting recommendations are unique to each authority so a direct comparison between authorities is not possible.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will publish the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate report on Wirral Metropolitan Council; and if he will make a statement. [153790]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my right hon. Friend to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor) on 8 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 298W.

HEALTH

Electronic Health Records

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the timescale for implementation of electronic health records in the National Health Service; on what basis the final scheme will be chosen; if it will be funded entirely from existing NHS funds; and what benefits the electronic health record system is expected to bring to the National Health Service. [144702]

Ms Stuart: The target in "Information for Health" is for the implementation of a first-generation Electronic Health Record (EHR) by March 2005. The work currently being undertaken by the Electronic Record Development and Implementation Programme (ERDIP) and related initiatives will inform the decision-making process on whether a single or a number of solutions is the way forward.

We are supporting the service in implementing the strategy, of which the EHR is a key component, with additional funding. Announcements over the last 12 months have increased, by £1,061 million, the amount that will be available to health authorities over the period April 2000 to March 2004 for information management and technology.

"Information for Health" does not specifically describe the benefits of the EHR for patients and staff in isolation but rather as a mix of EHR and Electronic Patient Records (EPR) benefits. These can be summarised as:

Convenience and confidence—through patients knowing health care professionals have access to their medical history;

Integration of care—through improving the co-ordination of multi-professional and multi-agency care;

Improving outcomes—through better decision-making based on up-to-date information;

Using evidence—by integrating EPRs with other systems;

Supporting analysis—for clinical governance and local planning;

Improving efficiency—through reducing time spent collecting data and freeing more time for direct patient care.

Sterilisation Services

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what role he has in the selection of registered authorised persons who monitor sterilisation services in the NHS; and what funding his Department gives them. [R] [143956]

Mr. Denham: The register of Authorised Persons (Sterilizers) AP(S) is maintained by the Institute of Healthcare Engineering and Estate Management who have delegated authority from the Department to do this. The Department retains ultimate responsibility through National Health Service Estates. To become registered as an AP(S), candidates must pass a 5-facet selection process, which includes examination and interview.

Under the current arrangements NHS Trusts employ the services of the AP(S) directly and pay for this from their operational budgets. There are no central funding mechanisms in place for this service.

NHS Estates has initiated a 5-yearly review of the current structure against a strategy of minimising risk for the NHS. This will include discussions with the NHS and industry and may result in revision of the existing structure and/or the development of a completely new infrastructure. The review will be completed later this year.

Waiting Lists

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients were waiting for admission to hospitals, including suspended patients but not including self-referred cases, *(a)* nationally, *(b)* in each health authority and *(c)* in each NHS trust in (i) 1987, (ii) 1992 and (iii) in each year since 1995. [149437]

Mr. Denham: The information requested has been placed in the Library. Information from national health service trusts is not available for 1987 as they did not exist then.

E.coli

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the Government's policies *(a)* to prevent *E.*coli outbreaks and *(b)* to ensure appropriate diagnosis and treatment of *E.*coli sufferers. [150312]

Ms Stuart: The *E.*coli bacterium of most concern is Vero cytotoxin-producing *E.*coli (VTEC) of which *E.*coli O157 is the commonest.

Many outbreaks of *E.*coli O157 are foodborne and have been associated with various foods including contaminated meat and dairy products. We have a wide range of policies aimed at preventing outbreaks of foodborne disease. All of these contribute to preventing outbreaks of *E.*coli O157 food poisoning. As well as comprehensive food hygiene legislation, examples of these policies include the clean livestock policy and butchers' licensing.

*E.*coli O157 outbreaks also occur from contact with farm animals or environments, including water, contaminated by animal faeces. The Chief Medical Officer issued health advice for farm visits by children last year, which was sent to all directors of public health and consultants in communicable disease control. Also in 2000, the Health and Safety Executive in collaboration with the Department of Health and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food revised guidance to farmers, farm workers and teachers on avoiding ill health at open farms. Further information produced by Government is also given to vulnerable groups, such as pregnant women, on how to avoid infection from various zoonotic diseases, including *E.*coli O157. The Food Standards Agency has recently issued guidance on avoiding the risks from camping and picnicking on fields used for grazing animals.

A Government task force on *E.*coli O157 has recently been set up to deal with specific areas of interest and concern. Their first meeting in September 2000 on human health aspects discussed and proposed practical steps on diagnosis, surveillance, treatment and care, outbreak management, person-to-person spread and risk assessment. The group are expected to report a programme of practical steps later in the year that can be taken forward to further reduce the risk of infection from *E.*coli O157.

The Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) has published guidelines dealing with sampling and identification procedures and requires its laboratories to test all stool samples for *E.*coli O157. All laboratories voluntarily notify all infections as part of an agreed reporting protocol.

In May 2000 the CMO's Update 26, which is distributed to all medical practitioners, carried an article "VTEC Guidance" which drew attention to the seasonal increase in infection, the risks from farm visits and the susceptibility of children to developing Haemolytic Uraemic Syndrome (HUS) following infection with *E.*coli O157.

*E.*coli O157 therapy is limited to supportive measures to maintain the body's fluid and electrolyte balance and monitoring for the development of HUS. Prescribing certain classes of antibiotics for *E.*coli infection may increase the risk of severe kidney disease and CMO Update 27 alerted medical practitioners to this in August 2000.

Prescriptions

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what estimate he has made of the percentage take-up of prescription pre-payment certificates by patients who would benefit financially from so doing; [153067]

(2) how many people purchased prescription pre-payment certificates for *(a)* a four month period and *(b)* a 12 month period in the last three years for which figures are available. [153066]

Ms Stuart: The information is not available in the format requested

Information available about the number of pre-payment certificates (PPCs) purchased in England is in the table. The figures are estimates, rounded to the nearest 10,000, as some health authorities failed to return data in one or more of the years.

Thousand

PPCs	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
4 month	500	490	550
12 month	300	290	330

Health Benefits (Low-income Scheme)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the estimated percentage level of take-up of the health benefits low-income scheme in the last three years for which figures are available. [153059]

Ms Stuart: The information requested is in the table.

Thousand

Year	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*
Claims received	933	865	872
Certificates issued for full help (HC2)	570	519	528
Certificates issued for limited help (HC3)	324	303	293

Note:
The prescription pricing authority processes low-income scheme claims for Great Britain. The number for England has been estimated from a sample.

Abuse in Care

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the cost to Government in each of the past three financial years of providing *(a)* services, *(b)* compensation and *(c)* criminal injuries compensation to victims of abuse in care. [153393]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* Services provided to the victims of abuse may include counselling, sexual health screening, medical treatment and/or mental health treatment. We are not able to disaggregate the costs of providing these services to show whether or not the service-user in any case has been a victim of abuse in care.

Information is not held centrally about compensation payments paid by central or local government in the last three years to individuals abused while in care.

The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority does not record its awards under a separate category of children abused while in care.

Incontinence

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent by the NHS on *(a)* incontinence pads and *(b)* incontinence pants in each of the last three years. [153548]

Mr. Hutton: Incontinence pads and pants are supplied either through National Health Service bodies, or supplied directly to patients' homes. Where products are supplied through NHS bodies, the figures in the table are broken down into spend on pads and on pants.

In respect of delivery to patients' homes, the breakdown between pads and pants is not held centrally.

£ million

	April 1997 to March 1998	*April 1998 to March 1999*	*April 1999 to March 2000*
Pads	23.7	25.7	22.8
Pants	1.8	2.5	2.6
Home delivery[1]	22.1	23.3	25.3

[1] Pads and pants

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much was spent by the NHS on incontinence appliances, with particular reference to bedding mats and creams, in each of the last three years. [153550]

Mr. Hutton: The figures in the table show the National Health Service spend on incontinence appliances for the last three years. These appliances include urine drainage

bags, bed pads, creams, incontinence sheaths and catheter valves. The figures exclude those appliances bought on prescription.

£ million

	NHS spend on continence appliances
April 1997 to March 1998	7.2
April 1998 to March 1999	10.2
April 1999 to March 2000	10.6

NHS Dentists

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much funding will be allocated to the recruitment and retention of dentists under the NHS Plan in each of the next three years; and how many dentists were employed in the NHS from outside the UK in each of the last three years. [153738]

Mr. Hutton *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* Our strategy for modernising NHS dentistry was published in September 2000 "Modernising NHS Dentistry—Implementing the NHS Plan". In that publication we announced that £100 million would be invested in NHS dentistry by April 2002.

This year we have made available £4 million through the Dental Care Development Fund to reimburse dentists who expand their practices and treat more NHS patients. We are considering the need for a similar scheme in 2001–02 when we will also make available up to £35 million to modernise NHS dental practices and make commitment to the NHS even more worthwhile for dentists.

A new Commitment Payment Scheme was introduced from April 2000 to reward dentists in the General Dental Service for their past and present commitment. We plan to spend a sum in the order of £18 million for payments made to eligible dentists in England in respect of 2001–02. From April 2001 the scheme will be revised and enhanced; we expect the funding to be around £22 million in respect of payment due in 2001–02.

We are discussing with the profession additional financial support for dentists to undertake clinical governance, which will include clinical audit and peer review, and to support continuing professional development.

Information about the number of dentists working in the National Health Service who have come from outside the United Kingdom is available only for dentists in the General Dental Services in England and is given in the table.

General dental service: Number of dentists by country of qualification at 30 September each year

England

Country of qualification	*1998*	*1999*	*2000*
United Kingdom	14,765	14,959	15,061
Total overseas	2,199	2,457	2,656
South Africa	638	774	864
Sweden	433	538	630
Irish Republic	577	542	513
Australia	173	174	171
New Zealand	125	131	133
Denmark	48	58	68
Greece	39	47	52
Malaysia	50	50	48
Germany	21	28	32
Netherlands	27	29	30
Finland	11	15	27
Other countries	57	71	88
Total	16,964	17,416	17,717

Notes:

1. Dentists are principals on a health authority list, assistants and vocational dental practitioners.
2. Data exclude dentists whose title of registration is shown as Statutory Exams and those dentists awaiting entry.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (Ex-servicemen)

Ms Kelly: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance his Department has given to hospital trusts when treating ex-servicemen who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. [154058]

Mr. Hutton: We have embarked on a radical programme of modernisation to improve access to effective treatment and care, reduce unfair variation, raise standards, and provide quicker and more convenient services across the spectrum of mental health services. The National Service Framework for mental health, published September 1999, sets out general standards for treatment and care. In addition, the Allen Report 1989 and "Planning for Major Incidents: the National Health Service guidance" 1998 were issued to help those involved in the provision of support for people with post-traumatic stress disorder to identify psycho-social support, and disseminate messages about good practice. There is also current guidance relevant to War Pensioners (Health Service Guidance (97) 31) which says:

> that the referral should make specific reference to the fact that the patient is a war pensioner and requires treatment for the condition(s) for which he was awarded a pension; and
>
> that war pensioners can use the NHS complaints system to resolve any alleged breakdowns in the arrangements for priority treatment (leading, ultimately, to the ombudsman).

Intermediate Care

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people will not require long-term care, who would otherwise have done so, as a result of the Government's intermediate care programme in the NHS Plan. [153836]

Mr. Hutton: Intermediate care is designed to promote independence, particularly for older people, who would otherwise face unnecessarily prolonged hospital stays or inappropriate admission to acute in-patient care, long-term residential care, or continuing National Health Service in-patient care. It is not possible to quantify precisely the number of people who will not require long-term care as a result of the development of intermediate care services following the NHS Plan. However, the initial evidence from several existing local schemes suggests a high success rate for short-term rehabilitation schemes set up

with the aim of preventing or delaying admissions to long-stay residential care. The Department is currently considering proposals from a number of research teams for the evaluative research of intermediate care schemes nationally.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Vocational Learning

14. **Mr. Chaytor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on vocational GCSEs. [152563]

Mr. Wicks: Vocational GCSEs will be introduced in September 2002. They are part of our programme to improve work-related opportunities for 14 to 16-year-olds, so that those who want to can then go on to apprenticeships. The new system will raise the status of vocational study and bring schools, colleges and employers closer together.

21. **Joan Ruddock:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the development of a qualifications ladder of vocational learning. [152570]

Mr. Wicks: The vocational ladder will offer young people wanting to follow programmes of vocational study a clear set of steps that will allow them to progress to further and higher study, as well as being relevant to work. We have introduced vocational A levels, are reforming and extending Modern Apprenticeships and are introducing Foundation Degrees. The new vocational GCSEs, to be available from September 2002, will provide a qualification of the same standard as academic GCSEs.

Constitutional Reform

15. **Mr. Dalyell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the scope of his Department's responsibilities relating to constitutional reform, with special reference to the balance of parliamentary representation. [152564]

Mr. Wills: This Department is a member of one Cabinet committee and two sub-committees on constitutional reform, and may be invited to others as necessary. I am taking part in cross-party debates for young people run by the Citizenship Foundation, with devolved administration colleagues; the Prime Minister asked me personally to help foster a debate on what Britishness means in the 21st century. Other Departments are responsible for the balance of parliamentary representation.

New Deal 50 plus

16. **Mr. Love:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guaranteed minimum income is available to those on New Deal 50-plus. [152565]

Ms Jowell: From April, eligible people who enter full time work are guaranteed a minimum income after deductions of £180 per week for up to 12 months. This consists of the national minimum wage paid by the employer and the Employment Credit of £60 per week paid by the Government. With effect from 1 October this will increase to a guaranteed minimum income of £189 per week as a result of the previously announced rise to the minimum wage.

Teacher Shortages

17. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the teacher shortage in Essex. [152566]

Ms Estelle Morris: I congratulate Essex heads and teachers on maintaining normal timetables in their schools, despite recruitment difficulties in some areas. Latest figures (January 2000) show the Essex teacher vacancy rate as 1.7 per cent. We announced in the Budget that a further £200 million would be spent on teacher recruitment and retention.

34. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many representations he has received from local education authorities in outer London about shortages of teachers in the last twelve months. [152584]

Ms Estelle Morris: My right hon. Friend receives frequent representations from outer London local education authorities on a wide range of issues.

On 16 January, I met representatives of inner and outer London boroughs specifically to discuss teacher recruitment. Since that meeting my right hon. Friend has published his proposals for teachers' pay in 2001–02. These take particular account of the need to help local education authorities recruit and retain teachers, and include a proposal to increase the outer London weighting allowance by 30 per cent. He has also published a Green Paper, "Schools: building on success", containing proposals that will help recruit and retain teachers generally.

New Deal for Lone Parents

19. **Ms Keeble:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what impact the New Deal has had on training for employment of lone parents. [152568]

Ms Hodge: Since the New Deal for Lone Parents was introduced over 22,000 lone parents have benefited from help with training to improve their prospects of getting a job. Trained personal advisers can help find suitable work-related training that supports the work goals of the individual and takes into account their child care responsibilities. Lone parents also receive financial support to cover the costs. From April this year we will introduce a £15 weekly training premium on top of the existing help. And as we announced in the Budget, we will also introduce a self-employment option for lone parents similar to that which is available through the New Deal for 25 plus. We will also introduce greater flexibility to enable lone parents to take a wider range of intensive short work-focused courses.

Barnsley College

20. **Mr. Illsley:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent representations he has received regarding the funding of Barnsley College. [152569]

Mr. Wicks: We are well aware of Barnsley College's funding position. The Further Education Funding Council and the college are currently discussing the best approach to putting the college on a sound financial footing.

Worcestershire

22. **Mr. Luff:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to bring spending per pupil in Worcestershire closer to the national average; and if he will make a statement. [152571]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Green Paper on the future of local authority funding made it clear that we want to remove the worst of the disparities that affect counties like Worcestershire, by levelling up not down. We will be working on this over the coming months, with the aim of moving towards a new system in 2002–03.

In the meantime, the Government continue to make substantial increases in the overall level of funding throughout the country.

New Deal for Schools

23. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools in Exeter have benefited from the New Deal for Schools. [152572]

Jacqui Smith: Eight schools in the Exeter constituency have directly benefited from New Deal for Schools investment—Bradley Rowe Middle, Foxhayes First, Ladysmith Middle, Whipton Barton First, St. James' High, St. Luke's CE High, St. Peter's CE High and the Topsham School. In addition, 58 other schools outside of Exeter can be identified as having directly benefited from New Deal for Schools investment in Devon local education authority. A further 34 schools were included in packages which cannot be readily identified to individual schools from the Department's records.

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many schools have benefited from the New Deal for Schools; and what plans he has to increase spending in this area. [152559]

Jacqui Smith: Some 17,000 schools have so far benefited from allocations to individual projects under the New Deal for Schools programme. Over the next three years, we are investing £8.5 billion, as part of the biggest school building and repair programme in decades. This includes devolving over £1 billion direct to schools. It will enable 650 schools to be replaced or completely refurbished and major repair and improvement projects to be carried out at over 7,000 schools.

Teacher Administration

24. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent meetings he has had with teachers' representatives to discuss the level of administration by teachers. [152573]

Jacqui Smith: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I meet regularly with teachers' representatives and we discuss a wide range of subjects, including our work to cut down the level of administration by teachers.

Funding Formulae

25. **Mr. Andrew George:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made in reviewing the formulae for the funding of local education authorities. [152574]

Ms Estelle Morris: We issued a Green Paper on Local Authority Funding on 19 September 2000 and consultation ended on 8 December. An analysis of consultation responses was published on 5 March on the DETR website at www.local.detr.gov.uk/greenpap/analysis/index.htm. Copies of the analysis have also been placed in the Library. We will publish a White Paper on Local Government Finance later in the year. We will be working on a new formula for funding local education authorities over the coming months, with the aim of moving towards a new system in 2002–03.

GCSEs

26. **Mr. McCabe:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the trend in the percentage of pupils gaining five or more A* to C grade GCSEs since 1997. [152575]

Ms Estelle Morris: The percentage of 15-year-old pupils gaining five or more A*-C grades at GCSE or the GNVQ equivalent has increased from 45.1 per cent. in 1996–97 to 49.2 per cent. in 1999–2000. The overall increase was four percentage points with an increase of at one percentage point in each of the intervening years. This shows that the figures are on track to reach the target of 50 per cent. by 2002.

School Discipline

27. **Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on discipline in schools. [152576]

Jacqui Smith: We regularly meet representatives of the teacher associations and discipline is one of the issues discussed at these meetings.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools' latest annual report shows that behaviour is good in three quarters of secondary schools and almost all primary schools, although he noted increasing levels of poor behaviour in the early years of secondary school. That is why we are providing record levels of funding—£174 million in 2001–02—a third more than this year and 10 times more than in 1996–97—to help schools and local education authorities tackle poor behaviour and provide education for excluded pupils.

This is helping to pay for the 1,000 on-site Learning Support Units which take disruptive pupils out of the classroom quickly, improve their behaviour and reduce the need for exclusion. This network has been delivered a year ahead of the original target date.

We are giving heads the full support they need to tackle disruptive and violent behaviour, including the use of exclusion where appropriate. We have clarified our exclusion guidance to emphasise that heads can permanently exclude pupils who are very disruptive or violent. And the new guidance for exclusion appeal panels makes clear that the head's decision should not be overridden in a range of circumstances including where there is violence or the threat of violence.

Where an exclusion is necessary provision for excluded pupils is being greatly increased. There are over 1,000 more places and nearly 600 more teachers, instructors and education support staff at Pupil Referral Units compared with 1997. Planned LEA funding for PRUs increased by 13 per cent. this year compared with last, and we expect to see a 10 per cent. rise in the number of PRUs in 2001 compared with 2000. And by 2002 all local education authorities plan to provide a full timetable for excluded pupils.

37. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what recent meetings he has had with teachers' representatives to discuss discipline in schools. [152587]

Jacqui Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given earlier today to the right hon. Member for Wealden (Sir G. Johnson Smith).

SEN (South Swindon)

28. **Ms Drown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he has taken to improve support for pupils with special needs in South Swindon. [152578]

Jacqui Smith: Swindon Local Education Authority has received in 2000–01 £807,309 from the DfEE's Standard Fund grants for special educational needs, inclusion and emotional and behavioural difficulties, social inclusion and access for post 16. Swindon LEA SEN budgets have increased in 2000–01 by £172,000 (3.46 per cent.) to £5,143,000 and special school delegated budgets by £376,000 (11.83 per cent.) to £3,584,000. £50 million is available nationally from the Schools Access Initiative for 2001–02 to support projects to make mainstream schools and the curriculum accessible to pupils in wheelchairs or with sensory impairments. Swindon LEA has been allocated £185,650 for community, foundation and voluntary controlled schools and £46,750 for voluntary aided schools.

Employment Zones

29. **Mr. Healey:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the performance of and future plans for Employment Zones. [152579]

Ms Jowell: Employment Zones have been running only since April 2000 but are already getting substantial numbers of the hardest to help into work. The Government will build on this early success by extending the existing zones for an additional 12 months. Subject to satisfactory evaluation of the existing zones in the coming months the Government will consider extending Employment Zones to new areas and to other claimant groups, for example, lone parents.

Disabled People

30. **Ms Osborne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made towards introducing comprehensive civil rights for disabled people. [152580]

Ms Hodge: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave on 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 14W.

Childminders

31. **Siobhain McDonagh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he has taken to increase the supply of childminders. [152581]

Ms Hodge: On 15 June last year, I launched a £4.5 million start-up grant, to help provide up to 39,000 childminder places in 2000–01. The grant, supported by the European Social Fund (ESF), helps people starting out in childminding to meet some of the associated set-up costs. The childcare tax credit element of the Working Families Tax Credit helps more parents to use childminding services as it pays up to 70 per cent. of childminding fees. This has the effect of allowing childminders to use the increase in revenue to invest in their business and, therefore, of encouraging more people into childminding.

Over the next three years, we have given Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships the target of setting up a minimum of 145,000 new childcare places with childminders across England by March 2004, a minimum of 25,000 of which will be in areas of disadvantage. These places will be in addition to those which partnerships would normally expect to create.

To support partnerships in achieving these targets, we are making extensive new investment in increasing the supply of childminding reflecting the Government's determination to reverse the decline in numbers. This includes extending the childminder start-up grant by £17 million over the three years.

We are also helping with infrastructure support for childminding by providing £11.25 million for the creation of 450 childminder networks over the next three years. Networks can encourage people to enter childminding and, by providing support, help to reduce childminder turnover.

Last month I announced a new £3 million project, again supported by ESF moneys, to support new childminder networks in four disadvantaged areas helping teenage mothers stay in full time education and training.

Complaints Procedures

32. **Tony Wright:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to introduce a school complaints system. [152582]

Ms Estelle Morris: I have nothing further to add to the reply I gave my hon Friend on 4 May 2000, *Official Report*, column 186W. We believe that the majority of schools already have procedures in place for handling complaints, generally based on models provided by local education authorities and diocesan boards.

Chris Woodhead

33. **Mr. Fallon:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the circumstances in which Mr. Chris Woodhead ceased to be Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools. [152583]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given earlier today by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) and my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Mr. Prentice).

Universities

35. **Mr. Rammell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the future level of funding for universities. [152585]

Mr. Wicks: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced last November increases of £412 million, £268 million and £298 million over 2001–02 to 2003–04 for higher education in England: between 1998–99 and 2003–04 the total additional funding will be over £1.7 billion. For the first time in over a decade the unit of funding per full-time equivalent student will increase in real terms in 2001–02 and expansion will be fully funded in the following two years.

There is also additional funding for research. In July 2000 the Government announced £1 billion in funding for improvements in research infrastructure, available to institutions in 2002–03 and 2003–04. Universities will be able to bid for part of an extra £250 million provided by Office of Science and Technology for research into genomics, e-science and basic technology.

Early Excellence Centre

36. **Mr. Dobbin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to develop the early excellence centre programme. [152586]

Ms Hodge: The EEC programme is at the forefront of our policies to develop good practice in integrated care, education and family services. 29 centres are making a real difference to the lives of children and their families. On 27 February we announced the designation of six new centres and an additional £17 million to expand the programme. Working closely with Sure Start and Neighbourhood Nurseries, we will create up to 100 centres across the country by 2004.

Disability Taskforce

38. **Mr. Joyce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Government's response to the disability taskforce report. [152588]

Ms Hodge: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave on 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 14W.

Long-term Unemployed

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures he is taking to encourage small businesses to recruit long-term unemployed people from disadvantaged communities. [152561]

Ms Jowell: At least 275,000 long-term unemployed young people have already found work through the New Deal, the majority in small and medium sized businesses. From April this year we will pilot a new project called Recruit, a simplified employment subsidy for small and medium sized businesses which employ people from the New Deal in disadvantaged areas. Less bureaucracy, more people into jobs—that is our commitment to small employers and the unemployed.

Nursery Places

Ms Ryan: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how the new neighbourhood nurseries initiative will support the national childcare strategy. [152567]

Ms Hodge: The national childcare strategy aims to create 1 million new childcare places for 1.6 million children across the country by 2004. 45,000 additional places in up to 900 new or expanded neighbourhood nursery centres will also be created. These nurseries will be in the most disadvantaged areas of the country where many families cannot presently access high quality childcare. The places created should be in well-designed buildings and sustainable over time, meeting childcare needs now and in the future.

New Classrooms

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many new classrooms have been created in the Warrington, North constituency; and which schools have received them since 1997. [149484]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* Figures on the number of new classrooms created are not readily available. I refer my hon. Friend to the replies I gave on 27 June 2000, *Official Report*, columns 472–74W, for details of specific allocations made to schools in the Warrington, North constituency. The table shows the total capital investment made in schools in Warrington local education authority since 1997–98.

Central government capital investment in schools in Warrington local education authority

£000

Funding stream	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*
Basic Credit Approvals	5,295	1,189	829	2,389
Supplementary Credit Approvals	534	193	90	92
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	1,277	207	438	505
New Deal for Schools	972	1,083	1,500	2,776
School Security Grant	275	66	67	67
Energy Efficiency Initiative	—	62	—	—
Key Stage 1 Class Size Initiative	—	218	1,436	442
National Grid for Learning Grant	—	401	465	670
Assistance with Asset Management Plans	—	—	27	—
Seed Challenge Funding	—	—	—	152
Devolved Formula Capital for Schools	—	—	—	1,438
Renewal of School Laboratories	—	—	—	149
Schools Access Initiative Grant	20	5	9	48
Outside Toilets	—	56	—	—
Secondary Support Learning Units	—	—	—	43
Total	8,373	3,480	4,861	8,771

Warrington local education authority was established in 1998. Figures shown for 1997–98 are for Cheshire local education authority, which included Warrington at that time.

Schools Funding (Stroud)

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the additional resources he has made available to schools in Stroud since 1997 according to sector; under which *(a)* scheme and *(b)* funds they are provided; and if he will make a statement. [152178]

Jacqui Smith *[holding answer 6 March 2001]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the letter sent to him on 16 February by the Secretary of State concerning increases in funding that the Government have made available to Gloucestershire local education authority since 1996–97.

Information showing the schools in the Stroud constituency, which benefited under the New Deal for Schools, is shown in Table A. These allocations formed part of the £12.482 million investment made so far in schools in Gloucestershire local education authority under the New Deal for Schools programme.

The New Deal for Schools was introduced as a new additional programme targeted specifically at addressing the backlog of urgent repairs in school buildings that had built up under the previous Administration. It is in addition to other capital funds made available to Gloucestershire local education authority.

In total, since 1997, Gloucestershire local education authority has received some £54.887 million of funding for capital investment in school buildings as shown in Table B.

Nationally, investment in school buildings has tripled from £683 million a year in 1996–97 to over £2 billion in 2000–01. It will be £3.2 billion in 2003–04, including grant, credit approvals and Private Finance Initiative credits. There will be central Government investment of £7.8 billion in school buildings in total from 2001–02 to 2003–04.

Table A: New Deal for Schools—Allocations to schools in the Stroud constituency

Year/school	*Project details*	*Grant awarded (£)*
1997–98		
Dursley CE Primary	Provision of inside toilets and hall; improvement to staff facilities/security; rewiring	[1]435,000
1998–99		
Rodborough Community Primary	Maintenance and improvement works, including replacement of HORSA classrooms	285,452
Cam House Special	Remodelling/refurbishment of science provision and urgent maintenance works	118,104
Park Infant	Maintenance and improvement works, including replacement HORSA classrooms	233,560
Slimbridge Primary	Maintenance and improvement works, including replacement of HORSA unit	181,012
1999–2000		
Saul CE Primary	Replacement of prefabricated mobile classroom	94,191
Cam House Special	Provision of science facilities, classroom and window refurbishment	229,684
Dursley CE Primary Rodborough Community Primary Saul CE Primary Archway	Removal of asbestos materials	[2]323,381
Bisley Blue Coat CE Primary Cam Woodfield Infants Cashes Green Primary Coaley CE Primary King's Stanley Infants Randwick CE Primary Saul CE Primary Sheepscombe Primary Uley CE Primary	Provision of fire alarm systems	[2]318,263
Callowell Primary Cashes Green Primary Dursley CE Primary Eastcombe Primary Eastington Primary King's Stanley Junior Longney CE Primary Slimbridge Primary Whiteshill Primary Cam Woodfield Infant Berkeley Vale Cam House Special	Fire precaution upgrade works	[2]395,089
2000–01		
Archway Sapperton CE Primary	Replacement of four temporary classrooms	423,568

Table A: New Deal for Schools—Allocations to schools in the Stroud constituency

Year/school	*Project details*	*Grant awarded (£)*
Woodchester Endowed CE Primary Berkeley Vale Community Stroud High	Part of package to replace heating boilers	[1]1,099,238
Rednock Eastcombe Primary Uley CE Primary	Removal and replacement of asbestos building materials	[2]503,438
Marley Stroud High	Provision of joint music facility for both schools	572,772
Callowell Primary Cam Everlands Primary Cashes Green Primary Dursley CE Primary Rodborough Community Primary Sharpness Primary The Thrupp Berkeley Vale Community	Provision of electrical fire alarm systems	[2]269,651
St. Dominic's RC Primary St. Joseph's RC Primary The Rosary RC Primary Maidenhill	Electrical re-wiring and cross bonding	[2]253,294
Cam Everlands Primary Cam Woodfield Infant Cashes Green Primary Dursley CE Primary Eastington Primary Park Infant Park Junior Rodborough Community Primary St. Dominic's RC Primary Whiteshill Primary Berkeley Vale Community Thomas Keble Cam House Special	Fire precaution upgrading works	[2]407,475

[1] Denotes total allocations made to projects in Phase 1 of the New Deal for Schools programme. Gloucestershire local education authority will be able to advise the value of projects at this school.
[2] Denotes total allocations made to package projects covering more than one school. Gloucestershire local education authority will be able to advise the value of projects at schools in the Stroud constituency which benefited from these allocations

Table B: Central Government capital investment in schools in Gloucestershire local education authority

£000

Funding stream	*1997–98*	*1998–99*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*Total*
Basic Credit Approvals	6,837	2,858	7,158	10,399	27,252
Supplementary Credit Approvals	166	541	362	919	1,988
Grant to Voluntary Aided Schools	387	233	451	1,086	2,157
New Deal for Schools	435	1,676	3,625	6,746	12,482
School Security Grant	117	147	201	201	666
Key Stage 1 Class Size Initiative	—	181	564	559	1,304
National Grid for Learning Grant	—	750	586	2,008	3,344
Assistance with Asset Management Plans	—	—	92	—	92
Seed Challenge Funding	—	—	—	314	314
Removal of Outside Toilets	—	416	—	—	416
Energy Efficiency Initiative	—	103	—	—	103
Devolved Formula Capital for Schools	—	—	—	4,346	4,346
Renewal of School Laboratories	—	—	—	319	319
Secondary Learning Support Units	—	—	—	100	100
Schools Access Initiative Grant	4	—	—	—	4
Total	7,946	6,905	13,039	26,997	54,887

Students Fund

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what grants from the Students Fund for 2001–02 are still to be announced; and if he will make a statement. [152482]

Mr. Wicks: The total amount of funding which the Government are making available through the higher education Hardship Fund in 2001–02 is £93.3 million, 6 per cent. higher than in 2000–01. The total includes funding for fee waivers for part-time students, bursaries for student parents and Opportunity Bursaries. Within the

total, resources for higher education students in further education institutions have been almost doubled to just under £5 million.

Learner Support Funds for 16 to 19-year-old students, including general further education Access Funds, residential funding for students in specialist colleges and support for students in school sixth forms, will total £47.4 million in 2001–02, representing a 9 per cent. increase year on year. Support for students aged 19+ through these funds, including resources for child care support, will be £67 million in 2001–02, representing an increase of over 20 per cent. year on year.

Notification of allocations from the Hardship Fund to higher education institutions will be made this month. Allocations of Learner Support Funds and the Hardship Fund will be notified to further education institutions at the beginning of April.

Faith Schools

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on faith schools. [152555]

Ms Estelle Morris: As our recent Green Paper says, we wish to welcome more faith schools within the publicly funded sector of education, where there is clear local demand from parents and the community. Schools with a strong sense of identity and a distinctive ethos, like faith schools, tend to be valued by parents. The faith schools in my hon. Friend's constituency are the following:

St. John's Catholic Infant School
St. John's Catholic Junior School
Christ the King Catholic Primary School
St. Peter's CE Primary School
St. Andrew's CE Primary School
St. Mary's CE Primary School.

I welcome the valuable contribution they make to pupils' development and to the Wirral community of schools.

Funding (South Shields and South Tyneside)

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what the SSA per *(a)* primary school and *(b)* secondary school was, in real terms, for South Tyneside in each year since 1996; [152783]

(2) what the average funding allocation was per school age child in the Borough of South Tyneside in each year since 1996. [152785]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* The information requested is in the tables. They show that between 1996–97 and 1997–98 total funding in South Tyneside increased by £50 per pupil in real terms. Between 1997–98 and 2000–01 South Tyneside's funding per pupil has increased by £430 per pupil in real terms. Grant figures have not yet been finalised for 2001–02, so no comparable figure is available for that year.

South Tyneside

Per pupil funding £

	Cash			*Cash*			*Cash*		
	Primary 5–10			*Secondary 11–15*			*Schools 5–15*		
	SSA	*Grants*	*Total per pupil*	*SSA*	*Grants*	*Total per pupil*	*SSA*	*Grants*	*Total per pupil*
1996–97	2,010	40	2,050	2,680	30	2,710	2,300	30	2,340
1997–98	2,120	40	2,160	2,780	40	2,820	2,410	40	2,450
1998–99	2,230	70	2,300	2,900	60	2,960	2,530	60	2,590
1999–2000	2,360	150	2,510	3,020	110	3,130	2,660	130	2,790
2000–01	2,470	300	2,760	3,180	220	3,400	2,800	260	3,060
2001–02	2,580	tba	—	3,310	tba	—	2,930	tba	—

Per pupil funding £

	Real terms 1990–2000 prices			*Real terms 1999–2000 prices*			*Real terms 1999–2000 prices*		
	Primary 5–10			*Secondary 11–15*			*Schools 5–15*		
	SSA	*Grants*	*Per pupil*	*SSA*	*Grants*	*Per pupil*	*SSA*	*Grants*	*Per pupil*
1996–97	2,180	40	2,220	2,900	30	2,930	2,500	40	2,530
1997–98	2,230	40	2,280	2,930	40	2,960	2,540	40	2,580
1998–99	2,290	70	2,360	2,970	60	3,030	2,590	60	2,650
1999–2000	2,360	150	2,510	3,020	110	3,130	2,660	130	2,790
2000–01	2,430	290	2,720	3,120	210	3,340	2,750	250	3,010
2001–02	2,470	tba	—	3,180	tba	—	2,810	tba	—

Note:
Real terms calculated using GDP deflators published by the Treasury 7 March 2001.
Figures are rounded to the nearest £10.

Teachers' Morale

Mr. Purchase: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on trends in teachers' morale since the appointment of the new Chief Inspector of Schools. [153010]

Ms Estelle Morris: My Department has not attempted to measure the effect on teachers' morale of the appointment of HM Chief Inspectors of Schools. My right hon. Friend and I are happy to put on record our support for the teaching profession and our recognition of the hard work of teachers in raising standards in our schools.

School Computers (Wansbeck)

Mr. Denis Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many computers there are in schools in Wansbeck; and how many there were in 1997. [153146]

Mr. Wills: The Department does not collect details about the numbers of school computers held in individual constituencies. Data from the Department's Survey of information and communications technology in Schools 1996 are given, as the survey was performed bi-annually until 1998. The comparable survey in 2000 shows that the numbers of computers in schools in England has increased as shown in the following table:

Sector	*March 1996*	*March 2000*
1 Primary	13.0	17.8
Secondary	95.9	112.6
Special	19.0	66.5

The ratio of computers to pupils since 1996 has improved as follows:

Sector	*March 1996*	*March 2000*
2 Primary	1:19	1:12.6
Secondary	1:9	1:7.9
Special	1:4	1:3.7

Teachers (Lancashire)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the number of *(a)* part-time teachers, *(b)* teachers recruited from overseas and *(c)* supply teachers employed by Lancashire Education Authority in (i) 1997, (ii) 1998, (iii) 1999, (iv) 2000 and (v) 2001. [153155]

Ms Estelle Morris: Part-time teachers and qualified short-term supply teachers on contracts of under one month employed in the maintained schools sector in Lancashire local authority are as follows:

January	*Part-time teachers (headcount)*	*Supply teachers*[1]
1997	1,690	560
1998	1,760	510
1999	1,880	400
2000	1,850	510

[1] Supply teachers employed for a full day on the day of the count. Supply teachers on contracts of one month or more cannot be separately identified from teachers in regular service and are not included in the table.

Note:
All numbers have been rounded to the nearest 10

Teachers recruited from overseas are not collected centrally. Teacher numbers for January 2001 are not yet available.

The Local Government Reorganisation affected Lancashire on 1 April 1998. From this date, Lancashire split to become three authorities: Lancashire, Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool. The figures in the table for 1999 and 2000 are the addition of the three new authorities.

The number of regular teachers (ie excluding short-term supply) in maintained schools in England increased by 6,900 between January 1998 and January 2000.

There was a growth of more than 2,000 in the number of people training to be teachers between 1999–2000 and 2000–01, the first such increase since 1992–93.

From April 2001 new graduate recruits can expect to earn £17,000 a year (up 6 per cent. from the previous year) and starting salaries in inner London will rise to £20,000 (up 9 per cent. from the previous year).

Educational Schemes

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list each school in England and Wales to which *(a)* the Pupil Learning Credits Scheme, *(b)* the National Grid for Learning, *(c)* Excellence in Cities and *(d)* the Learning Mentors Scheme applies, indicating in each case, for each school, (i) the parliamentary constituency in which the school is situated, (ii) the number of pupils who will benefit from the scheme and (iii) the value of the scheme for each school. [153278]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* This information is not held centrally and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Standard Spending Assessments

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each year since the Area Cost Adjustment was introduced the amount of standard spending assessment for each pupil in *(a)* Gloucestershire, *(b)* Oxfordshire and *(c)* Essex; and if he will make a statement on the reviews of ACA which have taken place or are currently taking place. [153387]

Ms Estelle Morris: The table gives the data requested from when the SSA system began in 1990–91.

The Green Paper on the future of local authority funding makes it clear that we want to remove the worst of the disparities that exist, including those caused by the Area Cost Adjustment. Our aim is to level up not down. We will be working on this over the coming months, with the aim of moving towards a new system in 2002–03.

The table shows that between 1997–98 and 2000–01, funding per pupil in Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Essex has increased by well over £300 in real terms. There will be further increases at national level in funding following the Year 2000 Spending Review and the recent Budget announcement: a further £420 per pupil over the three-year period, taking the total increase to nearly £750 between 1997–98 and 2003–04.

£

	Gloucestershire SSA	*Grants*	*Total*	*Oxfordshire SSA*	*Grants*	*Total*	*Essex SSA*	*Grants*	*Total*
Funding per 5–15 pupil (cash)									
1990–91	1,710	—	—	1,740	—	—	1,760	—	—
1991–92	1,960	—	—	2,010	—	—	2,030	—	—
1992–93	2,080	—	—	2,140	—	—	2,190	—	—

£

	Gloucestershire SSA	Grants	Total	Oxfordshire SSA	Grants	Total	Essex SSA	Grants	Total
1993–94	2,120	—	—	2,230	—	—	2,260	—	—
1994–95	2,140	—	—	2,260	—	—	2,330	—	—
1995–96	2,110	—	—	2,220	—	—	2,280	—	—
1996–97	2,190	—	—	2,270	—	—	2,360	—	—
1997–98	2,250	20	2,270	2,320	40	2,350	2,400	20	2,420
1998–99[1]	2,360	30	2,390	2,450	50	2,500	2,530	30	2,550
1999–2000	2,470	100	2,570	2,560	110	2,670	2,630	90	2,720
2000–01	2,580	230	2,800	2,690	210	2,900	2,760	190	2,950
2001–02	2,680	—	—	2,840	—	—	2,900	—	—
Real terms 1999–2000 prices									
1990–91	2,250	—	—	2,280	—	—	2,310	—	—
1991–92	2,420	—	—	2,490	—	—	2,510	—	—
1992–93	2,490	—	—	2,560	—	—	2,620	—	—
1993–94	2,470	—	—	2,600	—	—	2,640	—	—
1994–95	2,460	—	—	2,600	—	—	2,670	—	—
1995–96	2,360	—	—	2,480	—	—	2,550	—	—
1996–97	2,380	—	—	2,450	—	—	2,560	—	—
1997–98	2,370	30	2,390	2,440	40	2,480	2,520	20	2,540
1998–99[1]	2,410	30	2,450	2,510	50	2,560	2,590	30	2,610
1999–2000	2,470	100	2,570	2,560	110	2,670	2,630	90	2,720
2000–01	2,530	220	2,760	2,640	210	2,850	2,710	190	2,900
2001–02	2,570	—	—	2,720	—	—	2,780	—	—

[1] Prior to the local government reorganisation in 1998–99, Essex included Southend on Sea and Thurrock. The figures for 1997–98 are based on an apportionment for Essex across the three constituent authorities

Notes:

1. Comparable grant information is not available prior to 1997–98: all grants for 2001–02 have not yet been allocated
2. The SSA figures make no allowances for changes in SSA methodology since 1990–91
3. Figures are rounded to the nearest £10
4. Real term figures calculated using GDP deflators published by the Treasury 7 March 2001

Targeted Capital Fund

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many applications he has received for the Targeted Capital Fund; how much in total has been applied for; when he expects to announce the allocations; and if he will make a statement. [153535]

Jacqui Smith: Proposals for a total of 208 projects seeking support from the Targeted Capital Fund have been received from 116 local education authorities. The total value of the proposals submitted is £299 million. We are currently appraising these proposals, and I aim to make an announcement before the end of this month.

Proposals to be supported will be funded as part of the £8.5 billion investment programme in school buildings over the next three years. Most of this funding is being allocated according to needs-related formulae, rather than in response to bids. This funding is in addition to more than £5 billion capital invested since 1997. Capital funding this year at over £2 billion is more than three times the £683 million spent on schools capital in 1996–97.

Grammar Schools

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what criteria are used by grammar schools to select pupils; and what consideration is given to children's performance in the national curriculum when selecting such pupils. [153720]

Ms Estelle Morris: Admission authorities for grammar schools are responsible for setting their own arrangements for selecting pupils. Some allocate places on the basis of rank order of merit in the entrance test; others set a pass mark for the test and, if more children achieve the pass mark than there are places available, normal oversubscription criteria (for example siblings, distance) are used to allocate the places. Some admission authorities review cases of children who have marginally failed to reach the required standard in the test, taking account of head teachers' recommendations and school reports, which are likely to include reference to performance in the National Curriculum.

School Clubs and Holiday Schemes

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* after school club places and *(b)* holiday playscheme places there were (i) in 1996 and (ii) at the latest date for which figures are available in (A) London and (B) each London borough. [152200]

Ms Hodge *[pursuant to her reply, 13 March 2001, c. 561–62W]:* The wrong table was printed. The correct table is as follows.

Number of providers in out of school clubs and holiday schemes and number of places

	1996				2000			
	Out of school clubs		Holiday schemes		Out of school clubs		Holiday schemes	
	Providers	Places	Providers	Places	Providers	Places	Providers	Places
London	432	14,404	899	50,694	768	34,318	2,462	124,977
Inner London	239	9,343	387	16,561	452	24,114	1,046	57,751
City of London	1	50	1	52	6	280	12	520
Camden	30	1,046	71	1,656	31	1,078	141	7,267
Hackney	'—	'—	22	600	19	900	13	1,320
Hammersmith and Fulham	18	560	2	40	9	175	64	1,605
Haringey	27	1,120	18	1,686	32	1,504	80	5,654
Islington	44	1,411	82	1,587	57	3,890	70	3,470
Kensington and Chelsea	18	639	47	2,528	15	1,004	50	3,667
Lambeth	'—	'—	'—	'—	37	1,214	22	803
Lewisham	26	983	4	290	28	930	22	1,039
Newham	13	238	27	844	30	1,238	262	14,894
Southwark	24	1,058	20	1,129	70	5,158	124	4,912
Tower Hamlets	'—	'—	'—	'—	58	3,664	31	1,161
Wandsworth	21	1,181	39	3,215	30	1,245	73	5,614
Westminster	17	1,057	54	2,934	30	1,834	82	5,825
Outer London	193	5,061	512	34,133	316	10,204	1,416	67,226
Barking and Dagenham	5	120	14	1,154	8	258	91	4,522
Barnet	9	244	46	2,403	19	675	120	7,265
Bexley	4	180	6	550	5	128	32	2,131
Brent	16	480	43	2,150	26	567	72	2,298
Bromley	8	266	20	1,641	14	422	73	4,022
Croydon	14	610	21	825	23	1,022	113	6,405
Ealing	20	600	37	628	31	699	70	2,478
Enfield	13	'—	32	'—	29	928	165	7,643
Greenwich	2	70	'—	'—	31	1,748	27	912
Harrow	15	418	66	'—	9	352	53	2,743
Havering	7	91	14	253	5	170	33	1,953
Hillingdon	8	128	20	1,285	12	206	52	2,414
Hounslow	22	836	26	7,316	25	745	60	2,097
Kingston-upon-Thames	13	'—	'—	'—	23	653	102	4,799
Merton	9	288	65	3,090	11	351	77	2,701
Redbridge	5	112	16	10,176	11	366	72	3,417
Richmond-upon-Thames	14	407	50	2,197	16	472	85	5,307
Sutton	9	211	17	465	5	64	86	2,936
Waltham Forest	'—	'—	19	'—	13	378	33	1,183

' Not provided by the authority

Note:

Holiday scheme figures prior to 1998 may not be directly comparable to 2000 because of changes in the instructions given to providers for recording places in 1999.

Written Answers to Questions

Friday 16 March 2001

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Air Pollution (Leeds)

Mr. Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his written answer of 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 53W, on air pollution in Leeds, if he will give comparable information for other monitoring stations located in the Leeds, Central constituency. [153232]

Mr. Hill: DETR has one monitoring station within the Leeds, Central constituency and data have been reported in the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions' written answer of 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 53W. The dates when levels of air pollution were recorded as High or Very High at the monitoring stations in the Leeds, Central constituency and operated by the city council are as follows:

New Market St. (Corn Exchange)—permanent location from 23 September 1997 measuring carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide and particles (PM_{10}):

1997
29 October
30 October
31 October
6 November
13 November
1 December
2 December

1998
7 November
17 November
18 November
19 November
1 December
7 December
8 December

1999
Nil days

2000
Nil days

'Mobile sites', measuring sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and particles (PM_{10}) have been deployed as follows:

1999
Cross Green—30 April to 6 October—12 August
York Road site1—20 April to 7 July—nil days

2000
Elland Road—13 January to 27 April—nil days
Shannon Street—27 April to 1 August—nil days
York Road site2—3 August to 12 January 2001—nil days

Note:
With the exception of high sulphur dioxide at Cross Green on 12 August 1999, all other days reported were attributable to particles (PM_{10}).

Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment

Mr. Yeo: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what changes there have been in the membership of the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment since June 1999. [153247]

Mr. Meacher: There have been no changes to the membership of ACRE from that agreed at the end of the appointment process in June 1999. The current membership of ACRE was announced on 18 June 1999. One member, Professor Philip Mullineaux, was abroad at the time and could not be contacted and was therefore appointed formally in September. The membership of ACRE, including Professor Mullineaux, was announced again at the time of the Committee's first meeting on 16 September 1999.

Carbon Dioxide Emissions

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions at what level below 1990 levels are carbon dioxide emission levels. [153391]

Mr. Meacher: Emissions of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, fell by 7 per cent. between 1990 and 1998. 1999 emissions of carbon dioxide are provisionally estimated to be 7.5 per cent. lower than in 1990. The 1999 UK air emission estimates for greenhouse gases and other pollutants are due to be published on 28 March 2001.

Certification Fraud (Seamen)

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what steps he is taking to prevent unqualified and fraudulently qualified seamen from sailing ships into UK waters; [153587]

(2) what steps he has taken *(a)* to guarantee the proper official certification of serving officers on merchant ships using waters around the coast of the UK and *(b)* to prevent the sale or exchange of qualifications for seamen. [153589]

Mr. Hill: As a signatory to the Paris Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) inspects at least 25 per cent. of non-UK ships visiting our ports. An important part of any Port State Control inspection is the scrutiny of the qualifications of the ship's personnel to ensure that the qualifications are genuine and valid. Where there is any concern, the holder is questioned to determine the propriety of the qualification. Where appropriate, prosecutions for fraud have been pursued in close co-operation with the police. The MCA inspects UK ships in a similar manner as under Port State Control. No ship is permitted to sail from any UK port without correctly qualified seafarers.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* his counterparts in other maritime countries and *(b)* the International Maritime Organisation to prevent the practice of exchanging (i) qualifications and (ii) certification of seamen for money; [153588]

(2) what discussions he has had with the International Transport Workers Federation and the Seafarers International Research Institute about certification fraud among senior officers of merchant shipping vessels; [153591]

(3) what discussions he has had with the International Transport Workers Federation and the Seafarers International Research Institute about recent research on forged and fraudulently obtained seamen's certificates. [153590]

Mr. Hill: After discussions between my Officials, the International Transport Workers Federation and officials in other maritime administrations, the United Kingdom co-sponsored a paper concerning fraudulent certification that was discussed at the Maritime Safety Committee meeting of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) in 1999. The IMO subsequently commissioned a Research Project by the Seafarers International Research Centre in Cardiff. The UK contributed £5,000 towards the project and participated in the research.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions also contributed funding to the project. A summary Report will be put forward for consideration by the Maritime Safety Committee at its meeting in May 2001 and the full Report will be considered by an expert sub-committee in January 2002.

Boating (Scotland)

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with the Scottish Parliament and the Scotland Office over plans to increase access to water for non-powered craft in Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [153684]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: I have seen the Scottish Executive's consultation paper on the draft Land Reform (Scotland) Bill and we will observe its progress with interest. So far as access to water for non-powered craft in England and Wales is concerned, my officials have held discussions with a number of interested parties following which we recently let a contract led by the University of Brighton to establish the facts about participation.

Woodland

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he is taking to provide additional protection to sites of ancient woodland under the sites of special scientific interest system. [153679]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: The provisions of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 which give greater protection to sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs) came into force on 30 January 2001. The Act gives English Nature power to tackle neglect of sites and to make management agreements to help fund positive management. It also introduced increased penalties and a general offence of damage to the features of an SSSI. English Nature is also considering whether further sites should be notified as SSSIs.

National Air Traffic Services

Mr. Donohoe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he has required the bidders for NATS to include in their plan for the New Scottish Centre the capability to run the total Scottish Flight Information Region and the Oceanic Centre operation; [153919]

(2) when Phase 2 of the New Scottish Centre will go ahead in order to meet the 'O' date; [153918]

(3) what criteria he will use to evaluate NATS' strategic partner's plan for the New Scottish Centre to determine whether it is satisfactory. [153917]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* Bidders are required to submit plans covering all NATS' major capital projects in the most integrated and efficient manner. The NSC, as part of the two centre strategy endorsed by the Government, is expected to have the capacity to service the Scottish FIR, the Oceanic region and provide a significant contingency in the case of catastrophic failure of NERC/LATCC.

The two phase strategy for the NSC was announced by the Minister for Transport in April 1999. Phase 1 included development of detailed design of the building and systems, as well as software development, with Phase 2 containing the implementation of these designs, and bringing the centre into operation. This strategy was modified in February 2000, following the signing of an agreement between the systems supplier Lockheed Martin and NATS, and the retendering of the building design and construction contracts. This approach is expected to save over £100 million in comparison with the original PFI proposals for the New Scottish Centre.

Site preparation for the NSC has already started. Detailed design of the building is being carried out by Gibb Ltd., and NATS expects to appoint the main construction contractor by the end of 2001. On the systems side, software design is continuing.

The operational date for the NSC is largely a matter for the Strategic Partner—it will be obliged under the Strategic Partnership to bring the NSC into service by a given date, but may choose to do so before then.

The Government will be carefully scrutinising the bidder's complete investment plans as well as their proposals for the New Scottish Centre (NSC) in particular. This will involve a careful analysis of their strategies for safety management; procurement and financing; software integration; capacity planning; contingency capability for NERC; introduction of new controller tools; transition planning; and the overall impact on the mode of operations and controller interface and training.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to make an announcement about the preferred bidder for the NATS PPP. [153944]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* An announcement will be made when we have completed our evaluation of the bids.

Canals

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of the closure of the British Waterways' canal network on the leisure boating and narrow boat rental sectors; and if he will make a statement. [153820]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* British Waterways (BW) closed access to all its waterways located in affected and restricted areas from the beginning of the month to help limit the spread of foot and mouth disease. The closure applies where county councils have taken powers to close rights of way and prevents all non-essential use of the waterways concerned.

The Government have established a task force chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment to consider the implications of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease for the rural economy. The implications for the canal network (and other waterways) will be within the ambit of this group which will be considering whether and where it is safe to reopen rights of way, including waterways. The task force will also help those caught up in the crisis and measures to help the rural economy once the outbreak has been eradicated.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what progress has been made towards selling the dome; and if he will make a statement; [154236]

(2) with how many organisations he is currently discussing the sale of the millennium dome. [154234]

Ms Armstrong: English Partnerships have received more than a hundred informal expressions of interest for the dome and the regeneration of the Greenwich Peninsula, which they are exploring through discussions. As announced on 15 February 2001, *Official Report,* column 221W, the Government want openly to test the market for future uses of the dome. As part of this, English Partnerships have been asked to consider all options and mechanisms for the future use of the dome. Further details of future arrangements for taking this process forward will be announced as soon as possible.

Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the future role of the Strategic Rail Authority. [153907]

Mr. Hill: The purposes of the Strategic Rail Authority are set out in section 205 of the Transport Act 2000. The SRA published on 13 March its Strategic Plan which sets out how it will further these purposes. Copies have been placed in the House Library.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the terms of appointment of the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and other board members of the Strategic Rail Authority. [153908]

Mr. Hill: I have placed copies of the terms of appointment of the Chairman and other members of the Strategic Rail Authority in the Libraries of the House.

Rail Franchises

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress with regard to the awarding of new rail franchises and the role being played by OPRAF. [153909]

Mr. Hill: The Strategic Rail Authority has taken over the functions of OPRAF. Franchise replacement is taking longer than originally anticipated in some cases but remains a priority for the Government and the Authority. The replacement process remains essential to delivering service improvements to passengers and the potential benefits are already clear in the new proposals for the Chiltern and South Central franchises.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the applicants for the Wessex Rail franchise; and when a decision is expected on the successful bidder. [153910]

Mr. Hill: The Strategic Rail Authority announced on 2 March that Connex Transport UK Ltd., First Group Plc, GB Railways Group Plc, Group 4 Falck Global Solutions Ltd., National Express Group Plc, SBB Laing and Stagecoach Holdings Plc had prequalified to submit proposals for the Wessex franchise. There is no set timetable for awarding this new franchise.

Waste Recycling

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the rates of recycling of household waste achieved by local authorities in England. [154211]

Mr. Robert Ainsworth: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given on 1 March 2001, *Official Report,* columns 722–23W, in which we referred to the publication of the "Guidance on Municipal Waste Management Strategies" containing household waste recycling rates for local authorities in England. Copies of the guidance have been deposited in the House of Commons Library and have been sent to all English local authorities.

Telecommunication Masts

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking following responses to the consultation paper on telecommunications mast development; and if he will make a statement. [154519]

Mr. Raynsford: I am today announcing a series of important changes to the planning system on the siting of mobile phone masts. We will:

strengthen public consultation requirements on mast proposals of 15 metres and below so that they are exactly the same as applications for planning permission;

increase the time for authorities to deal with prior approval applications to 56 days;

increase application fees to enable local authorities to carry out full public consultation;

underline that school governors must be consulted on all proposals for new masts on or near a school or college;

maintain in full an authority's ability to reject applications on amenity grounds;

A modern communications system brings massive benefits to people and businesses alike. Nearly 40 million people—60 per cent. of the UK population—use mobile phones. They enjoy the convenience and accessibility they provide. Parents and children feel more secure because of them. Mobile phones have saved lives—they allow the emergency services to be called immediately when they are needed. None of this could happen without the masts and other infrastructure which enable the service to be delivered.

But people are concerned about where masts are located. It is vital that masts are designed and sited sensitively so that their environmental impact is kept to a minimum. Local people must have a better opportunity than now to have their say on proposals for mast development.

We recognise too that there is public concern about the possibility of health effects associated with mobile phone masts. That is why the Government set up the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (chaired by Sir William Stewart) which published its report in May last year. The report suggested that the current planning requirements for masts of 15 metres and below did not allow adequate public consultation. It further suggested that lack of consultation was a major cause of grievance in people who suffer a loss of amenity when base stations are erected.

We therefore intend to strengthen the current public consultation requirements for masts of 15 metres and under to incorporate exactly the same requirements as for masts over that size and for other development requiring applications for planning permission.

To give local planning authorities more time to consult local people we shall increase the amount of time they have to determine prior approval applications for ground-based masts and those on buildings from 42 and 28 days respectively to a uniform 56 days. In addition, we shall extend the prior approval arrangements to cover antennas on roofs where the height of the antenna (including any supporting structure) would exceed 4 metres.

Under the new arrangements, local planning authorities will be expected to make their decisions within 56 days. Authorities will still be able to turn down mast applications where they do not consider amenity aspects have been adequately addressed. If they have not made a decision within 56 days, approval will be deemed to have been granted. This discipline is needed because many authorities are failing to meet their Best Value target to determine 80 per cent. of planning applications in eight weeks and delay cannot be justified.

In recognition of the extra demands which improved consultation will make of authorities we propose to increase the fee payable by developers for prior approval applications from £35 to £190 so that authorities have more resources to handle them.

These changes represent a considerable strengthening of the current arrangements. We shall introduce them, and revised national planning policy guidance, at the earliest opportunity. The guidance will underline our commitment to encouraging mast and site sharing, where that represents the best environmental solution, to minimise proliferation of masts. It will also emphasise the Government's view that telecommunications development must be taken forward through partnership between the operator, the local planning authority and the local community. The revised guidance will make it clear that governing bodies must be consulted on all proposals to site masts on or near schools and colleges.

We welcome the commitments which the operators have made to develop, with other stakeholders, clear standards and procedures to deliver significantly improved consultation with local communities. For example, operators will initiate the process as early as possible by discussing optimum design and siting solutions even before applications for masts are submitted. We shall want to ensure that these commitments are implemented and followed in every case. We will underpin the arrangements with a new Code of Practice developed with the operators and representatives of local government. I intend to call in the operators shortly to discuss next steps.

The Stewart Report concluded that

"the balance of evidence indicates that there is no general risk to the health of people living near to base stations on the basis that exposures are expected to be small fractions of the guidelines."

Gaps in scientific knowledge led the Group to recommend a precautionary approach to the use of mobile phone technologies, comprising a series of specific measures, until more research findings become available. We agree with this approach.

The Government have already taken forward a range of precautionary actions in response to the Group's Report. These include:

ensuring that all mobile phones and base stations meet the guidelines of the International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection (ICNIRP) for limiting exposure to electromagnetic fields. In relation to public exposure these are tougher than the guidelines issued by the National Radiological Protection Board by a factor of five. Mobile phone operators have agreed to ensure that all existing base stations meet these guidelines. In addition, the operators have agreed that all planning applications for new development will be accompanied by a certificate of compliance with ICNIRP guidelines;

setting up, by the Radiocommunications Agency, a national database giving details of mobile phone base stations. It is planned that the map-based facility will indicate the locations, height and maximum power outputs for each fixed transmitter. This is anticipated to be ready and on-line in the next three months;

auditing mobile phone base stations and masts to assess emissions. The audit will focus on schools with base stations. Schools were asked to register if they wanted to be included. The audits have now begun and all schools registering within the deadline set will be included. The first 11 audits indicated maximum levels of exposure a tiny fraction of the ICNIRP guidelines (eg: the highest level was approximately 1–600 of the guideline levels). The database of results has been put on the Radiocommunications Agency website: www.radio.gov.uk; and

launching a new joint Government/industry research programme, costing around £7 million and with an independent programme management committee led by Sir William Stewart. It will carry out research into the effects of mobile phone technology on health. This will ensure that this area is kept under review and that Government and the public are kept up to date with new research findings. The call for research proposals was issued on 9 February.

In addition, the Department of Health has published leaflets on mobile phones, base stations and health to give people the latest information and advice. The Department for Education and Employment has also issued information to schools and local education authorities regarding mobile phones, base stations and schools. This has been published on their website: www.dfee.gov.uk/a-z/mobilephones.

It is the Government's responsibility to decide what measures are necessary to protect public health. It remains the Government's firm view that the planning system is not the appropriate mechanism for determining health safeguards. I have outlined the measures being taken on a precautionary basis. In the Government's view, if a proposed development meets the ICNIRP guidelines it should not be necessary for a local planning authority, in processing an application, to consider the health aspects further. This view will be reiterated in our revised planning policy guidance.

I believe that the improvements to the planning arrangements announced today meet the concerns of the Stewart Group and others about public consultation on masts and strike the right balance by giving people a better opportunity to voice their views without hindering unnecessarily the development of a modern telecommunications network. We shall continue to keep the whole area of mobile phone technologies under review in the light of further research.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr. Hendrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the neighbourhood renewal funds. [154522]

Ms Armstrong: I am pleased to announce that I have laid before the House the Special Grant Report that sets out the allocations and conditions for receipt of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.

The NRF will provide £900 million to certain local authorities over the next three years to enable them to improve services in their most deprived areas, including contributing to the achievement of Government PSA targets to narrow the gap between deprived areas and the rest of the country. It is both acceptable, and strongly desirable where service quality is at risk or requires improvement, that NRF funding should be devoted to mainstream services, such as schools, provided that the funding benefits the most deprived areas. The grant can be used to support services provided not only by the local authority, but also by organisations that are members of the local strategic partnership (where one exists) and by others.

Joint Nature Conservation Committee

Mr. Dobbin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made with the review of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee announced in July. [154636]

Mr. Meacher: We have published today the report of the first stage of the financial, management and policy of the JNCC, and have placed copies in the House Libraries. I am inviting interested parties, including the devolved administrations and the respective country conservation agencies to offer their considered views on the report within three months.

Foot and Mouth

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action is being taken by *(a)* the regional development agencies and *(b)* the Countryside Agency to help combat foot and mouth disease. [154210]

Mr. Meacher: The primary responsibility for measures to combat foot and mouth disease rests with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. The regional development agencies and the Countryside Agency, together with other organisations, have been developing their ideas for actions they can take to help to respond to the wider consequences. They are represented on and are contributing their ideas to the task force on the economic effects of the disease which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has asked me to chair.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Code of Conduct

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Prime Minister if he will amend the Ministerial Code of Conduct to cover the letting of rented accommodation to civil servants. [153783]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 15 March 2001]*: No. Paragraph 1 of the Ministerial Code makes it clear that Ministers must ensure that no conflict arises, or appears to arise, between their public duties and their private interests.

The right hon. Member for Hartlepool

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Prime Minister for what reason he accepted the resignation of the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. [153969]

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) on 24 January 2001, *Official Report*, column 915.

Environmental Policy

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Library a copy of his environmental speech presented to the WWF conference at Chatham House on 6 March; and what steps he is taking to allow the public access to the contents of his speech. [154192]

The Prime Minister: I have today placed a copy in the Library of the House. It is also available on the No.10 website.

Parliamentary Pay and Allowances

Mr. Win Griffiths: To ask the Prime Minister when he will publish the Review Body on Senior Salaries report on parliamentary pay and allowances. [154520]

The Prime Minister: The Government are publishing the Review Body on Senior Salaries report of parliamentary pay and allowances today. I am grateful to Sir Michael Perry and members of the SSRB for their work and the Government have noted their recommendations.

This will be a matter for decision by Parliament.

Foot and Mouth Taskforce

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Prime Minister if he will set out the *(a)* terms of reference and *(b)* membership and *(c)* programme of the taskforce set up to consider the impact of foot and mouth disease on rural areas; when the taskforce is to report; if he will publish the findings of the taskforce; and if he will make a statement. [154212]

The Prime Minister: I have asked my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment to chair a taskforce with the following terms of reference:

To consider the implications of the outbreak of foot and mouth disease for the rural economy, both immediately and in the longer term and to report to the Prime Minster on appropriate measures.

In particular to:

(a) identify the problems that the FMD outbreak is causing for the wider rural economy;

(b) draw up specific guidance for public and businesses in accordance with veterinary advice;

(c) identify any initiatives—e.g. from the Rural White Paper—whose implementation might be brought forward to help those caught up in the crisis;

(d) identify potential new actions which would help to kick-start the rural economy again once the outbreak had been eradicated.

The taskforce include representatives (including Ministers) of the following organisations:

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
Department of Trade and Industry
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
Treasury
No. 10
English Tourism Council
Countryside Agency
British Hospitality Association
National Trust
Federation of Small Businesses
National Farmers Union
Country Landowners Association
South West Regional Development Agency
Newcastle University
Local Government Association
National Federation of Women's Institutes
The Rural Group of the Bishops of the Church of England
Countryside Alliance
Scottish Executive
The Wales Office
Northern Ireland Executive
Forestry Commission.

The first meeting of the taskforce took place on Wednesday 14 March and it will meet again early next week. I have asked for the specific guidance to the public and businesses on access to the countryside to be prepared by the weekend, and for a report on immediate initiatives to help those caught up in the crisis as soon as possible next week. The taskforce will meet regularly.

DEFENCE

Shoeburyness

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what *(a)* munitions and *(b)* delivery systems associated with nuclear warfare have been demolished at (i) the Shoeburyness Sands and (ii) adjacent mud flats/sand banks. [149518]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 8 February 2001]:* Rocket motors from the Polaris missile were destroyed at Shoeburyness Sands during the 1990s. Conventional high explosives from nuclear weapon systems have been and continue to be disposed of in the demilitarisation facilities of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency range at Shoeburyness. The level of radiation from the explosives disposed of in this fashion is minute and does not constitute a hazard to the environment or to public health.

Type 45s

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what criteria were used in deciding to accept BAE System's bid for the Type-45s. [150523]

Mr. Hoon: I assume that this question refers to the contract recently placed in keeping with the existing procurement strategy for the Demonstration and First of Class Manufacture (DFM) Phase of the Type 45.

In November 1999, BAE Systems was nominated as the Prime Contractor for the Type 45 Programme following the end of the tri-national Horizon Programme. BAE Systems was nominated because of the previous involvement of GEC Marconi in the Horizon International Joint Venture Company, so it could make maximum re-use of the outputs of the Horizon definition work, and they demonstrated an ability to resource the programme to achieve the timeliness in partnership with the IPT. A competition to select the Type 45 Prime Contractor risked delaying the ISD by at least six months and probably longer.

The criteria under which BAE Systems was contracted in December 2000 for the DFM Phase are to deliver the first three Type 45 Destroyers, on schedule and to time. The DFM contract has a successive incentive arrangement encompassing all Prime Contractor work, including the ship build elements, in accordance with the existing competitive Procurement Strategy.

Pipework Insulation

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what standard of heat insulation is specified for pipework in PFI projects in his Department. [151658]

Dr. Moonie: In the Private Finance Initiative projects we set the services and performance levels we require. These requirements are recorded as the key outputs in PFI contracts. We deliberately avoid specifying how contractors should meet our requirements, or the nature of the assets they should use in doing so. Like other companies, PFI contractors do of course need to meet statutory requirements.

Mines

Mr. Frank Cook: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the anti-vehicle mines held by the UK, including mine type, the quantities of stocks held anti-handling devices and fuse types. [152600]

Mr. Spellar: The UK currently holds five different types of anti-tank mines. These are:

MK 7/4 and MK 7/7
Barmine—L9s, L17s and L18s
L3A1—Lightweight non-metallic
L35A1—Shielder Vehicle Launched Scatterable Mine System
AT2—Anti-Tank sub-munition delivered by Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS)

Only the AT2 anti-tank mine has an anti-handling device.

None of the anti-tank mines held in the UK stockpile contravene the Ottawa Convention.

I am withholding the quantities of stocks held and fuse types in accordance with exemption 1.(a) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

RAF Northolt

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many aircraft movements there were in each of the last 10 years from RAF Northolt. [153568]

Mr. Spellar: A movement is defined as either a take-off or landing. According to available records, the number of aircraft movements, both military and civil, at RAF Northolt for the years in question are:

Year	*Number of aircraft movements*
2000	12,587
1999	13,476
1998	13,571
1997	15,181
1996	15,726
1995	14,467
1994	12,744
1993	12,960
1992	14,501
1991	13,800
1990	14,700

Note:
Figures prior to 1997 do not include flights for which landing fees were waived.

International Criminal Court

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations from the armed forces he has had regarding the proposed International Criminal Court; if he will place in the Library reports setting these out; and if he will make a statement. [153845]

Mr. Hoon: None. The priority of the Ministry of Defence in the drafting of the International Criminal Court Bill and its passage through Parliament has been to ensure that members of the armed forces are fully protected from malicious or ill-founded prosecution by the ICC. The armed forces have been closely involved in the consultation process. I am confident that the Bill before Parliament provides all necessary protection.

Council Tax

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what regulations govern the payment of council tax by members of HM Forces serving *(a)* at home and *(b)* overseas; and if he will place them in the Library. [154071]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the then Minister of State for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, North (Mr. Henderson) on 23 July 1999, *Official Report*, column 695W. I also refer the hon. Member to the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (Chapter 14) and the Armed Forces' Pay Review Body Thirtieth Report 2001 (page 28), copies of which are available from the Library of the House.

Service Pensions

Mr. Jim Murphy: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the review of the Armed Forces Pension Scheme and the Joint MOD/DSS Compensation Review. [154523]

Mr. Hoon: I am pleased to announce that the emerging findings of these reviews are being published today for public consultation. I appreciate that both reviews are taking longer than originally intended, but they have raised complicated issues and I am determined that we should find the right package of benefits appropriate for our Armed Forces in modern society.

The review teams have carried out detailed analysis of the current arrangements and the options for modernisation. They have set out options in each area, working closely with the Services personnel staff. The next stage in the review process is to seek the views of individual Service personnel, ex-Service and Widows organisations and the general public. This will include wide circulation of material describing the proposed changes, both in hard copy and on a range of websites. We will also be going out to interested organisations to explain our proposals, answer any questions and seek views. Because of the complexity of the proposals I have allowed over four months for consultation. After this time we will publish a summary of the responses and consider how to take the package forward in the light of them.

Copies of the consultation documents will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and will also be available on the MOD website. The Joint Compensation Review consultation document will also be available on the DSS War Pensions Agency website.

Offshore Patrol Vessels

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to replace the Island Class offshore patrol vessels. [154524]

Dr. Moonie: I am pleased to announce that following a thorough tender evaluation, Vosper Thornycroft (UK) Ltd. have been selected as preferred bidder to provide an offshore patrol capability under a lease arrangement to replace the five existing Island Class Offshore Patrol Vessels employed on patrol and fishery protection duties on behalf of MAFF. Subject to satisfactory conclusion of negotiations, we plan to be able to place the associated contract with Vosper Thornycroft (UK) Ltd. in April 2001.

War Veterans

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will assess the desirability and cost of introducing regular four yearly health checks on war veterans with war wounds, for the purpose of ensuring that they receive the correct pension entitlement. [153382]

Mr. Bayley: I have been asked to reply.

The period for which a war disablement pension is awarded represents the length of time over which it is judged that the assessed level of service-related disablement will remain stable. Lengths of awards are based on individual case-specific facts, taking account of the nature and natural history of the disabling condition and any planned treatment.

Regardless of the length of any award, if at any time the war pensioner believes that their pensioned condition has deteriorated, he or she may request a review of the award and the assessed level of their service-related disablement, by the Secretary of State for Social Security.

These provisions are regarded as appropriate to ensure that war pensioners receive War Pensions at rates appropriate to their service-related disablements.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Fishing Vessel Licences

Mr. Martyn Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to change the capacity penalty arrangements applying to the transfer and aggregation of fishing vessel licences; and if he will make a statement. [154475]

Mr. Morley: The operation of fishing vessel licensing arrangements has been recently reviewed by a joint industry/departmental working group and a copy of the group's report is being placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The working group has recommended that the existing capacity penalty arrangements should be maintained for the time being but that the penalty relating to the uprating of an existing engine, or to an increase in power following its replacement, should be based on the increase in the vessel's capacity rather than its overall capacity. The Fisheries Departments in the UK agree and arrangements are being made to notify the owners of licensed fishing vessels.

As of today a 20 per cent. capacity penalty will operate for the uprating or replacement of an existing vessel engine provided the resulting increase in engine power does not exceed 35 per cent. This penalty will be reduced to 10 per cent. where an engine is uprated or replaced before 31 December 2001. However, except in the case of pelagic vessels, where vessel capacity units (VCUs) are taken from vessels under 18 metres in overall length and aggregated onto licensed vessels measuring 18 metres or more in overall length, the capacity penalty will be 30 per cent. Provision will also be made for the splitting of fishing vessel licences for the purpose of engine power adjustments.

The Fisheries Departments, in conjunction with the European Commission, are also prepared to consider, on a case-by-case basis, waiving capacity penalties and compliance with tonnage rules for vessel improvements which relate exclusively to improved safety and which will not result in an increase in a vessel's fishing effort. Under EU legislation member states may apply for an increase in tonnage objectives under their relevant Multi Annual Guidance Programme to take account of increases in vessel capacity resulting exclusively from safety improvements. Advantage is now being taken of that facility.

In the longer term the Fisheries Departments in the UK wish to simplify the present capacity regime and, with the exception of engine power adjustments, plan to return to a situation where a single penalty applies. The present capacity penalties will therefore end on 31 March 2003 and be replaced on 1 April 2003 by a single penalty which will also apply to tonnage and engine power as well as vessel capacity units. Since two years' notice of these changes is being given, no provision will be made for so called pipeline cases. The views of the fishing industry and other interests are being sought on the level at which the capacity penalty should be fixed and whether this should apply to both licence transfers and aggregations or to aggregations alone.

HEALTH

Prescriptions and Optical Vouchers

Mr. Benton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase charges in the NHS and the value of optical vouchers; and if he will make a statement. [154513]

Mr. Milburn: We shall lay before the House regulations to increase National Health Service charges in England from 1 April 2001. There will be a cash increase in the charge of 10 pence (1.67 per cent.) from £6.00 to £6.10 for each quantity of a drug or appliance dispensed.

The cost of prescription prepayment certificates will rise to £31.90 for a four month certificate and £87.60 for an annual certificate. These offer savings for those needing more than five items in four months or 14 in one year.

Prescription charges are expected to raise some £414 million for the NHS in 2001–02.

Charges for elastic stockings and tights, wigs and most fabric supports supplied through the Hospital Service will be increased similarly.

The maximum patient charge for a single course of dental treatment begun on or after 1 April 2001 will increase from £354 to £360. Only about one in every 1,000 courses of treatment will attract the new maximum charge.

We have restricted the prescription charge increase to the same cash amount as the previous two years and the other increases are in line with this percentage increase.

Optical voucher values will increase overall by 2.5 per cent. to help children, people on low income and certain people with complex sight problems with the cost of spectacles or contact lenses.

NHS Charges and optical voucher values in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are a matter for the Devolved Administrations.

Details of the revised charges have been placed in the Library.

Abattoirs

Mr. Paice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* red meat abattoirs and *(b)* poultry abattoirs were in operation on (i) 1 May 1997, (ii) 31 December 1998, (iii) 31 December 1999 and (iv) 31 December 2000; and how many were designated (A) small, (B) medium and (C) large on each date. [151816]

Ms Stuart: Abattoirs producing meat for sale for human consumption must be licensed in order to operate. They are classified as either full or low throughput. There is no separate classification for medium-sized abattoirs.

The table details the number of full and low throughput red meat and poultry meat abattoirs licensed on 1 May 1997, 31 December 1998, 31 December 1999 and 31 December 2000.

	Red meat abattoirs		*Poultry meat abattoirs*	
	Full throughput	*Low throughput*	*Full throughput*	*Low throughput*
1 May 1997				
England	200	181	92	51
Scotland		[1]51		[1]9
Wales		[1]37		[1]13
Northern Ireland	14	0	11	4
31 December 1998				
England	198	162	83	48
Scotland	37	7	7	4
Wales	14	20	4	9
Northern Ireland	14	0	11	4
31 December 1999				
England	194	145	75	44
Scotland	36	8	8	3
Wales	15	20	4	7
Northern Ireland	15	0	12	3
31 December 2000				
England	186	130	70	41
Scotland	36	8	7	4
Wales	15	20	5	5
Northern Ireland	15	1	10	2

[1] As at 1 June 1997. Information on throughput category not readily available

Mr. Drew: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many abattoirs there were, and how many closed, in each of the last 10 years. [151826]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 1 March 2001]:* The tables give the number of licensed red meat and licensed poultry meat abattoirs in the United Kingdom from 1991 to 2000, and the number of licenses revoked in each year where this information is available.

Red meat abattoirs

Year	*England*		*Scotland*		*Wales*		*Northern Ireland*	
	Licensed	*Revoked*	*Licensed*	*Revoked*	*Licensed*	*Revoked*	*Licensed*	*Revoked*
1991	593	[1]—	49	[1]—	55	[1]—	16	[1]—
1992	540	[1]—	53	[1]—	54	[1]—	15	[1]—
1993	434	[1]—	53	[1]—	40	[1]—	15	[1]—
1994	424	[1]—	48	[1]—	40	[1]—	15	[1]—
1995	402	21	48	[1]—	36	[1]—	14	[1]—
1996	384	22	49	[1]—	37	[1]—	14	[1]—
1997	375	16	48	[1]—	35	2	14	0
1998	360	14	43	4	34	1	14	1
1999	339	20	44	1	34	1	15	0
2000	316	23	44	1	35	0	16	0

Poultry meat abattoirs

Year	*England*		*Scotland*		*Wales*		*Northern Ireland*	
	Licensed	*Revoked*	*Licensed*	*Revoked*	*Licensed*	*Revoked*	*Licensed*	*Revoked*
1991	98	[1]—	7	[1]—	5	[1]—	9	[1]—
1992	93	[1]—	8	[1]—	5	[1]—	11	[1]—
1993	98	[1]—	9	[1]—	4	[1]—	9	[1]—
1994	137	[1]—	8	[1]—	10	[1]—	9	[1]—
1995	144	[1]—	8	[1]—	11	[1]—	10	[1]—

Poultry meat abattoirs

Year	England		Scotland		Wales		Northern Ireland	
	Licensed	Revoked	Licensed	Revoked	Licensed	Revoked	Licensed	Revoked
1996	144	[1]—	10	[1]—	13	[1]—	17	[1]—
1997	131	9	10	[1]—	15	0	15	2
1998	131	6	11	2	14	2	15	0
1999	119	8	11	1	12	2	15	0
2000	111	4	11	1	10	2	12	3

[1] Information is not available for these years.

Departmental Business (Overseas Visits)

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many visits abroad have been made by him and his Ministers on departmental business *(a)* since 1 May 1997 and *(b)* in the last 12 months. [149154]

Ms Stuart: Since 1 May 1997 there have been 49 visits abroad on departmental business made by the Secretary of State for Health or one of his Ministers. Of those 49 visits, 12 were made within the last 12 months.

Christchurch Health Centre

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 111W, on Christchurch Health Centre, on what date negotiations commenced for the release of the restrictions on the lease of the Christchurch Health Centre; what deadline has been set for the conclusion of these negotiations; and for what reason the responsibility for such negotiations is not being left to the assignee of the lease. [153551]

Ms Stuart: Negotiations for the release of the lease restrictions commenced in January of this year. No deadline has currently been set as the speed of progress on the negotiations will depend on the landlords.

To enable the premises to be satisfactorily marketed competitively on the open market it is necessary for prospective purchasers to have certainty on the terms of the lease. It has been advised, therefore, that the terms for a release of the lease restrictions be agreed before remarketing commences.

Aspartame

Mr. Syms: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the health effects of the use of aspartame in food; and if he will make a statement. [153905]

Ms Stuart *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* Neither the Food Standards Agency (FSA) nor the Department has commissioned research into the health effects of aspartame in food. Aspartame (E951) has been approved in the United Kingdom since 1983 and full independent reviews of its safety have been carried out by the European Commission Scientific Committee on Food (SCF) and in the UK the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT).

The Food Advisory Committee—one of the independent expert committees which advises the FSA—recently discussed aspartame in view of the concerns expressed by some consumers about its safety. The Committee noted that many papers on aspartame have been published in the scientific literature since the last full reviews. It asked the FSA to assess this additional literature and decide whether further detailed evaluation was warranted. If so, the SCF should be asked to conduct a formal review of the new data. The FSA is completing its assessment and will be writing shortly to the SCF.

NHS Appointments Commission

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the independent appointments commission for NHS boards will *(a)* be established and *(b)* take responsibility for appointments. [154161]

Ms Stuart: Regulations for the National Health Service Appointments Commission have been laid before Parliament and will come into force on 1 April 2001. The Commission will be operational from that date and will be responsible for all chair and non-executive appointments to NHS trusts, health authorities and primary care trusts.

Avon Ambulance Service

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the most recent statistical evidence on the response times of the Avon Ambulance Service; and if he will provide corresponding information for *(a)* one year and *(b)* two years ago. [154215]

Ms Stuart: The quality of service standards for the Avon Ambulance National Health Service Trust from 1997–98 to 30 September 1999 was to respond to 50 per cent. of emergency calls within eight minutes and to 95 per cent. within 14 minutes. For urgent patient journeys the ambulance should arrive not more than 15 minutes after the agreed time in 95 per cent. of cases. The following table contains information about the percentage of responses against these targets for Avon Ambulance NHS Trust from 1997–98 to 30 September 1999.

Percentage

Year	Emergency call response		Urgent patient journeys
	Within eight minutes[1]	Within 14 minutes[2]	Arrival not more than 15 minutes late[3]
1997–98	54.2	90.6	73.0
1998–99	53.5	92.2	71.7
1999 to 30 September	53.6	90.9	[4]66.9

[1] Target 50 per cent.
[2] Target 95 per cent.
[3] Target 95 per cent.
[4] For full year

Source:
Form KA34
Department of Health, Statistics Division SD2B

Following a review of standards in 1996 ambulance services were required to introduce systems to prioritise emergency calls. The new prioritisation procedures require that all emergency calls are classified as either immediately life threatening, Category A, or other emergency calls, Category B/C. A new standard was introduced which requires that, by the year 2001, ambulance services reach 75 per cent. of Category A calls within eight minutes. For Category B/C calls and urgent patient journeys the previous standards continue to apply. Avon Ambulance NHS Trust moved to the new system from 1 October 1999 and the following table contains information about the percentage of responses against these targets from 1 October 1999 to 31 March 2000.

Percentage

	1 October 1999 to 31 March 2000
Category A emergency calls response	
Within eight minutes[1]	51.3
Within 14 minutes[2]	88.3
Category B/C emergency call response	
Within eight minutes[3]	51.4
Within 14 minute[4]	88.0
Urgent patient journeys	
Arrival not more than 15 minutes late[5]	[6]66.9

[1] Target 75 per cent.
[2] Target 50 per cent.
[3] Target 50 per cent.
[4] Target 95 per cent.
[5] Target 95 per cent.
[6] For full year

Source:
Form KA34
Department of Health, Statistics Division SD2B

Further details about the performance of Avon Ambulance NHS Trust and all other ambulance trusts are contained in the Department of Health Statistical Bulletin "Ambulance Services, England 1999–2000". A copy is available in the Library and also available at www.doh.gov.uk/public/sb0014.htm.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Parliamentary Pensions

Mr. Clapham: To ask the President of the Council when the SSRB report on parliamentary pensions is to be published; and if she will make a statement. [154518]

Mrs. Beckett: As decided in the last Parliament, the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) now carries out regular reviews of the Parliamentary Contributory Pension Fund (PCPF), generally timed to coincide with the triennial valuations of the PCPF by the Government Actuary. The SSRB has published its report today, and a copy has been placed in the Library of the House. Copies are also available in the Vote Office. I am most grateful to the Review Body for their thoughtful and thorough report.

The SSRB has made eight recommendations:

(1) that the lump sum death in service payment be increased from three times annual basic salary to four times annual basic salary and that the increased cost of around 0.4 per cent. be borne by the Exchequer;

(2) that the rules should be amended to remove the provision for curtailing the pension of a widow/widower of a deceased Member on remarriage or cohabitation. Any consequential increase in the contribution rate should be borne by the Exchequer;

(3) that the service in the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly, other than such service concurrent with service at Westminster, should count towards the qualifying period for an early retirement pension;

(4) that the Trustees of the PCPF should explore with the managers of the MEPs' pension scheme and the Trustees of the pension schemes for Members of the devolved assemblies the merits of establishing a Parliamentary Transfer Club;

(5) that the rules of the scheme should be revised in respect of benefits for children to ensure that all dependent children receive equality of treatment;

(6) equality proofing of the PCPF rules to ensure that there is no systemic discrimination;

(7) that an exception to the abatement rules should be made for former Members of the House of Commons in receipt of a pension as an MP who become paid office holders in the House of Lords. This exception to abatement should not extend to any part of the pension earned as a paid office holder in the Commons.

(8) that the Trustees should canvas the views of Members of the PCPF on the issue of survivor pensions for unmarried partners.

As required by section 2 of the Parliamentary and other Pensions Act 1987 I shall consult about the changes to the scheme with the Trustees of the PCPF and with other interested parties. As is customary, the Government will hold a debate on an amendable motion. This will give the House a chance to consider this report and the draft regulations implementing the SSRB recommendations, also the associated report of the Government Actuary, which will, I understand, be published shortly.

It will be helpful for the House to know that the Government are proposing to accept all these recommendations except for recommendation 2. The cessation of widow(er) pension on remarriage or cohabitation is a common provision of public service pension schemes and is a provision which is generally only removed at member cost.

In relation to recommendation 8, the Government would expect the costs associated with any extension of survivor pensions to unmarried partners to be borne by the members of the PCPF, and not by the Exchequer.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

People's Peerages

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the President of the Council how many *(a)* applicants for a people's peerage and *(b)* candidates invited for interview were formerly hereditary peers sitting in the House of Lords. [151661]

Mrs. Beckett: This information could be provided only at disproportionate cost and in breach of the Appointments Commission's undertakings to treat all personal information in individual applications in strict confidence.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Metropolitan Police Force

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with the Mayor of London about the recruitment of police officers for the Metropolitan Police Force. [152683]

Mr. Straw: I met the Mayor of London on 4 October and 13 December 2000. Recruitment to the Metropolitan Police Service was among the matters discussed on each occasion, and it has been on a number of less formal occasions when I have met the Mayor.

Royal Parks Police

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make it his policy to take the Royal Parks Police into the Metropolitan Police Service; and if he will make a statement. [153460]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Royal Parks Constabulary is a non-Home Office police force; the sponsor Department with responsibility for this Constabulary is the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The recent review of the Royal Parks Constabulary recommended that the Constabulary should either become a ring-fenced division of the Metropolitan Police Service or that funds should be provided to allow proper management, accountability and policing by the Royal Parks Constabulary. The recommendation is currently being considered at official level with the Royal Parks Agency and the DCMS.

Lancashire Police Force

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish the latest data available to his Department in relation to the Lancashire police force on the numbers of police officers who *(a)* are on the establishment of the force, *(b)* are on sick leave, *(c)* are undertaking light duties and *(d)* represent a full complement of officers for the force. [153711]

Mr. Charles Clarke: I understand from the Chief Constable that Lancashire Constabulary does not maintain a target establishment of officers for the force. I am told that on 13 March, 153 officers were on sick leave. On 28 February, the latest date for which information is available from the force, 158 officers were on restricted/recuperative duties. These figures are for actual persons and are not full-time equivalent numbers.

I also understand that on 13 March Lancashire Constabulary had 3,261 full-time equivalent police officers.

Policy Pay

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list in respect of police constables *(a)* average earnings on 1 April 1997, *(b)* average earnings on 1 April 2001, *(c)* the percentage annual pay increase for each of the last five years and *(d)* the percentage pay increase between 1 April 1997 and 1 April 2001. [153199]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* The Survey of Pay, Hours and Length of Service, conducted annually by statisticians from the Office of Manpower Economics for the Police Negotiating Board (PNB), provides figures on the average earnings of police constables, including pay, allowances and overtime. The November 1997 survey showed that the average earnings of a police constable in the United Kingdom were £516.28 per week (or £26,933 per annum). The most recent data available are from the PNB survey undertaken in November 1999 and this showed that the average earnings of a police constable were £550.03 per week (equivalent to £28,693 per annum).

The PNB makes recommendations to the Home Secretary on all matters concerning police pay and allowances. Police pay is increased every September through a pay award based on the median percentage of the Manpower Index for non-manual workers, a formula introduced in 1994. In 1996 and 1997 the increase was 3.5 per cent; in 1998, 4.0 per cent; in 1999, 3.6 per cent. and in 2000, 3.0 per cent. The pay scale for constables at 1 April 1997, the current pay scale and the percentage increases are detailed in the table (the length of the pay scale was reduced in September 1997).

	Annual salary (£) from:		
Pay point	*1 September 1996*	*1 September 2000*	*Percentage pay increase*
Constable:			
On commencing service			
1	14,916	17,133	14.86
2	16,197	19,170	18.36
On completion of initial training			
3	17,295	20,304	17.40
On completion of two years' satisfactory service			
4	17,679	20,841	17.89
5	18,147	21,567	18.85
6	18,777	22,257	18.53
7	19,380	22,983	18.59
8	20,013	23,649	18.17
9	20,589	24,246	17.76
10	21,111	25,035	18.59
11	21,795	25,953	19.08
12	22,593	27,114	20.01
13	23,607	—	—

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of the cost of detaining all new asylum applicants in secure conditions for *(a)* the period covering initial decisions and appeals and *(b)* the period following refusal of asylum and removal in the current financial year; [153823]

(2) how many additional places in secure conditions he estimates would be needed to detain all new asylum applicants awaiting initial decisions and appeals. [153824]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* The answer to these questions depends on a number of variables, in particular the number of asylum applicants and the length of time taken to complete the process to removal. Based on forecast asylum intakes, and detention

of up to six months, the cost could be more than £2 billion in start-up costs and annual running costs of over £1 billion. It is estimated that a further 32,000 detention spaces would be required. This would equate to a further 64 detention centres each with 500 beds. None of the costs quoted take account of the management overheads of running this size of detention estate. No estimate has been made of the cost of detaining asylum applicants in the period between refusal of asylum and removal.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the practical difficulties of returning failed asylum seekers to *(a)* Iran, *(b)* Iraq, *(c)* Somalia, *(d)* Sri Lanka and *(e)* Afghanistan. [153829]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 15 March 2001]:* For all nationalities there are the practical difficulties of locating those who have absconded.

There are also the practical difficulties of arranging flights, the handling of last minute representations and legal challenges.

Many asylum seekers arrive without a valid passport. In order to effect their return it is necessary to obtain a passport or other travel document from their national authorities. This can be a lengthy and difficult process as it is often necessary to provide detailed evidence of the applicant's identity and nationality before a travel document can be issued.

We are not currently seeking to return failed asylum seekers where country conditions are not conducive. In addition returns to three of these countries (Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan) are complicated by the absence of direct international flights from the United Kingdom to those countries. Thus removals to those countries require the agreement of third party states to enable transit through their territory. We are currently investigating the potential for reaching such agreements with appropriate states. For some nationalities we are unable to effect removals without having first obtained a travel document from that country's Embassy or High Commission.

Hunting Bill

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if it is his policy that members of the Government should not brief in favour of particular options within the Hunting Bill. [154241]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government are neutral on the issue of hunting with dogs. Individual members of the Government are free to express their own views on the three options in the Hunting Bill.

Bajram Zeqiri

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the implications for Government policy of the decision of the Court of Appeal in the case of Bajram Zeqiri. [153993]

Mrs. Roche: The Court of Appeal allowed this appeal challenging the Government's decision to maintain the certificates issued under Section 2 of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 to return Kosovar Albanian asylum applicants to Germany under the Dublin Convention. The appeal was allowed on the basis of an assertion by the Court that the applicants had formed a legitimate expectation that their claims for asylum would be substantively determined in the United Kingdom. The Government are considering whether to petition the House of Lords for leave to appeal against the judgment.

The Court of Appeal found in favour of the Government regarding their powers to review and maintain such certification decisions. It also found that the Dublin Convention conferred rights upon member states rather than upon individuals. This case related to decisions made before 25 March 1999 under provisions of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 which have subsequently been repealed. Its effect is limited to a small number of cases. For these reasons the judgment does not affect the general policy of the Government regarding the transfer of asylum seekers to safe third countries under the Dublin Convention; nor does the judgment affect the operation of Section 11 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.

Immigration (Carrier Penalties)

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 5 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 37W, under which circumstances the civil penalty provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 are pursued against the operator of a hired vehicle used by persons seeking to enter the United Kingdom clandestinely. [154244]

Mrs. Roche: The civil penalty provisions of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (the 1999 Act) are pursued against the operators of hired vehicles, be they the owners, hirers or drivers of vehicles found to have carried clandestine entrants if the operators fail to establish a defence as set out in Section 34 of the 1999 Act. Section 34 (2) of the 1999 Act allows for a defence of duress and Section 34 (3) provides for a defence that the operator did not know or suspect the carriage of a clandestine entrant, had an effective system for preventing the carriage of clandestine entrants (having regard to the code of practice issued in accordance with Section 33 of the legislation) and that on the occasion in question the effective system was operated properly.

Working Group on Football Disorder

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when the Working Group on Football Disorder will submit its findings and recommendations. [154521]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We have today published the Working Group's report and a copy has been placed in the Library. It contains over 50 recommendations aimed at improving the image of English football, the behaviour of its followers and the role of football in promoting social inclusion. A targeted action plan is included. The report stresses that the need to improve communication and develop productive partnerships will be crucial to enhancing the game's reputation and maximising its vast potential to help deliver an inclusive and tolerant society.

SOLICITOR-GENERAL

Factortame Litigation

Mr. David Taylor: To ask the Solicitor-General if he will make a statement on the role of the Treasury Solicitor's Department in the Factortame litigation. [154271]

The Solicitor-General *[pursuant to his reply, 15 March 2001, c. 705W]:* Further to the figures quoted, I can confirm that the total sum of damages for the two trials concerned was £54.9 million of which £24.7 million was interest.

Operation Care

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Solicitor-General how many of the cases referred to the CPS as part of Operation Care were *(a)* accepted and *(b)* refused; and what the main reasons for refusal were. [151613]

The Solicitor-General *[pursuant to his reply, 5 March 2001, c.47W]:* A fuller breakdown of cases is as follows:

Since April 1996 when Operation Care commenced. Merseyside police have submitted cases relating to 181 suspects to the Crown Prosecution Service.

The CPS advised prosecution of 59 suspects; of whom 42 have been finalised, 20 pleaded guilty, seven were convicted after trial, three were acquitted, three were stayed, three were discontinued, one was cautioned, one was abandoned and four died before the proceedings were concluded. Of the remaining 17 to be finalised, 16 are pending and one is awaiting committal.

The CPS advised police not to proceed with cases against a further 101 suspects, 90 because of insufficient evidence and 11 because the public interest was not satisfied. The police are carrying out further inquiries into another 21 cases.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Public Trust Office

Mr. Drew: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what progress has been made with the proposed reforms to the workings of the Public Trust Office. [154037]

Jane Kennedy: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster, Central (Ms Winterton) on 21 December 2000, *Official Report*, column 272W.

Mr. Drew: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department what consultations are being undertaken on reforms of the Public Trust Office. [154038]

Jane Kennedy: Since the publication of the Quinquennial Review of the Public Trust Office in November 1999 there has been extensive consultation with staff, stakeholders and clients on reform of the Office. We will continue to consult on the way that the Public Guardianship Office provides services to clients when it takes over the mental health functions from the Public Trust Office on 1 April.

Electronic Conveyancing

Mr. Beard: To ask the Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department when he will publish proposals for the introduction of electronic conveyancing. [154637]

Mr. Lock: My Department has today published a consultation paper "Electronic Conveyancing: A draft order under section 8 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000". This consultation paper has been produced in association with HM Land Registry and the Law Commission. Copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

CABINET OFFICE

Ministerial Visits (Peterborough)

Sir Brian Mawhinney: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list the Cabinet Office Ministers in her Department who visited any of the constituencies which are in the Peterborough Unitary authority area between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001, indicating in each case *(a)* the date of the visit, *(b)* the constituencies included in the visit and *(c)* if the local hon. Member met the Minister. [151036]

Marjorie Mowlam: No Cabinet Office Ministers visited the constituencies in the Peterborough Unitary area between 1 January 2000 and 14 February 2001.

Departmental IT Projects

Mr. Field: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if she will list (1) the IT projects currently undertaken in her Department; and if she will state the *(a)* expected completion date and *(b)* cost of each project; [151504]

(2) the IT projects her Department plans to undertake in the next year; and if she will state in each case the *(a)* expected date of commencement and completion and *(b)* cost. [151468]

Mr. Ian McCartney *[pursuant to his reply, 26 February 2001, c. 495–96W]:* IT projects currently being undertaken by the Cabinet Office are as follows:

Ukonline.gov.uk citizen portal

In July 2000 the Cabinet Office awarded a contract to BT (British Telecommunications plc) to build and operate the Ukonline.gov.uk citizen portal, for one year (until July 2001). This initial development phase is expected to cost around £10 million, of which around £4 million has been spent so far. We are currently considering the longer-term arrangements for operating the site.

Government Gateway

In October 2000 the Cabinet Office began working with a group of suppliers including Microsoft and Cable and Wireless to deliver the initial phase of the Government Gateway. The initial phase of delivery will be complete by June 2001 and will have cost around £18 million.

Knowledge Network

The cost to the Government of the new Knowledge Network system has been £3.6 million (GRP) to date.

The initial development phase of both the ukonline.gov.uk citizen portal and the Government Gateway projects will continue into the next financial

year, ending in July and June 2001 respectively. Both projects are part of the long-term strategy for delivering electronic government, and the Cabinet Office has applied for CMF funding to enable both projects to continue beyond these dates. The value of this work will depend upon which aspects of each project are selected for development during the next phase.

The Knowledge Network project, which is expected to be completed in August 2002, is expected to cost up to £15 million.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Oftel

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects Oftel to publish its review on the pricing of conditional access; and if he will make a statement. [154242]

Ms Hewitt: I expect Oftel to announce shortly publication of its review of the conditional access pricing guidelines with respect to public service broadcasters.

Japanese Overseas Reprocessing Committee

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what communications he has received from the Japanese Overseas Reprocessing Committee since the beginning of November 2000; and if he will place copies in the Library. [153198]

Mr. Hain *[holding answer 14 March 2001]:* No such communications have been received.

Hinduja Brothers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) on what date his Department was informed of intelligence reports relating to the Hinduja brothers referred to in paragraph 8.4 of the report of the Hammond Inquiry; [154232]

(2) on what date intelligence briefings relating to the Hinduja brothers were first made available to him. [153437]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 12 March 2001]:* It is not the practice, and has not been the practice of successive Governments, to comment on intelligence matters.

Hyundai

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what discussions he has had with Hyundai representatives on the market prospects for semi-conductor manufacturing. [153614]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 16 March 2001]:* The Government are in regular contact with Hyundai on a range of issues, including the market prospects for semi-conductor manufacturing.

Departmental Advertising

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the television, newspaper and radio advertising and other promotional campaigns conducted by *(a)* his Department, *(b)* its agencies and *(c)* its departmental public bodies, in each of the past five years, showing for each the expenditure incurred by his Department; and if he will make a statement. [153413]

Mr. Byers *[pursuant to the reply, 13 March 2001, c. 544–46W]:*

The following information was omitted from the answer.

Radiocommunications Authority promotional campaigns were as follows:

Year	£
1996–97	184,380.62
1997–98	361,358.70
1998–99	545,719.32
1999–2000	486,761.36
2000–01	493,312.62

TREASURY

Deaths Abroad

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many British people died each year abroad in each of the past 10 years. [153796]

Miss Melanie Johnson: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the National Statistician. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Len Cook to Mr. Frank Field, dated 16 March 2001:

As Registrar General for England and Wales, I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the number of deaths of British subjects abroad in each of the past ten years (153796).

This information is not available. Some deaths of British subjects abroad are registered at Consulates or High Commissions or by HM Forces. Returns of these events are made to the Registrar General for England and Wales. In other cases, deaths are registered in the country where they occurred, where that is a legal duty, and there is no legal obligation to notify Registration Services in England and Wales.

Correspondence

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will reply to the letter dated 7 February from the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan regarding his constituent Mr. R. Foreman. [154240]

Miss Melanie Johnson: I have already done so.

Public Service Agreements

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the technical notes underpinning the public service agreements will be published. [154635]

Mr. Andrew Smith: All main Departments have published technical notes on their websites. A link to all the sites can be found at http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/sr2000/psa/technote.html. I am placing a copy of all the technical notes in the Libraries of both Houses.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Earnings Disregards

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will review the rates of earnings disregard for *(a)* Income Support and *(b)* Housing Benefit. [152953]

Mr. Bayley: The existing £15 a week higher earnings disregard in Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit will be increased to £20 a week from 9 April 2001.

Income Support

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 6 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 168W, on Income Support, if he will estimate *(a)* the number of children in all families, *(b)* the number of lone parent families and *(c)* the number of children in lone parent families on Income Support for one year or more. [154231]

Mr. Bayley: As at November 2000 it is estimated that there were 1.67 million children living in households which had been in receipt of Income Support for one year or more, of which 1.26 million were children of lone parents. At this date it is estimated that there were 687,800 lone parent households which had been on Income Support for one year or more.

Correspondence

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he will reply to the letter dated 29 December 2000 from the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan regarding his constituent Mrs. M. Innes. [154239]

Angela Eagle: A reply has been issued today.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Sierra Leone (Select Committee Report)

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs at what time and on what date the deputy head of the Foreign Office's news department first saw a version of the draft Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone supplied by the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross). [154128]

Mr. Robin Cook: The then Deputy Head of the FCO News Department answered this question two years ago in his evidence to the Committee on Standards and Privileges (Eighth Report of Session 1998–99).

The allegations recently published by Mr. Nicholas Jones contradict nothing that was said at the time. From my first answer on this issue, on 23 February 1999, *Official Report*, column 259W, I made it clear that we had responded to leaks by others to the press, that the FCO had received a copy of the final Report at 0800 on 9 February, and that subsequently the press were briefed orally on my initial reaction. There is therefore nothing to add to the evidence provided to the Standards and Privileges Committee or to my answers to Parliamentary Questions at the time.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) at what time on what date *(a)* the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, *(b)* the head of the Foreign Office's news department and *(c)* the head of the Foreign Office's Africa department (Equatorial) were first briefed on the contents of the draft Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone supplied by the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross); [154129]

(2) what duties he was carrying out, and where, at 8 am on 9 February 1999; and where he took the telephone call from BBC journalist, Nicholas Jones, that morning; [154002]

(3) if *(a)* his special advisers and *(b)* John Williams spoke to the hon. Member for Dundee, West (Mr. Ross) concerning the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone in the week prior to 9 February 1999; [153998]

(4) when his office first prepared a briefing on the Foreign Affairs Select Committee report on Sierra Leone published on 9 February 1999; who was involved in writing the briefing; and if he will place a copy in the Library; [154027]

(5) what telephone conversations *(a)* he and *(b)* his Office had with journalists (i) before and (ii) after 10 am on 9 February 1999; [154000]

(6) if he saw a Foreign Office summary briefing on the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone before 8 am on 9 February 1999; [154028]

(7) from where and at what time he placed the telephone call on 9 February 1999 to the BBC journalist, Nick Jones, asking him to return his call; [154001]

(8) at what time on 9 February 1999 *(a)* he, *(b)* his special advisers, *(c)* the Permanent Secretary, *(d)* the head of the news department and *(e)* the deputy head of the news department received a copy of the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone; [153997]

(9) if lines for use for briefing the press regarding the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone were prepared before 8 am on 9 February 1999; [154025]

(10) if a draft press statement was prepared before 8 am on 9 February 1999 based on the content of the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone; [153999]

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if he instructed the Foreign Office spokesman on his Department's response to *The Guardian* prior to its report of 12 March concerning his statements to Parliament relating to his Department's advance knowledge of Select Committee reports; [153957]

(2) at what time and on what date he spoke to Nicholas Jones about the Foreign Affairs Committee's Second report of Session 1998–99 on Sierra Leone. [153956]

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) if a spokesman from his Department telephoned Mr. Nicholas Jones of the BBC shortly after 6.30 am on 9 February 1999 to discuss the Foreign Affairs Committee's Second report of Session 1998–99 on Sierra Leone; [153955]

(2) at what time he telephoned Mr. Nicholas Jones of the BBC on 9 February 1999 to discuss the Foreign Affairs Committee's Second report of Session 1998–99 on Sierra Leone; [153958]

(3) when he first read the Foreign Affairs Committee's Second report of Session 1998–99 on Sierra Leone. [153968]

(4) when John Williams of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office first read the Foreign Affairs Committee's Second report of Session 1998–99 on Sierra Leone. [153959]

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the statements by the BBC's lobby correspondent concerning his use of a leaked draft of the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone. [154148]

Mr. Wilshire: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (1) to whom his officials spoke about the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone before 10 am on 9 February 1999; [153986]

(2) if he will publish a list of Ministers and officials who spoke to Mr. Nicholas Jones of the BBC before 10 am on 9 February 1999; [153990]

(3) on what date and at what time he first *(a)* received and *(b)* read a copy of the Foreign Affairs Committee report on Sierra Leone; [153988]

(4) to whom he spoke on the telephone between 6 am and 10 am on 9 February 1999; [153987]

(5) if he will publish a list of Ministers and officials who saw leaked documents relating to the Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry into Sierra Leone in 1998–99; [153991]

(6) how many copies of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee report on Sierra Leone were collected by his officials on 9 February 1999, at what time and from where. [153989]

Mr. Robin Cook: I refer right hon. and hon. Members to my reply to the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 16 March 2001, *Official Report*, column 773W.

President Mugabe

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he has discussed the visit of President Mugabe to France with the French Ambassador. [154016]

Mr. Wilson: No, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not spoken to the French Ambassador. The French Government are well aware of our deep concerns at the situation in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs whom the Minister of State met and what was discussed during his recent visit to Zimbabwe. [154015]

Mr. Wilson: I have not visited Zimbabwe since my appointment as Minister of State.

Mr. Maude: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement regarding President Mbeki's policy towards Zimbabwe. [154017]

Mr. Wilson: I discussed our concerns over Zimbabwe with South Africa's Deputy Foreign Minister on 6 March. We welcome President Mbeki's expressed intention to meet President Mugabe soon to discuss the situation in Zimbabwe.

The hon. Member for Leicester, East

Mr. Stephen O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with the hon. Member for Leicester, East on the contents of the report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges relating to his conduct. [154070]

Mr. Robin Cook: I first saw the report when it was published on 12 March. I first discussed it with my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on the latter's return from Cyprus late on 14 March.